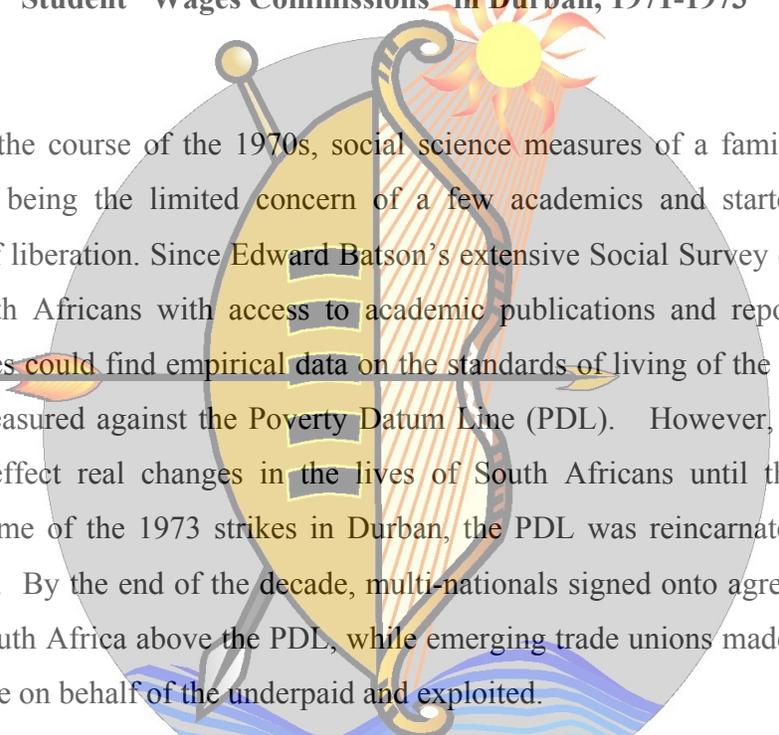


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January 2003

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**Making poverty research political:
Student “Wages Commissions” in Durban, 1971-1973¹**



Over the course of the 1970s, social science measures of a family’s minimum needs ceased being the limited concern of a few academics and started to become instruments of liberation. Since Edward Batson’s extensive Social Survey of Cape Town in 1942, South Africans with access to academic publications and reports by liberal research bodies could find empirical data on the standards of living of the different ‘race groups’ as measured against the Poverty Datum Line (PDL). However, PDL research did little to effect real changes in the lives of South Africans until the mid-1970s. Around the time of the 1973 strikes in Durban, the PDL was reincarnated as a wage-setting device. By the end of the decade, multi-nationals signed onto agreements to pay workers in South Africa above the PDL, while emerging trade unions made effective use of this measure on behalf of the underpaid and exploited.

Why did quantitative measures of economic inequality begin to have material consequences in the 1970s, where before they remained toothless? Part of the answer lies in interventions made by white students to encourage black workers to use the PDL themselves when demanding higher wages.² In 1971, students at the University of Natal,

¹ I thank David Hemson, Gerry Mare, Dudley Horner, Halton Cheadle, Bhekisa Nxasana, Vusi Shezi, Omar Badsha, Pat Horn, Harriet Bolton, and Mbu Mchunu for their cooperation and generous assistance.

² A more comprehensive account than this one of the rise to prominence of the PDL and the “Minimum Effective Level” (MEL) as a wage-setting tools would have to consider the making of the “Sullivan Principles,” the British House of Common debate about foreign investment in South Africa, the development of the EEC code, and the ensuing demand from industry for data on minimum budgets in order to comply with such employment codes. Here the University of Port Elizabeth’s household surveys

Durban (UND) initiated a “Wages Commission” in order to investigate wages paid to unskilled employees on university campuses and in various industries. Distributing pamphlets on poverty and urging workers to attend Wage Board meetings, the Wages Commissions helped alter the terrain of debate about poverty in South Africa through their forceful application of the PDL, aiding in making this term a widely-known reference point for non-academics, and eventually a means of holding employers accountable for the welfare of their employees.

As part of a doctoral thesis on the production of, and use for, social science research on poverty in South Africa (c1930-1980), my interest in the Wages Commissions stems from this strategic appropriation of poverty expertise to serve a political purpose. However, this was an appropriation that generated ambiguous results. For historians of science, the ways in which radical students and discontent laborers began wielding empirical measures of the bread line demonstrate something of how social science knowledge can, at certain junctures, become a powerful weapon and helpful means of self-expression (contrary to what some scholars of Foucault suggest).³ Several historians have already examined the contributions of the Wages Commissions to the rebuilding of South Africa’s labor movement in the 1970s.⁴ However, this paper takes another look at this history in order to explore a different set of concerns.

and the Bureau of Market Research were crucial. I thank J. Potgieter for alerting me to some of this history.

³One might also ask: How did the Wages Commissions use the PDL to *depoliticize* the wage issue, capitalizing on the assumed objectivity of academic research? At the same time, anti-apartheid groups and sympathetic journalists in South Africa appear to have used the PDL to *politicize* the problem of “slave wages.” See, James Ferguson, *The Antipolitics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). To me what is notable about the PDL is how it suggests that scientific knowledges can be taken up and used in all kinds of ways, not simply serving as handmaidens of hegemony. Here I depart from James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) [Also see, Arjun Appadurai on the census in colonial India and Michael Rose on “governmentality.”] This paper has been influenced by the work of Ian Hacking on feed-back dynamics between social scientists and society. I return to this in my conclusions. See, Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), *The Taming of Chance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴ The greatest contribution by the Wages Commission in this regard was probably helping to form and administer the General Factory Workers’ Benefit Fund (GFWBF) starting in 1972. The benefit fund was an attempt to form unions in disguise and gave birth to the Trade Union Advisory and Conglomerated Council (TUACC) in 1974, which lead to the formation of FOSATU in 1977, which lead to the present-day COSATU. The Wages Commissions have been noted in several existing accounts. While paying little attention to how the commissions actually operated, these accounts tend to stop at estimations of the

The Wages Commissions raise several difficult questions about the complexities of relationships between intellectuals and workers? And about representation and spokespersonship in situations marked by unequal access to resources and institutionalized authority. How did students try to speak with workers, speak for workers, and encourage workers to speak for themselves? How did intellectuals translate their ideas through pamphlets, newspapers, and face-to-face conversation? How did workers convey their ideas to intellectuals through letters and in interviews, and where did this communication break down? While some readers might want to ask: How we can rescue the autonomous voice of the worker from the impositions of students' voices? In this paper, I am most interested in highlighting the intermingling and overlaying of voices, and grappling with the miscommunications, tensions, and alliances forged between workers and students. What conditions inhibited student's capacity to speak on behalf of laborers, and who else vied to speak for them? How did the Black Consciousness movement, M.G. Buthelezi, existing trade unions, employers, and the state all compete to gain dominance over the question of low wages, often finding other terms more compelling than the PDL? Finally, how did actors in this story appropriate and reframe the past in order to formulate critiques of the present?

One of the points I also try to make [although more could be done here] relates to the importance of finding ways of writing about historical actors so as not to reduce them to the agents of the politics we ascribe to them—or even to the politics they ascribe to themselves! In what follows, I aim to document how individuals negotiated multiple,

amount of credit due to students for rebuilding South Africa's trade unions (in comparison with underground SACTU networks, leadership from workers, and the Black Consciousness movement, for instance). None of these closely consider how students interacted with workers, sought to represent workers, or how workers perceived students. See, for example, Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1987); Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1991); Eddie Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1985). Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Working for Freedom: Black trade union development in South Africa throughout the 1970s* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981). Others highlight the agency of black workers, giving white students only a minor role, especially in the 1973 strikes. See, Nelson Sambureni, "The Apartheid City and its Labouring Classes: African Workers and the Independent Trade Union Movement in Durban, 1959-1985." PhD thesis. UNISA, 1997. The Forth Interim Report of the Schlebusch Commission RP 33/1974 offers much information about the Wages Commissions, but presented so as to sensationalize the subversive sounding language of students involved. The indictments against whites students in NUSAS has been discussed by Michael Lobban, *White Man's Justice: South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). Also, see Martin Legassick on NUSAS (find citation). Also see SWOP phd. Find Citation!

sometimes conflicting, commitments and affiliations in their lives, rather than acting from the basis of a unitary subjectivity or one political agenda, even when their own retrospective accounts suggest otherwise.⁵

Moving chronologically, I situate the formation of the Wages Commissions in the intellectual milieu of Durban in the early 1970s. I examine opposition these students faced from other students and university administrators, as well as organizational problems and infiltration by the Special Branch.⁶ I describe the Wages Commissions' initial attempts to represent workers (especially dockworkers) at Wage Board meetings using the PDL, as well as their efforts to communicate the importance of class-consciousness through pamphlets and newspapers. I leave until later versions of this essay to attempt to deal with how poverty expertise operated in the context of the 1973 strikes; the work of Institute for Industrial Education (IIE); the rift between M.G. Buthelezi and Barney Dladla of the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly; the *Guardian's*

⁵ On the question of how people express themselves differently in the context of different relationships (i.e. when speaking privately to patrons/benefactors versus speaking publicly) see, Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal*, *Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Emma Mashinini's reflections on her role as a shop steward and supervisor also captures what I mean by negotiating multiple affiliations and the common problem of feeling pulled in two directions at once. Mashinini writes: "...I was very glad to be elected a shop steward and that it was part of my duty to go about and influence people. . . . I had a dual role in the factory, but I was very clear where my first loyalty lay. I was appointed a supervisor, but I was *elected* to be a shop steward by my fellow workers. As a supervisor I had some access to Mr. Becker, who was held in very high esteem by senior management. He was very much feared by the workers, since he had a way of goading, pushing and bullying them to produce more garments than any of his white colleagues who headed other departments. He was slave driver. But as shop steward I was able to intervene and reduce the number of dismissals which were taking place. . . .It was very unusual for a black woman to be a supervisor, and because of the superior attitudes of whites towards blacks I had to be doubly determined to demonstrate that I could do the job very well. I remember that when I first confronted Mr. Becker he was quite taken aback, because he did not expect me to speak out. But with time I say that he came to respect my views." (20-21) As a shop steward, supervisor on the factory floor, and member of Lucy Mveubelo's black Garment Worker's Union, Mashinini occupied an ambiguous position, not easily reconciled into singular analytic categories. Emma Mashinini, *Strikes Have Following Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 20-21. Perhaps for strategic reasons, or because they were reacting to the Black Consciousness movement, which focused on identity as defined by race, the Wages Commissions tended to see subjectivity as defined by class position and classes as discrete entities. In later drafts I hope to develop a clearer critique of where this view of identity as singularly defined by class interests failed to capture the complexities of the ground, especially in student's interpretations of relationships between workers and indunas. See Appendix.

⁶ Although this paper focuses on the Wages Commission, activism within NUSAS can be seen as just one strand in an overlapping social, intellectual, and organizational network in Natal made up of people concerned, in essence, with how to overthrow Apartheid and radically change South African society. This constellation included leftist study groups active in Durban in the 1960s, Black Consciousness affiliated students, returning Robben Island ANC and PAC-affiliated leaders, Spro-Cas and church leaders, ex-SACTU leaders, the Natal Indian Congress, affiliates of the SACP, the Coloured Labour Party, and existing trade union leaders. I thank Omar Badsha for alerting me to some of these connections.

“slave wages” campaign; the formation of the Sullivan code and its impact on subsequent academic research on minimum living levels (for example by the Bureau of Market Research and the University of Port Elizabeth); and the sequence of events leading to the legal recognition of black trade unions in 1979. I also leave aside the interesting question of how intellectual currents driving the Wages Commission movement, especially the expressed interest in finding and promoting working class consciousness, may have shaped the writing of labor history in South Africa since the 1970s.

I. Durban’s Political Avant-Guard and ‘identity’ politics

Although many individuals and groups contributed to leftist thinking in Natal in the 1960s and early ‘70s, two figures most embody the contrasting perspectives that shaped Durban’s avant-guard in the years before the 1973 strikes: black consciousness leader Steve Biko, and political scientist, Rick Turner. The contributions of these two leaders are well known to students of South Africa. Less well known is how both influenced the formation of the Wages Commission.

In the late 1960s, Steve Biko lead black students in rejecting any further political affiliation with white students in NUSAS. Established as a body to bring English and Afrikaans-speaking students together in 1924, in principle, NUSAS offered students in the 1960s the opportunity to cooperate across race lines. However its leadership remained dominated by whites, due in part to the National Party government’s Bantu Education policy.⁷ Only about a tenth of NUSAS’s members were black at the time Biko formed the South African Students’ Organization (SASO) in 1968.⁸ And many,

⁷ In 1959 legislation dictated that black students needed to obtain a special permit in order to attend any of its five major English-speaking institutions: the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, and the University of Natal, with campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Only these, overwhelmingly white, campuses could be affiliates of NUSAS. The state designated other campuses specifically for “Bantu,” Indian, and Coloured students, including: the University of Fort Hare, the University College of the Western Cape, the University College of Zululand, and the University of Durban-Westville.

⁸ “The fact that there are 27,000 white students and 3,000 black students in the organization is not complementary to black opinion being fairly listened to,” wrote Biko. *Steve Biko, I write what I like: a selection of his writings* (Randburg: Raven Press, 1996) 13. In Biko’s presidential address to the first national meeting of SASO held in Wentworth, Biko identified the annual NUSAS conference in 1967 at

Biko argued, had come to accept white leadership in NUSAS as the natural state of affairs.⁹ In 1968 leaders of the Student Representative Council (SRC) on black campuses voted to institute SASO, and in 1969 it was formally launched. After this, white students called on members of the SASO executive, “to make countless explanations of what this was all about,” in Biko’s words, because whites were not used to blacks not wanting things done for them.¹⁰

Biko proclaimed the need to “establish a strong identity among non-white students and to ensure that these students are always treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.”¹¹ What was desired was a body that would express their grievances, boost their morale, and “make them accepted on their own terms.”¹² Despite the possibility of government reprisal against them, student membership in SASO grew steadily on black campuses, while many NUSAS members were left with a profound feeling of their own political irrelevance.¹³ Biko clearly stated that the presence of liberal whites was unwanted and a “bilateral” approach impossible.

Rhodes University as the real moment of truth for black students. Because of the Group Areas Act, black students were not permitted to spend the night in Grahamstown where white NUSAS members were lodged in residence halls. Instead they stayed in a church building in a nearby township, in conditions Biko called “appalling” (Ibid, 10-11). Although some white students protested this arrangement, the failure of NUSAS as a whole to adequately counter blatant segregation in their midst sparked black students to question whether NUSAS could ever serve their needs.

⁹ “While, as a matter of principle, we would reject separation in a normal society, we have to take cognizance of the fact that ours is not a normal society. It is difficult not to look at white society as group of people bent on perpetuating the *status quo*. The situation is not made easier by the non-acceptance that black students have met with in all the so-called open organizations both religious and secular. All suffer from the same fault basically of accepting as a fact that there shall be white leadership and even worse, that they shall occupy themselves predominantly with problems affecting white society first.” Ibid, 12.

¹⁰ “I am surprised that this had to be so. Not only was the move taken by non-white students defensible but it was a long overdue step. It seems sometimes that it is a crime for the non-white students to think for themselves. The idea of everything being done for the blacks is an old one and all liberals take pride in it; but once the black students want to do things for themselves suddenly they are regarded as becoming ‘militant.’” Ibid, 4.

¹¹ Ibid, 4-5. What is perhaps interesting to note about the different approaches taken by Black Consciousness and the Wages Commissions is that both espoused notions of “identity.” The former focused on identity defined by race, the latter by class. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker have critiqued “identity” as a unit of analysis, even when “identity” is treated as multiple, heterogeneous, shifting, etc. Instead they argue that “identification” should be considered as a process, something that evolves in specific situations, and the noun form of the word abandoned completely as an analytic tool. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 [1] (2000):1-48. See Appendix.

¹² *Steve Biko, I write what I like*. 4-5.

¹³ Conversation with Gill Hart, 28 December 2002. Hart also put it more bluntly: “We were told to ‘fuck-off.’”

When SASO newsletters began to appear, Biko wrote a series of articles called, “I write what I like,” under the pen name, “Frank Talk.” The first article opened with the words: “Basically the South African white community is a homogeneous community. It is a community of people who sit to enjoy a privileged position that they do not deserve, are aware of this, and therefore spend their time trying to justify why they are doing so. Where differences in political opinion exist, they are in the process of trying to justify their position of privilege and their usurpation of power.”¹⁴ Constructing an image of white society as homogeneous in its commitment to the status quo, like slave-owners unable to imagine blacks speaking for themselves, Biko related two of the central goals of the Black Consciousness movement as the establishment of a strong black identity and autonomous self-representation. He later articulated the need to write histories of black resistance to white invaders, “if we blacks want to aid each other in coming into consciousness.”¹⁵

Whereas race defined Biko’s politics (and new histories would reveal the origins of black resistance) Richard Turner challenged Durbanites to confront economic inequality in South African society, encouraging them to construct alternate relationships based on non-material values in their own lives.¹⁶ After completing a doctorate on Jean-Paul Sartre through the University of Paris, Turner was appointed lecturer of Political Science at UND in 1970, where he gave popular open lectures called “platforms.” On the urging of one community leader, these were held at the Warwick Avenue branch of the University (more accessible to people using public transport) on subjects such as student

¹⁴ Steve Biko, *I write what I like*, 19.

¹⁵ “...a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we blacks want to aid each other in our coming into consciousness. We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes that formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders. More has to be revealed, and men such as Shaka, Moshoeshoe and Hintsa. These areas call for intense research to provide some sorely-needed missing links. We would be too naïve to expect our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us but we have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652, the year Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape.” From “Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity,” *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁶ I have decided to postpone a close reading of *The Eye of the Needle* for other drafts. Here I rely on Duncan Greaves analysis of Turner’s work written several years after his assassination in 1978. Duncan Greaves, “Pessimism of the mind, but optimism of the will’: Richard Turner’s Politics, 1968-1973,” Paper for presentation to the Southern African Studies Seminar, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 25 September 1984 (Rick Turner Papers, UND Library). One difficulty of drawing from such accounts, however, is that they are framed in terms of ‘Turner’s influence on us.’

movements, Stalinism, and democracy.¹⁷ Although the presence of spies from the Secret Police (or Special Branch) meant many students could not speak openly in these forums, Turner's platforms were well attended by a cross-section of Durban's intelligentsia—students, community leaders, wives of prominent judges, and even some Black Consciousness-affiliated people.¹⁸ Referring to the student protests in France in May of 1968, Turner concluded one public speech by echoing Marcuse on the role of students in sparking revolution:¹⁹

The situation, I think shows that, whilst a revolution cannot succeed without direct worker participation, nevertheless the initial student revolt could act as “the vital detonator which suddenly illuminates the situation with new possibilities by managing to break down, at the time at least, the aura of permanency with which the capitalist state has managed to surround its ridiculous institutions.”²⁰

Turner spoke not only of students sparking revolution, but also of the need to create an alternate hegemony to capitalism, saying this does not simply mean being nice to one's

¹⁷ Omar Badsha recalls suggesting this venue to Turner, as well as hosting Turner on regular basis for discussion groups in his home.

¹⁸ Interview with David Hemson, 9 August 2002.

¹⁹ Some of these ideas were already in circulation within NUSAS. The Schlebusch (later La Grange) commission into “certain organizations,” interrogated members of the Wages Commission using their own confiscated documents as evidence against them. The commission argued that students hoped to sow the seeds of discontent and start a revolution among black workers (implying notable that workers were otherwise “content.”) In 1969, in an address called “NUSAS—A possible role for the National Union,” Rob Davies is noted by the commission for arguing that connections should be sought between NUSAS and the black urban proletariat, perhaps through black students: “African students, though a privileged group, are usually in very good contact with black workers.” But, Davies continued, “through no fault of their own, the African student is not as familiar with new ideas and tactics of overseas students groups, eg SDS and overseas thinkers, eg Marcuse and Sarte.” Therefore white students could contribute by disseminating these ideas. (Schlebusch Commission, Chapter 17, *The Wages Campaign*, 466) Clive Keegan, in an essay called, “Towards a more legitimate NUSAS,” suggested (somewhat paternalistically) that white students should “educate African leaders in the art of politics and increase the militancy of the workers.” (Ibid, 468) The commission draws attention to the Wages Commissions’ articulation of notions of “working class consciousness,” as I also do. However, I want to ask: How might have students’ strong desire to promote working class consciousness complicated their interactions workers who had more than one affiliation, and did not themselves identify only as workers? [I need to flesh this out more in later drafts.]

²⁰ Greaves quotes this speech in “‘Pessimism of the mind, but optimism of the will’: Richard Turner’s Politics, 1968-1973,” 12. Greaves notes that Turner elsewhere quotes the following from Marcuse: “...the student movement in not a revolutionary force, perhaps not even an avant-garde so long as there are no masses capable and willing to follow, but it is the ferment of hope in the overpowering and stifling metropolis: it testifies to the truth of an alternative—the real need and the real possibility of a free society.” Ibid, 12. When I interviewed Hemson about the formation of the Wages Commission he used the word “ferment” to describe what he saw emerging among students at UND in 1970-71. Interview with David Hemson, 9 August 2002.

black servants. Rather, South Africans should reject “money-values” and see relationships with their neighbors as the core of life.²¹ In the *Eye of the Needle*, Turner also notes how gender inequalities had come to seem “natural” to South African society, as had white dependence on black labor. With many students looking to him for leadership, in a letter Turner wrote to his former wife, we see this produced some ambivalence: “...the only problem is that I now find myself propelled into a leadership role on campus—my advice and consent has to be got for everything etc. Both embarrassing, and undesirable that they should need a leader.”²²

Turner often spent Saturdays at work-camps set up by himself, Mewa Ramagobin, and Ela Ghandi at the Pheonix Settlement, where black and white students from around the country volunteered. Black consciousness-affiliated students from the UND medical school ran a crèche, but some tensions apparently began to arise between their interest in black autonomy and Turner’s interest in re-thinking economic inequalities. In discussions with Biko at Pheonix, Mamphela Ramphele recalls how Turner would promote a socialist perspective to Biko...

...Steve in turn pointed out to Rick that an economic class analysis which ignored the racist nature of capitalist exploitation in South Africa, and in many other parts of the globe, was itself inadequate. The debate would drift into a discussion of the false consciousness of white workers, ending with Steve challenging Rick to go out and conscientise white workers to prove that this approach would work in apartheid South Africa. Steve’s often-quoted remark in this regard was: ‘Go and talk to Van Tonder [a stereotypical conservative Afrikaner worker] about solidarity with black workers, and see what his response would be.’²³

Did building up working class consciousness represent the only path open to white students committed to changing South African society in the 1970s or was this goal already operative in the minds of radical students?²⁴ Either way, it would certainly

²¹ Ibid, 13.

²² Ibid, 14.

²³ Mamphela Ramphele, *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996) 62.

²⁴ See Eddie Webster, “Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction: Richard Turner and Radical Reform,” *Theoria* (October 1993). One difficulty in assessing the influence of Turner and Biko on students is that both have been memorialized in different ways since their deaths and referred and seem to be referenced, as Ramphele’s account suggests, with present-day political concerns in mind. Webster writes: “At the core of Turner’s theory of South African society was the concept of social class and the exploitation of black

appear that the formation of SASO, along with Turner's critique of capitalism, combined powerfully in leading some students towards committing themselves to strengthening labor.²⁵

II. The formation of the Wages Commission and the appropriation of the PDL

With little further opportunity for cooperation between black and white students through NUSAS, some white students turned to campus-based protest, others to propaganda, while others looked to the issues of low wages.²⁶ A brief overview of events on university campuses in the early 1970s indicates something of the rising political "ferment" among students, met by the state with considerable repression and surveillance. In May of 1970, about 500 students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) marched through Johannesburg to protest the detention of 22 people on counts of terrorism. Over 350 were arrested and eventually 30 students were charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act. University of Cape Town (UCT) students marched the next day, and 4 students, including NUSAS president Neville Curtis, were charged.²⁷ 1970 also saw protests against forced removals in Port Elizabeth on the UND campus.²⁸ In February of 1971, more than 1000 documents were taken from the NUSAS head office during a police raid.²⁹ In March of 1971, several cases of campus spying surfaced. UCT reported more than a dozen instances of members of the Special Branch approaching students.³⁰ Indian and white students were asked to inform at Wits, Rhodes University, and UND, while the Special Branch asked Afrikaans students to spy at

labour. It was not race, he would say to Steve Biko, that explains the exploitation of the black worker, but the capitalist system. Do not let your Blackness blind yourself to the fact that your power lies in the unorganized working class, he would say to the advocates of Black Consciousness."² Here we do not know if Webster is talking or Turner or both. Also see Eddie Webster, "Black Consciousness," *Dissent* (March/April 1974), co-authored with Turner.

²⁵ Turner may have inspired the initial idea of "redirecting the flow of information" (as we see later) but he did not advocate direct contact with workers. He is remembered for remaining somewhat conservative in his belief that white students could gradually awakening white society, perhaps being out of touch with whites South Africa after his years abroad. Interview with Mike Murphy, 17 January 2003. Halton Cheadle mentioned the same issue to me.

²⁶ [Insert Legassick and others on NUSAS, here or elsewhere]

²⁷ "A Brief History of Student Action in South Africa," 8. NUSAS papers, UCT Manuscripts and Archives Department, BC 586 (Hereafter "NUSAS papers").

²⁸ Check this! Interview with David Hemson, 9 August 2002.

²⁹ "A Brief History of Student Action in South Africa," 8. NUSAS papers

³⁰ *Daily News*, 21 March 1971 (Independent News Library, Durban, see "Universities: Natal").

Stellenbosch. Neville Curtis stated to the press that there was “at least” one informer on every SRC council and in every student organization.³¹ It was also reported that the Security Police were investigating graffiti on campus, student newspapers at UND, the University Christian Movement, and SASO.³² These suspicions culminated in the Schibusch Commission’s investigation potential links between NUSAS members, the ANC and the Communist Party.³³

Cautious attempts to desegregate universities failed in these years, as the state slapped vocal student leaders with banning threats. When UCT considered offering a lectureship post to Archie Mafeje, a black anthropologist working with Monica Wilson on class and culture in Langa, the appointment had to be withdrawn when the Government threatened legal action. Students spoke out against this, but to no avail. Around the same time, UND students called for university autonomy over admissions. However, university principal, Professor F.E. Stock, reportedly supported the government’s stance, saying that admitting members of different races was not necessary, since equivalent university education was available to all races through the Bantu Education system.³⁴ Rick Turner and Paula Ensor both had their passports refused—just a foreshadowing of events to come. And in May of 1971, Paula Ensor was threatened with banning for activities said to be “furthering communism.”³⁵

Looking at campus publications and their reception, we see radical students were out of step with the sentiments of the public and perhaps the majority of other students. UND’s *Dome* magazine made the local papers after running a “shocking” article explaining the mechanics of sex, menstruation, and contraception to female students, complete with anatomical drawings and a sketch detailing birth control use.³⁶ In May of 1971, another article tactically used images to raise the awareness of students. A double-page spread of a policeman about to strike at members of the crowd at Sharpville, “in case readers had forgotten how far we have progressed away from the civilized and

³¹ *The Star*, 11 March 1971 (Independent News Library, Durban, see “Universities: Natal”).

³² *Daily News*, 21 March 1971 (Independent News Library, Durban, see “Universities: Natal”).

³³ See Lobban, *White Man’s Justice*.

³⁴ *Daily News*, 2 March 1971 (Independent News Library, Durban, see “Universities: Natal”).

³⁵ “A Brief History of Student Action in South Africa,” 8. NUSAS papers

³⁶ *Daily News*, 28 May 71.

cultivated norms of 20th century life.”³⁷ *Dome* also ran interviews with banned leaders, like Mewa Ramagobin, and H. Selby Msimang. *Dome*’s editors faced opposition from some in the SRC. Students criticized president Stock, and especially SRC, president John Henderson, for allegedly interfering with the editors of the magazine and attempting to “silence all criticism of himself and the SRC.”³⁸ Paula Ensor and Charles Nupen both threatened to resign from the SRC, along with two other students, in the context of a no-confidence vote against Henderson. Conservative SRC members, like Henderson, continued to oppose outspoken uses of student publications (later he opposed the printing of certain Wages Commission materials). Clearly, white society was not as homogenous in its views as Biko’s treatises contended.

It was in this milieu of growing radicalism that a group of leftist students, including David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, David Davis, Karel Tip, and Charles Nupen, found they were in the majority at a student body meeting on 11 March 1971. In a move Cheadle described as “something of a manipulation,” in the sense that their proposal did not reflect the mass of student sentiment, they pushed through a resolution for a student Wages Commission.³⁹ It is not clear whose idea it was to start a group focused on wages. David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Charles Nupen and other students all spent hours in discussion with Rick Turner, probably leading to collective thinking on the matter. However, David Hemson seems to have played the key role in conceptualizing of the project.

It is tempting to try to reconstruct the origins of political interventions like this one from the retrospective accounts of participants. For example, about fifteen years after the 1973 Durban strikes, in an essay written upon his return from exile entitled, “The 1973 Natal strike wave: how we rebuilt the unions,” David Hemson reflected on his role as a student organizer:

In the late 1960s I used to organize a lot of the Durban student protests, but I came to feel it was a complete waste of time. If only it was possible to get in touch with the massive power of the African working class and link up with that, then we would see that all this joke protest would be in the past and South Africa

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Dome* (Special Issue on the Wages Commission) 17 June 1972, UND Library.

³⁹ Interview with Halton Cheadle, 23 July 2002.

would be completely transformed. This line of thinking led myself and other white students to become involved in organizing Wages Commissions to link up with African workers.⁴⁰

Such accounts tend to present the end result of a movement as a foregone conclusion and the movement itself as a straightforward progression of events. Scrutiny of the Wages Commission in its early years suggest a messier process: failures, dead-ends, abandoned possibilities, and inconsistencies. Here the role of personal connections, family dynamics, and social networks also played a role.⁴¹

In 1970, after completing a master's thesis Hemson moved from Durban to Johannesburg where he worked for the South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR). The Institute, known for its measured approach to fact-finding without direct political involvement, soon proved too conservative for Hemson, especially after he ran a "Free Winnie Mandela" campaign from their office of which the Institute disapproved.⁴² Hemson returned to Durban the same year in order to take up a part-time lectureship at UND, where he researched his doctoral thesis on dockworkers in Durban. After leaving the Institute, Hemson kept up contact with Dudley Horner, then a research assistant, and secured a grant of R200 to write up his thesis. At the same time he also reluctantly relied on his parents. In a letter written to Horner, Hemson complained: "The pressure of Natal colonial life is getting me down; in our house we seem to have five servants and this time! It's amazing; you can't help clearing the table or washing up; that would be putting someone out of a job. I've told my parents I'm only sitting here long enough to finish my thesis."⁴³

Housed in this stifling world of privilege, which he clearly wanted to escape, Hemson and other students from similarly middle-class backgrounds participated quite

⁴⁰David Hemson, "The 1973 Natal strike wave: How we rebuilt the unions." *Congress Militant*. (December 1990), 5. The *Congress Militant* was published by the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC. This account was composed in 1988 and published along with a speech made by Hemson at a rally welcoming him home after fourteen years in exile.

⁴¹See Shula Marks, *Ambiguities of Dependence*.

⁴² Presumably they disapproved because they cultivated an image of apolitical fact-finding, rather than direct intervention. Interview with David Hemson, 9 August 2002.

⁴³ Correspondence between David Hemson and Dudley Horner, 31 December 1970. Dudley Horner private papers (South African Labour and Development Research Unit, UCT). I am grateful to Dudley Horner for initially alerting me to the work of Wages Commissions, sharing his records with me, and his insight into this period.

different relationships on campus. David Davis and Holton Cheadle, both students of politics under Rick Turner and Michael Nupen, began consulting with Hemson about how to make links with black laborers. At this time Cheadle and Hemson were friendly with Black Consciousness people and both attended meetings at the UND medical school. They were two of the only white students present when SASO was launched in an all-night meeting in 1968. Cheadle even recalls sleeping in Biko's bed once when space was tight, suggesting Biko's public rejection of white spokespersonship did not prevent him from maintaining personable relations across race lines.⁴⁴ But Cheadle and Hemson did sense "a heavy atmosphere" in these meetings, and some black students thought they shouldn't be present.⁴⁵ Eventually, the impetus grew to do more than campaign within white society, preparing whites for the revolution that would come with the realization of black consciousness.

Initially taking moderate steps, the Wages Commission would promote class consciousness instead, at first through academic research, and later through attempts to mobilize workers to organize against employers. The initial proposal for the Commission reveals that founders did not expect immediate sympathy from the majority of students. Perhaps trying to bring values honed in conversation with Turner into practice, they invoked student responsibility in several ways:

Students may feel that wages as such are peripheral to student concern, but in the capitalist society wages are the key to food, shelter, health, education, clothes, transport and recreation. Wages are a variable in our society controlled by strict institutional procedures, which have effectively excluded workers from putting the case for a living wage. The function of students is to address the imbalance by using the facilities provided by a university: information gathering, correlation and dissemination and undertaking social action to make people aware of the situation of poverty wages.⁴⁶

The duty of the wages commission, they proposed, would be to gather information on university employees through surveys and directly requesting information on wages from the administration. They would then report to the student body. Eventually, the Wages Commission would move from studying campus wages to wages paid to Municipal

⁴⁴ Interview with Halton Cheadle, 23 July 02.

⁴⁵ Interview with David Hemson, 8 August 2002.

⁴⁶ "Proposed Establishment of a Wages Committee Under the Students Representative Council." NUSAS papers.

employees, and here they envisioned that the Commission might have an immediate effect by analyzing the operations of the Wage Board, the official wage-setting body for workers not covered by Industrial Councils in South Africa at this time.

Contesting wages paid by the Municipality did not end up being a prominent feature of the commission's activities (as compared with researching employment practices in specific industries) however, it is clear that from the beginning the commission would aim at immediate intervention. Their research would be applied directly where it could be used to force employers to raise wages. Statements about student culpability prodded students to join the cause. "Students do not exist in isolation," it was argued, since they benefit from the labor of low paid laborers in residences, kitchens, and research institutes. The only responsible attitude on the part of students, it was argued, was for students to "turn their energy to investigating further the situation, publishing information, and acting to bring the desperate conditions of poverty to the notice of employers."⁴⁷

It is not clear exactly why low wages became the focus for these students. However, academics at UND's Institute for Social Research (ISR) presented students with examples of previous attempts to argue for social change based scientific definitions of minimum needs derived from the social survey work of Edward Batson, and eventually they offered the Wages Commission welcome guidance in sampling techniques.⁴⁸ Students, Hemson argued, should patronize the intellectual resources of the University and at the same time reduce complex information to simple terms and disseminate knowledge.⁴⁹ At this stage it was proposed that the Wages Commission would work closely with the Student Representative Council and the ISR. It would also reinforce evidence being presented by the SAIRR to the Wage Board. They would

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ [Insert material from interviews with Lawrence Schlemmer and Hilston Watts, both formerly with the ISR].

⁴⁹ "The wages committee should operate in conjunction with students of economics, sociology, industrial psychology, political science and mathematics in cooperation with the Institute for Social Research in gathering information on wages in particular industries...to present to the Wage Board investigations. In particular the task of the committee would be reducing wages to real terms, which will indicate the extent to which wages are being diluted by a rapidly rising cost of living. Investigation of income and expenditure of workers in the particular industry would demonstrate the gap between the wages received and the minimum standard of living." "Proposed Establishment of a Wages Committee Under the Students Representative Council." NUSAS papers.

establish “a unit to gather, arrange and disseminate information on wages and budgets in various industries” and work towards generating “appropriate social action to reinforce institutions striving to eliminate poverty in Durban.”⁵⁰ The Institute of Social Research had already shown that three-fifths of African workers in Durban lived in poverty. Specifically, Hemson and Cheadle proposed that university employees be paid wages equal or above to the PDL, a clearly defined goal.⁵¹

Thus, in conceptualizing the Commission’s, Hemson and Cheadle envisaged a body that would draw strength from university departments and established bodies, like the SAIRR, at the same time steps would be taken towards “social action,” such as raising the wages of campus staff. The most significant move in this direction came when students began to consult with a local trade union leader. Soon after the meeting in March of 1971, when the survey of campus workers had barely begun, Rick Turner suggested that Cheadle, Hemson, and David Davis make contact with Harriet Bolton, who was then general secretary of the Garment Worker’s Union.⁵² Bolton’s influence on

⁵⁰ Ibid. Unrelated to the formation of the Wages Commission, in 1971 a South African-born journalist, Denis Herbstein, began researching British companies operating in South Africa. Herbstein interviews with ten companies were published in the UK in April. He did not refer to the PDL, instead he claimed that survey data showed that 80% of the unskilled labour force suffered from malnutrition. James Sanders notes that the director of Unilever warned Herbstein that his investigations were disloyal to British interests. However, any public controversy about British employment practices seem to have been mitigated by the fact that Herbstein’s article appeared “buried in the business section and, with no supporting editorial or front page splash.” It received little attention. See, James Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media, 1972-1979* (London: Frank Cass, 2000) 117. Subsequent investigations, however, would make more of an impact using PDL data.

⁵¹ This was a new kind of use of the PDL. As I plan to discuss in my thesis, the PDL emerged in relation to postwar planning efforts. Batson drew on British social surveying (such as the work of Booth, Rowntree, and Bowey), but he went to great lengths to see that the PDL was seen as apolitical. His social survey of Cape Town compared the living levels of European and non-European households in relation to the British Medical Association’s minimum dietary requirement standards, and not surprisingly found that white families were significantly better off. Batson’s interest lay in establishing an empirical, scientific measure of poverty (modeled on the natural sciences) as opposed to ‘impressionist’ approaches, such as commissions of inquiry. The PDL became a popular rhetorical reference point for reformers like Hornle, Gluckman, Hofmeyer, and the SAIRR, useful in validated the need for greater state responsibility for an increasingly urbanized African population and social security for all South Africans. However the Nationalist Party essentially silenced these claims in favor of ‘separate development.’ Perhaps the state also sidetracked people like Batson by involving them in planning projects never to be implemented. Batson worked for a time for the National Building Research Institute in the early 1950s on a low cost housing scheme, but this study was completing ignored once completed. [Insert interviews with Johannes Potgieter and Hilton Watts on their work with Batson]

⁵² [check dates of her various positions in the union] Bolton’s personal history can be seen as interwoven with the history of industrial relations in South Africa in the twentieth century. It is worth reviewing some of this history before discussing her influence on the Wages Commission. In 1944 Harriet was hired as a secretary at the typographical workers union in Durban, taking shorthand and minutes. [Interview with

these students was perhaps as significant as that of Biko and Turner, and requires elaboration.

One of the notable strategies of the union under Harriet Bolton's leadership was its use of media publicity, something the Wages Commissions may have sought to emulate. For example, early in 1971, just as the Wages Commissions were being conceptualized, Bolton approached employers about starting wages for "cleaners" (who picked threads from clothes), but employers weren't willing to negotiate. The union bought a half page advertisement in the Natal Mercury reading:

“WANTED: SLAVES AT STARVATION WAGES. The Clothing Industry in Natal desperately needs: Male and Female Machinists, Cleaners, Layers Up, Cutters...but the basic laid down wage buys only bus fare and one meal per day! Starting Rate R5.00 per week. After 2 years R9.95 per week. After 4 year R15.25 per week. COULD YOU LIVE ON THIS? 26,000 clothing workers are battling to do so!⁵³

Employers were furious with her, she recalls, because they had been shamed in the public eye, and were now being questioned about these low wages by friends and colleagues.⁵⁴ Some demanded an apology from the union, while refusing to raise wages. Employers did not relent until a large strike in 1971 at Curries Fountain. According to Bolton, the vast majority of workers struck. The union organized the strike through word of mouth, meeting shop stewards at bus ranks in the early morning and during their lunch hours.

Harriet Bolton, 19 November 2002.] There she met James Bolton, and the founder of the furniture workers union. James Bolton was a British Socialist, an upholstery designer, who before moving to South Africa, participated in England's "great strike" in the late 1920s, when miners struck for nine days to protest wage reductions. After this he was forced to seek employment outside of England and moved to South Africa. In 1933, he was working in the furniture trade in Durban, when a group of textile workers approached him and asked him to investigate working conditions in their factories. He found that many employers were not paying the minimum wage, partly due to depression-era unemployment levels. [*Garment Workers' Industrial Union (Natal) Souvenir Brochure 1934-1959 Silver Jubilee*. (I thank Harriet Bolton for sharing this and other union materials with me.)] In 1934, Bolton formed the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), meeting with workers between shifts and at lunch hour, inside and outside factories, and he became the union's General Secretary. In 1935 they ran a "Fair Wage" clothing label campaign and applied for a Wage Board investigation into the Garment industry. When Harriet married James she soon took up organizing with him and when he died in 1963, Harriet took over as General Secretary. Harriet recalled how her parents were horrified by her work in the trade unions, and asked her why she couldn't get "a normal job." Reflecting on her father's "liberal" views, it seemed the fact that that she was working with the poor, rather than with non-whites, that disturbed her parents most. [Interview with Harriet Bolton, 19 November 2002.]

⁵³ Natal Mercury [Date??] Killie Campbell Memorial Library, See "Resistance to Apartheid" File, 99/71/2/11 (Hereafter "KCM, Resistance to Apartheid").

⁵⁴ Interview with Harriet Bolton, 19 November 2002.

Some had been South African Congress of Trade Union (SACTU) members, although many were afraid to reveal this publicly, after the ruthless repression of SACTU in the 1950s.⁵⁵ According to Bolton, the Curries Fountain strike was “the talk of the town,” said Bolton, and worker’s demands for higher wages, more pay for overtime, more holidays, and shorter hours were finally wrested from employers.⁵⁶

Both Hemson and Cheadle recall their surprise at meeting Bolton. “What was a white woman doing running an Indian trade union?” they wondered.⁵⁷ The apparent contradiction mattered little however as Bolton quickly became one of the Wages Commissions’ most helpful supporters. Crucially, she provided space in Bolton Hall (named after the late James Bolton) where students could organize meetings of black workers. One affiliate of the Wages Commission described her as “mother hen” figure, “who brought all these kids together,” and organized feasts at her house during Durban’s sardine run.⁵⁸

As somewhat of an aside, before outlining the Wages Commission’s strategic use of the PDL and their attempts to get worker to confront the Wage Board, it is perhaps important to note how few opportunities existed for the non-unionized to convey their complaints to management due to the suppression of SACTU and the lack of collective

⁵⁵ Bolton recalls visiting one steward’s home, who pulled up his floor boards under his bed and showed her a stash of ANC and materials and *Sacheba* newspapers. SACTU had campaigned for a pound a day, which Bolton noted seemed an “inaccessibly” high wage at the time. The strategy was to make a high demand, to get people to think about what was possible, to raise the consciousness of both workers and unions, rather ask for a realistic wage, as the PDL arguments did later. Interview with Harriet Bolton, 19 November 2002.

⁵⁶ In fact, Bolton suggested to me that this strike may have given workers the idea to strike in 1973. Reflecting on the 1971 Curries Fountain demonstration, Bolton recounted to me how one textile factory owner on the morning of the strike said to her that it was only when he went to his factory and saw no work being done, only managers and secretaries standing about, that he realized his business simply could not operate without the workers. This epiphany on the employer’s part, whether remembered by Bolton accurately or not, seems either selected from Bolton’s memory, or retrospectively reconstructed because it makes a point she sought to make elsewhere, and perhaps wanted to impress on me. It is the same epiphany of capital’s dependence on labour Bolton selected from Gandhi’s advice to workers in another setting. She quotes him in her General Secretary’s message to the union at the opening of the new Bolton Hall on Gale Street in Durban, in May of 1974: “I have a message to our workers. Mahatma Gandhi said it better than I can—I quote: ‘In my humble opinion, labour can always vindicate itself if labour is sufficiently united and self-sacrificing. No matter how oppressive the employer (the capitalists) may be, I am convinced that those who are connected with labour and guide the labour movement have themselves, no idea of the resources that labour can command, and which capital can never command. If labour would only understand that capital is perfectly helpless without labour, labour will immediately come into its own.’” The point of this aside is to offer one example of how memory presents a complex source, one filtered and reconstructed again and again.

⁵⁷ Both Hemson and Cheadle conveyed this to me.

⁵⁸ Interview with Dudley Horner, 2 July 2002.

bargaining machinery. Here I pick one example, although many others could be used to illustrate the point. The following story also suggests how some workers (much like the Wages Commissions and the Black Consciousness movement) looked to the past in formulating a critique of the present.

Vusi Shezi, now an organizer at NUMSA, joined tens of thousands of other workers in the streets during the massive strike wave that swept Durban in January of 1973. In the course of speaking with him about the strikes, another story emerged in the course of our conversation about a time before the strikes. Describing his family as poor, with five younger siblings at home, Shezi left school in his late teens in order to earn money, and indicated several times to me his sense of regret about having to end his studies prematurely. After several low paying jobs, he began working at Dunlap Tyre Company, where he had heard that laborers could sacrifice their lunch hour and get more pay, although he was not able to get one of these jobs. In his account, workers felt they were always being watched by *indunas* (African supervisors) and by undercover Secret Police. These spies monitored employee's conversations and management's suspicion could be raised, he recalled, even if a worker brought a newspaper article into work to show others. When I asked Shezi if the management ever suspected him of anything, he said "yes" and laughed:

I was working the night shift. This department had all the old people. Sometimes when the orders for the job that we were tasked to do got finished, they would sleep (laughs) and ask me to tell them when the senior people came around.

And I was saying to myself, 'I am wasting time and I am not studying. If I was using this time to study...but I don't have books.' Then, I usually remember why I am sitting here. Then I started writing on the big trolley there, taking a piece of chalk, what I know about the arrival of the whites starting in 1652 and how South Africa was colonized. I was just doing that in English. Now I don't know why I was doing that in English.

Unfortunately, I forgot to wipe it off. Then the next morning it was seen by senior management. They see this trolley with a very good map of Africa, and some background of colonialism, with a bit of an attack on the Apartheid government and complaints about black leaders that were jailed.

I don't know what I was writing. You see, when you are young, you are just

thinking and writing...⁵⁹

In moment of a stream-of-consciousness writing about the history of South Africa on the side of a trolley, Shezi reflected on his fate. No one else in the department could write in English or Zulu, and after being questioned by management about the trolley, Shezi was singled out, then transferred to another unit, where he said the work was significantly more taxing.⁶⁰ After the 1973 strikes, Shezi left the factory and took a job at South African Fabrics, where he heard from friends that the textile union was beginning to organize people. The fact that he was essentially punished for his outburst of writing suggests something of the limits placed on workers who wanted to publicly vocalize dissatisfaction.

How would students seek to represent workers in this climate of repression? The first meeting where students from the Wages Commission attempted to speak on their behalf took place on June 8, 1971. Preceding the meeting, Durban newspapers ran a statement made by a trade union leader invoking the PDL in response to the recent setting of minimum wages for some 300,000 unskilled black workers. “An extremely dangerous situation is being created,” argued J.C. Rampona, secretary of the Motor Industry (non-White) Combined Workers’ Union [check this], “and the Government seems to be blissfully unaware of it—where the gap between non-White earnings and the poverty datum line is widening.”⁶¹ Anna Scheepers, President of the Garment Workers Union, played to other sentiments, arguing that, “the Government should feel *morally* bound to pay the non-White workers a living wage.”⁶²

Using the SRC printing facilities, the Wages Commission decided to alert people to this situation, especially to the fact that the Wage Board had tentatively set the new minimum wages for unskilled workers at R6.80 per week for females and R8.50 for males. The Wages Commission printed a pamphlet explaining that the PDL for Durban

⁵⁹ Except for this interview, most of the “worker’s voices” I draw on in this paper were recorded by other interviewees or observers, which presents a range of methodological problems. However, I have decided to use these sources anyway as they are the best existing records of many of these events. Interview with Vusi Shezi, 2 December 2002.

⁶⁰ He notes he was required to make 32 tires an hour.

⁶¹ *Natal Mercury*, 8 June 1971.

⁶² *Ibid* (emphasis mine).

had been calculated at R16.30 per week, almost twice the new minimum wage rate.⁶³ Calling African, Coloured and Indian workers to attend a meeting at Bolton Hall, the pamphlet declared: “Thousands of you are already paid these low wages. Some of you are paid even less. Professors at the University have worked out that R8-50 is half the lowest amount which is needed for you and your family to eat properly, have enough clothes, and get an education for your children.”⁶⁴ Hemson wrote to Dudley Horner, his advisor, friend, and financial patron at the SAIRR, about the next day’s meeting. “I am working with a student group at Durban; the Wages Commission which is doing studies of particular industries and giving evidence to the Wage Board. The first step had been to organize an objection to the latest unskilled wage determination for Natal. This meeting is coming off tomorrow... I just don’t know what the outcome could be.”⁶⁵

The commission still faced notable resistance on campus at this time. With the meeting at Bolton Hall being planned for the next day, SRC president, John Henderson visited the Wages Commission office where thousands of these pamphlets were being prepared, reading: “Issued by the Students Representative Council.” Henderson ordered that the pamphlets be destroyed, claiming students were “exceeding the bounds of the mandate by which the group had been established.” The SRC executive overruled this however, and distribution of the pamphlets went ahead. Later the SRC called for a disciplinary investigation.⁶⁶ Henderson used his casting vote as chairman to bring David Hemson, David Davis, Halton Cheadle, Charles Nupen and Karel Tip before the Disciplinary Court for “breach of discipline.”⁶⁷ When several SRC members threatened to resign these charges were dropped.⁶⁸ One student concluded: “Those acting against

⁶³ *Dome* (Special Issue on the Wages Commission) 17 June 1972, UND Library.

⁶⁴ It unclear who wrote what in the Wage Commission pamphlets, although Hemson seems to have been behind much of their publicity. Some if not all of this particular pamphlet was likely penned by David Davis, another key member in the founding of the commission. In the course of a general conversation, Hemson attributed this phrase “professors at the university” to Davis.

⁶⁵ Correspondence between David Hemson and Dudley Horner, 7 June 1971. Dudley Horner’s private papers. At that time, Hemson received a letter from the Minister of Labour in reply to an enquiry about African’s giving evidence to the Board, saying “very firmly” that workers must receive permission from their employers in order to give evidence. He noted this to Horner, also that that “Dhlomo of UBC, Msimang of Lamontville UBC, Mrs. Bolton, Jock Epsie, and Demsy Noel of the Labour Party were in attendance at the meeting.”

⁶⁶ “NUSAS Newsletter,” 18 May 1971 (NUSAS papers).

⁶⁷ *Dome*, Special Issue on the Wages Commission, 17 June 1971.

⁶⁸ Later in this month, a Natal newspaper reported that “a defamatory reference” to the Stock (who students saw as allied with Henderson) had been painted in black paint on the walls of the Memorial Tower

the Wages Committee did so because they saw their own position as future leaders of white liberal society endangered by practical attempts to interest the black labour force in their own conditions of employment. Black worker solidarity constitutes a danger to the white management class—and that is the area in which lies the projected futures of university trained SRE office-bearers.”⁶⁹

One can only assume Wages Commission members were thrilled by the effect of their propaganda. As a result of the pamphlets Bolton Hall was “packed to capacity.”⁷⁰ According to the *Daily News*, 400 attended the meeting, demanding higher wages.⁷¹ Several workers expressed how impossible it was for them to support their families, feed, and educate their children with the wages laid down by the Wage Board.⁷² At the meeting, Jock Epsie of the conservative Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) told those assembled that industries could afford to pay more and strongly criticized the Wage Board.⁷³ It is unclear who actually voiced the proposal that workers get paid wages approximating the PDL at the meeting, or who lead them in rejecting this proposal. According to a NUSAS newsletter: “A proposal made at the meeting that workers call for a minimum wage of R16.30 was rejected and replaced by a call for R20.00.” Someone reportedly said: “Why should we call for the lowest acceptable wage only?”⁷⁴ All present signed an objection to the Wage Board’s determination, along with Michael Nupen, Rick Turner, Peter Duminy and Fatima Meer⁷⁵ and unanimously agreed to inform the Minister

Building, a prominent building on campus, along with slogans reading: “this building is obscene” and “revolution is in our hands.” *Daily News* 28 May 1971, (Independent News Library, Durban, see “Universities: Natal”).

⁶⁹ Creve Salope, “Bruit,” pamphlet from June 1971. FOSATU papers.

⁷⁰ *Dome* Special Issue on the Wages Commission, 17 June 1971. Hemson and Cheadle recall distributing these and other pamphlets at taxi ranks in industrial areas and outside factory gates, including at the Coronation Brick Factory where the Durban strikes began. Both recall workers reading them with great interest. Hemson emphasized that they were neither too radical nor too tame, although Cheadle mentioned some translation problems.

⁷¹ *Daily News*, 9 June 7. Some of the newspaper articles I cite here and below, especially those that cover Wage Board meetings are cited in David Hemson, “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock workers of Durban, Vol. II.” PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1978.

⁷² *Natal Mercury*, 9 June 71.

⁷³ TUCSA was formed in the 1950s out of a split within the existing union over the inclusion of black workers. Those in support of organizing black workers formed SACTU, while TUCSA remained uncommitted to recognizing black workers as equal members. See Davie Lewis chapter in *From Protest to Challenge* [insert citation!]

⁷⁴ NUSAS newsletter May 18, 1971 (NUSAS papers).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

of Labour they were demanding R20 per week.⁷⁶ Mewa Ramagobin, urged those present to form so-called “works committees,” saying “you as Black men cannot form a trade union but that doesn’t stop you from forming committees.”⁷⁷

Horner congratulated Hemson: “I have seen the results of your group’s action in a report in the Natal muckraker. I was extremely excited as Loot (Dowes-Dekker)⁷⁸ and I have been thinking along these lines. All the blether about attitude studies and change in the social structure of society now seem to me pure academic frivolity. Only the vote or a strong workers’ movement can produce effective change.” But he qualified his approval with the suggestion that direct communication between workers and the Minister of Labour might not prove a winning approach. “In the case of your meeting at Bolton Hall might it not be more tactful to forward your rejection of the Wage Board’s recommendations to the Minister via the local Bantu Official? Great regrets to suggest a compromise but I do have my reasons for this.”⁷⁹ Perhaps because the workers did not express their grievances through the structures of the Bantu Labour Office, no threat of strikes loomed over the heads of management, when the Wage Board published its determination for unskilled workers in October of that year, no notice had been taken of the petition sent directly to the Secretary of Labour.⁸⁰ The Board set down a minimum wage of R8.50 per week.⁸¹ Thus the wages commission failed in its first attempt to gain higher wages for unskilled laborers in Durban.

Meanwhile, pamphlets explaining the PDL and announcing the meeting at Bolton Hall yielded some unanticipated results. On the 9th of June, the day after the Bolton Hall meeting, a small group of African workers at the McWillaw Iron and Steel Foundry in Isipingo stopped work. By the late afternoon, more that 200 had gathered outside the

⁷⁶ *Natal Mercury*, 9 June 71.

⁷⁷ *Daily News*, 9 June 71

⁷⁸ TUCSA expelled Loot Douwes-Dekker and Eric Tyacke from their “African Affairs” department for being overly sympathetic with the concerns of black workers. These two launched the Urban Training Project, also in 1971, with the help of the Young Christians Workers organization. The Urban Training Project provided some support to the Wages Commissions.

⁷⁹ Correspondence from Dudley Horner to David Hemson, 17 June 1971 (Dudley Horner’s personal papers).

⁸⁰ [Explain about the Bantu Labour Office]

⁸¹ *Bulletin of the Wages Commission*, Students’ Representative Council, University of Natal, Durban, No. 1 6 December 1971 (UND Library).

gates of the foundry.⁸² According to Hemson, workers held up Wages Commission pamphlets on poverty quoting Hilton Watt's estimation of R16.50 as a minimum weekly income. 70 policemen arrived armed with batons and workers were called into the factory to negotiate. A settlement seemed to have been reached with no pay increase. The following day however, foundry employees continued their strike and some, if not all, were dismissed.⁸³ From these inauspicious beginnings, the Wages Commission proceeded to hone its approach to representing workers.

II Bringing the PDL to Wage Board Hearings

The Wage Board was established in South Africa in 1925 after white miners took part in strikes in 1913, 1920, and 1922 in protest against the employment of Africans in semi-skilled jobs at lower rates of pay. Twice these ended in serious violence and the imposition of martial law.⁸⁴ The state appointed a group to investigate the causes of the strikes and some of their findings were incorporated into the Industrial Conciliation Bill in 1923, which passed into law as the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1924.⁸⁵ The Act stipulated that all trade unions and employee organizations must be registered and that negotiation take place through Industrial Councils with members elected by employers and employees. Ringrose describes these Industrial Councils as "quasi-permanent bodies." Along with conciliation boards, these could present agreements enforceable as

⁸² David Hemson, "Students and Workers," 4, NUSAS papers. Also see, *Natal Mercury* 10 June 1917.

⁸³ *Natal Mercury*, 11 June 1917. The *Natal Mercury* states all strikers were paid off. Hemson reports six workers were dismissed for their role in the strike. See David Hemson's "Workers and Students," 4 (NUSAS papers). Later, after the Wages Commissions started operating on all five NUSAS affiliated campuses, Jeannette Curtis warned members on protecting their informants from reprisals from employers. [insert quote on "the more quickly we realize this the better..."]

⁸⁴ The origin of this legislation is summarized concisely by Muriel Horrell of the SAIRR: "A strike took place on the gold mines in 1913 over the question of their [trade unions] status, for at that time the recognition of trade unions and the right of collective bargaining were not generally accepted in South Africa. Next year another strike, which originated on the Natal coal mines, spread to the railways and gold mines, and developed into a general strike which was brought to an end only after martial law had been declared. Further strikes, of first African and then White mine-workers, took place in 1920 and 1922 over the question of the employment of Africans in semi-skilled jobs at lower rates of pay than Whites received for similar work. Serious rioting took place, martial law was again declared, and once more the workers were driven back by forceful methods. It became abundantly clear that machinery for the settlement of labour disputes was necessary." Muriel Horrell, *South Africa's Workers: Their Organizations and the Patterns of Employment* (Johannesburg: C.E. Folkey, 1969) 2. [insert more on the legislation].

⁸⁵ H.G. Ringrose, *Natal Regional Survey Volume 4: Trade Unions in Natal* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1951) 17.

law after publication in the *Government Gazette*. Yet the Industrial Conciliation Act excluded Africans from representation with a loaded turn of phrase. An “employee” could not be anyone falling under Native pass laws, or a worker recruited by labour agents, which effectively cut out Africans.⁸⁶

The Wage Board, established under the Wage Act of 1924, operated in the space left open by the Industrial Conciliation Act, investigating wages and working conditions “in any industry referred to it by the Minister, or in a trade not already covered by an agreement or award made under the Industrial Conciliation Act.”⁸⁷ Here African employees were given some recourse. The Wage Board would meet when “a number of employers or employees considered by the Board to be sufficiently representative of the industry in question had submitted a direct application.”⁸⁸ The Wage Act also stipulated that the Wage Board must consider objections within a 30-day period after determinations were made, a feature exploited by the Wages Commissions.⁸⁹ Typically, the Board met for any given industry about once every four years, but much longer intervals sometimes occurred.⁹⁰ The Department of Labour published announcements for upcoming meetings and also published its determinations in the *Government Gazette*. Here the definition of “employee” did not matter, as African workers could, and did, associate into unregistered trade unions, or “works committees,” and demand Wage Board investigations. Some of these unregistered African unions operated “in parallel” with registered ones, as in the garment industry in Natal, and these unions would then represent Africans at Industrial Councils. Thus, the Wage Board remained one of the only official channels open to black workers wanting to change the conditions of their employment in South Africa in the 1970s, although an under-utilized one.

⁸⁶ Horrell notes that some 12.5 percent of Africans were estimated to be living in urban towns at that time. In the Cape and the Orange Free State there were no such pass laws, thus trade unions in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Johannesburg did admit Africans, some in large numbers. Horrell, *South Africa's Workers*, 2. In Durban, however, only white, Indian, and coloured workers could be represented by Industrial Councils.

⁸⁷ Ringrose, *Trade Unions in Natal*, 18-19. [insert more on the legislation].

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

⁸⁹ [check legislation].

⁹⁰ South African Institute of Race Relations, *A survey of race relations in South Africa, 1972* (Johannesburg: Race Relations Press [check publisher], 1973) 242.

After securing a grant of R400 for their study of campus wages from the SAIRR, students seem to have focused their energies on studies of particular industries instead.⁹¹ The first Wage Board meeting where students presented evidence was for the cement products industry on 25 June 1971.⁹² Two or three weeks before the meeting, students distributed pamphlets outside factories explaining the procedures of the Wage Board and the kind of evidence likely to be effective.⁹³ These pamphlets were probably translated into Zulu by a former court translator who worked with the Wages Commission (a man who had links to the ANC and a girlfriend on campus).⁹⁴ “Professors at the University,” the pamphlet confidently declared, had determined that cement workers’ current wages were only half of the minimum amount needed to live and support their families. Employees should show they needed more money based on an inventory of their expenses:

“DO YOU WANT YOUR WAGES INCREASED? If you do then you must do these things: Work out a weekly budget for your family and list your wages and your normal weekly expenses: what you spend on food, clothing, transport, housing, medicine and doctors, etc. List the number of people in the family and give their ages. Say whether your wife or son works and if they pay anything towards family expenses. If you cannot write to get some of your friends to help

⁹¹Correspondence from Halton Cheadle to Dudley Horner, 4 November 1971, Dudley Horner’s private papers. Hemson noted to me that Nupen did a lot of the work on the campus wages study. Interview with David Hemson, 8 August 2002.

⁹² It would be interesting at a later stage to contrast the development of the Wages Commissions with interventions on behalf of workers by “homeland” leaders. In May of 1972 members the Kwazulu Legislative Assembly took up to the question of low wages and economic inequality, linking these not so much to “working class consciousness” as to notions of “development” and the future of “the Zulu nation.” Buthelezi is remembered by historians for his opposition to the labor movement, evidenced by his fallout with Barney Dladla, Councillor of Community Affairs. Dladla became one of the most outspoken representatives of workers within the administration, before being expelled in 1974, and seems to have negotiated a tricky position between the “homeland” government, workers, and student organizers involved in the formation of the Institute for Industrial Education in 1974. In May 1972, a few days before first meeting of the Kwazulu Legislative Assembly, workers at Afrotex and Wintex factories in Pinetown and New Germany areas staged a slowdown. (See *Bulletin* No. 8, NUSAS papers) I believe this was the dispute where Dladla investigated and spoke on the worker’s behalf. After making the case for higher wages to employers, one factory agreed to raise wages. (See the records of the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly.) Mare and Hamilton, focusing on the development of Inkata, present Buthelezi as essentially hostile to workers concerns, since he supported employers and sought to further the investment of capital within his territory. Gerhard Mare and Georgina Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the Politics of ‘Loyal Resistance’* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1989)

⁹³ Correspondence from Halton Cheadle to Dudley Horner, 4 November 1971, Dudley Horner’s private papers.

⁹⁴ Interview with David Hemson, 8 August 2002. [Is this the same translator who did the pamphlets? Hemson did not recall his name]

you write this.⁹⁵

This pamphlet explained that the Wage Board had to listen to “both bosses and the workers” before deciding what the lowest wages should be. And that after agreements about wages and working hours would become law. But, it qualified: “You or a group of your friends in the factory will have to be at the Wage Board to show that you need the increase.”⁹⁶ The Zulu version concluded with “Amaholo enu angakhushulwa. Kukinina!”

Wage Board meetings in Durban were held in a small room in the office of the Department of Labour. Hemson notes that the Wage Board tried to “reproduce the atmosphere of a court,” with Wage Board officials seated on a raised platform, any works committees, the Bantu Labour Board, and the employers all seated on one side, and the registered trade unions and any workers on the other.⁹⁷ [Insert here or elsewhere interview with former Wage Board official] At this time few would attend Wage Board meetings and Wages Commission founders felt that those who did attend were essentially sell-outs, spokesmen chosen by employers who failed to represent employees’ real complaints. Another limitation on workers: they were apparently required to get permission from their employers in order to give evidence.

At the cement industry hearing, several managed to get time off and attend the hearing, but not in large numbers. The Wages Commission had compiled budgets worked out in conjunction with 19 workers. Notable is how at this meeting the Commission appears to have taken Dudley Horner’s advice about the most diplomatic means of communicating to the Labour authorities. A Reverend Mavundla and H.S. Msimang of the Urban Bantu Council served as spokesmen for the students, delivering the commission’s findings.⁹⁸ Reverend Mavundla presented a daily budget of the food, fuel, and lighting needs of a family of six. It was argued the bare minimum would be R16.30 per week.⁹⁹ Conversely, employers recommended the board set the minimum wage at R8.50. The chairman of the board summed up management’s point of view,

⁹⁵ NUSAS Papers.

⁹⁶ “Workers in the Cement Products Industry” attached to “What can be done.” Dudley Horner papers.

⁹⁷ Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 598.

⁹⁸ Correspondence from Halton Cheadle to Dudley Horner, 4 November 1971, Dudley Horner’s private papers.

⁹⁹ (draft) Letter from the Wages Commission to the Secretary for Labour, 5 July 1971. FOSATU papers. William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter, FOSATU papers).

saying that he did not believe employers wished “to hold down wages for the sake of holding down wages and employing people and paying them below the breadline...but there are serious problems,” such as “cost implications” that could potentially damage the export capacity of the cement industry.¹⁰⁰

After the hearing, the Wages Commission also wrote to the Minister of Labour, submitting their analysis of past determinations and their own research into this industry.¹⁰¹ In their letter they also drew on the work of Hilston Watts, a leading expert on the estimation of the PDL in Durban, and the head of UND’s Institute for Social Research.¹⁰² The delegation of students and employees tried to argue that the industry could afford an increase, and that raising African buying power would have the added benefit of boosting demand for consumer goods.¹⁰³ The Wages Commission also supported TUCSA’s claims for shorter apprenticeships and shorter working hours. Here it seems that the Commission’s strategy, in the absence of strong worker representation, was to submit arguments they felt would prove compelling (using accepted channels of

¹⁰⁰ “Extracts from Chairman of Wage Board’s summing up of evidence given at hearings into cement products industry: Durban,” FOSATU papers.

¹⁰¹ “We based our pay demands on the poverty datum line for Durban which stands at about R17.50 a week for a family of five. The conditions of the workers lives was also touched upon: the relation of disease to poverty: cultural stagnation to poverty.” Apparently some updating of the figures brought the demand from R16.30 to R.17.50] (draft) Letter from the Wages Commission to the Secretary for Labour, 5 July 1971. FOSATU papers.

¹⁰² Ibid. Hilston Watts worked with Edward Batson in the 1950s at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research on a study of low-cost housing. [Insert points from interview with Watts]. In 1966 he published *A Study of the Social Circumstances and Characteristics of the Bantu in the Durban Region*, which calculated PDLs. Among other recommendations, Watts noted the need for black trade unions. One of the papers on poverty in Durban by Watts referenced by the Wage Commissions may have been “Poverty and Wages: An article in three sections written especially for the Natal Employers Association” presented in January of 1971 [FOSATU papers]. Here Watts seeks to influence Durban’s leading employers to raise wages by drawing the parallel between late nineteenth-century Britain and South Africa. He writes: “What are the causes of poverty? In the South African situation where we are dealing with a rural non-Western population which has moved into urban areas and is gradually being urbanized, the problem of poverty is complex, and is very similar to that found in India or say Latin America. However, as Rowntree found in Britain as long ago as 1899, so in South Africa analyses by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and also the Institute for Social Research have shown unequivocally that the major single factor in poverty is low wages—wages which are below the bread line. Europe had a serious problem of poverty at the turn of the century and earlier. They eventually wiped it out. Rising wages, and improved productivity and better training of workers which made rising wages possible for the industrialists, were key factors together with education in wiping out poverty... Will we rise to the challenge as our British and European forebears did?” Posing this question to employers, however, did not come attached to any articulation of what consequences in terms of their own profits employers might face if they did not pay above the bread line, as in the context of the 1973 strikes. (Watts defined the minimum here as R70 per month for all races, or R16.30 per week).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

communication like the Bantu Labour Officers) based on things like African consumer power, employers' ability to pay, and the PDL, and wherever possible back these with references to academic studies. They repeated the same strategy in investigating the clothing industry in the border areas of Natal.

In a meeting held in Ladysmith, students again advanced the PDL as the legitimate means for setting minimum wages. Despite this, other considerations dominated discussion. The Wages Commission submitted their report in writing, although their statement is not recorded in the official minutes. They called for an automatic adjustment of wages in relation to increases in the cost of living between Wage Board determinations, and for wages to meet the PDL.¹⁰⁴ Cheadle reported that, "employers actually laughed at our proposals for wages based on the poverty datum line."¹⁰⁵

Also attendance at the meeting were representatives of the Department of Labour, the Industrial Council for the Transvaal, Cape and Natal; the Transvaal Employers Association; employers from the border areas; the Clothing Workers Union (its registered and African branches) and Wage Board chairman, Hugué Tindale, who took minutes.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the meeting these spokesmen made myriad kinds of claims for the need to raise wages, on the one hand, or to keep wages the same, on the other, without apparent common ground. Employers tended harp on productivity, while representatives of labor emphasized the rising cost of living, worker efficiency, international standards, quality of life issues, unfair treatment, and lack of sufficient representation in the border areas. Perhaps a main hindrance in convincing the Board to raise wages, along with the fact that there were no apparent threats of strikes or an effective organization of workers, was that many of these criteria were relative and could be used in an idiosyncratic manner, with speakers drawing examples from their own personal experience, ignoring the counter claims of others. Employers and representatives of labor seemed to be speaking about

¹⁰⁴ Determinations were sometimes spaced by as many as seven years, they noted. Correspondence from Halton Cheadle to Dudley Horner, 4 November 1971, Dudley Horner's private papers.

¹⁰⁵ Tindale's position may have differed in public versus private discussions. Cheadle reported to the SAIRR that Tindale later agreed privately to put forward this proposal to his colleagues. Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of the Wage Board, Determination for the Garment Industries of the Border Areas [check date], Ladysmith (David Hemson's private papers. I am grateful to Hemson for sharing these with me).

the same things of the surface, but a multiplicity of terms clouded discussion.¹⁰⁷ Also, at this stage in mid-1971, management clearly felt no compulsion to consider raising worker's standard of living.¹⁰⁸

At the end of the day, employers won out. Obviously fighting to continue paying textile workers in the border areas at low rates, employers were not openly adversarial towards the presence of students in this meeting, and allowed them carry out studies in their factories.¹⁰⁹ However, their failure to convince the Board urged the Wages Commission to ratchet up their assault and sharpen their empirical weaponry. Citing the “inadequacy of general evidence,” Cheadle petitioned Horner for more financial support:

The conclusion reached from these two Wage Board sittings was that if we were to convince the Wage Board to give a rise in wages we would have to base our evidence on primary sources: processing them into a coherent and conclusive body of evidence. In order to do this we would have to work out a black

¹⁰⁷ For instance, Anna Scheepers argued that wage determinations happened too infrequently, the cost of living was increasing, workers were paid more overseas, and in the border areas some workers were given notice shortly before they qualified for permanent employment and new workers were hired in their place. “To work and starve is worse than not working at all,” she argued. She then referred to a personal conversation with a Scottish manager of a clothing factory who expressed to her his view that African workers were as productive as those he had employed in England, but that low wages discouraged them from becoming efficient. Scheepers then cited Sheila van der Horst who had recently warned that the growing wage gap could cause industrial unrest. Next Harriet Bolton argued that workers were “completely unaware of their rights in the border areas, while workers are aware of their rights in urban areas.” In her view there should be “a reasonable correlation” between wages set by the Wage Board for black workers and those set by the Industrial Council, which she was representing at that time. Lucy Mvumbelo apparently spoke last, and the minutes suggest she said the following: “We appreciate what employers are doing to bring industry to decentralized areas but we want them to do this not at the expense of the workers. The workers pay as much rent in border areas as the do in Soweto: R6.50. There is no buying in bulk and supermarkets. Kwashikor is rife, and education is difficult to obtain. African workers are also contributing to South African industry and are willing to learn.” Mvubelo concluded her case by mentioning how workers had recently been arrested for complaining about low wages. It is unclear if the workers present said anything. Countering these kinds of claims, employers argued that they faced certain disadvantages in the border areas. One employer responded to the “cost of living” argument with a “standard of living” argument, and at the same time sought to excuse himself from any responsibility for workers’ hardships: “There are 1,400 workers employed by us who have attained a fair standard of living, and 75-80 per cent of them live between 4 – 5 miles from the factory and pay R6.10. A similar house in Chatsworth would cost R18.00...” Later he argued: “It is also not out responsibility if rural shopkeepers take advantage of the market in rural areas.”

¹⁰⁸ In the following year, Tindale clarified the position of the Wage Board in an interview with the *Financial Mail* in which he argued that the Board sought to protect unorganized workers by setting minimum wages, yet it was beyond the scope of the Board to attempt to raise worker's standards of living by raising wages. South African Institute of Race Relations, *A survey of race relations in South Africa, 1972* (Johannesburg: Race Relations Press, 1973) 242. Hereafter *Race Relations Survey, 1972*.

¹⁰⁹ Although when students had shown up at these factories prior to this, police were called [find source!!]

consumer price index for the area with documented evidence of workers conditions generally and particularly in the industry concerned.”¹¹⁰

Because there would also be five determinations in the following year to which the wages commission founders wanted to give evidence, Cheadle asked for R830 in order to gather more coherent evidence, noting that further studies would come under the direct supervision of Lawrence Schlemmer of the ISR.¹¹¹

Perhaps because the cement industry lacked a history of worker militancy and textile workers in the border areas did not know their rights, as Harriet Bolton pointed out, labor made a weak showing at these two Wage Board meetings in 1971, despite the attempts of the Wages Commission to encourage workers to attend. Moreover, the PDL remained one among many claims put forward, but one that drowned in a sea of other claims. A different scenario played out when David Hemson and Halton Cheadle began communicating with dockworkers in Durban, who did use the PDL to make their voices heard, and attended Wage Board sittings in large numbers.

III Nationalization and contact with stevedores

At a NUSAS conference in July of 1971, Jeanette Curtis proposed a motion, seconded by Paula Ensor at UND, to establish a “wages and economic commissions” at Wits, UCT, Rhodes, and the University of Natal-Pietermaritzburg based on the UND model. These would be official sub-committees of the SRC. Curtis and Ensor argued that the commissions, while “co-operating fully with the workers,” should conduct research in conjunction with staff members in the departments of economics, sociology and law, publicize their findings on wages and material needs, and act as a “pressure

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Speaking retrospectively, Schlemmer expressed to me that the PDL in its various forms became a powerful tool for putting pressure on employers and raising consciousness, but in and of themselves, PDLs were poorly conceived, superficial instruments. For example, Schlemmer at one point showed that one of the more common estimations of the PDL budgeted clothing expenses at a rate calculated to be higher than the average university professor spends on clothing per month. However, this particular measure had no provision for savings. In this sense they were not very well conceptualized or consistent, but rather served as a benchmark the media could understand. They could “be used like a club to beat people with,” he said. Telephone conversation with Lawrie Schlemmer, 11 July 2002. Both he and Cheadle referred to the PDL as something people “grabbed.”

group.”¹¹² Much the initial proposal at UND, the motion for a national effort called on the commissions to investigate the operation of the Wage Board, for students to present research at Wage Board meetings and to “assist workers in presenting their demands.”¹¹³ It was also argued that, “some historical work was needed on decisive industrial agreements and strike action.”¹¹⁴ The thinking was again that university departments should be exploited for their capacity to produce research that would illustrate industrial relations in South Africa and be applicable in helping poorly paid laborers; while histories should be written of the making of industrial relations in South Africa.

The other NUSAS affiliated Wage Commissions essentially followed this strategy, although the process proved far from seamless. Jeanette Curtis of NUSWEL (a branch of NUSAS concerned with welfare issues) lead the head office for the commission in Cape Town, yet little coordination between the different commissions hampered operation in their first years.¹¹⁵ At the July 1972 NUSAS congress Hemson delivered a paper entitled "What can be done," arguing that students should work together to tackle the problem of wages below the PDL on campus and present evidence to the Wage Board. Hemson alerted students to what Edward Batson had repeatedly argued, that several things such as “chemist bills, furniture, pots and pans, bedding and another items generally considered to be essential to living,” were left out of PDL estimations. Telling students to study Watts’ fact paper on PDL's, Hemson explained the that a popular counter-argument heard from employers was that PDL is based on family income for one breadwinner, yet another family member is also likely to be earning. “The answer is that the PDL is only a minimum standards and that there are many other expenditures such as those listed which families just have to meet, which are not included

¹¹² “Report of the commission set up to examine the establishment of wages and economic commissions at affiliated centers.” NUSAS papers.

¹¹³ It also noted that overseas companies in South Africa were “exploiting the Apartheid situation to their own ends,” while local firms blatantly exploited black labour.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., see Appendix.

¹¹⁵ It will be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the activities of the UCT, Wits, and Rhodes commissions in detail. As an aside, it should be pointed out that UCT faced different challenges in terms of organizing workers because the Western Cape was a “coloured labor preference area” making it more difficult to unify African and coloured workers. Also certain ideological differences arose between the Cape Town commission and the Durban-Wits commissions. When student leaders moved into union organizing Durban and Johannesburg went for industry-based unions, while Cape Town attempted to create general unions. Interview with Pat Horn [insert date.]

in the PDL.”¹¹⁶ Students should prepare pamphlets announcing Wage Board meetings, explaining to workers how to construct a household budget, and that it is possible for them to be present at investigations. They should also send letters with the facts on poverty to newspapers. “Yet the aim of the pamphlets,” Hemson qualified, was “not solely to produce statistics but to indicate to the workers how their wages are deflated by rises in the cost of living, and how to present reasoned demands to the Wage Board or their employers.”¹¹⁷

Finally, students should organize mass meetings of employees before the Wage Board sitting takes place. Here Hemson’s perspective on “the workers” begins to emerge. Hemson argued and that if objections made by workers to the Wage Board were accepted, even slightly, “this fact must be strenuously advertised so the workers become conscious of their power to change their economic conditions.” Crucially, the prime function of the wage commission, he argued, “should be to ignite the consciousness of the workers to their collective power to change the system in accordance with their needs. Fanon wrote: ‘action is incoherence and agitation if it does not restructure the consciousness of the individual.’” Along with wage surveys, Hemson added that, “much historical work is needed on the struggles of African trade unions during the second world war to present, decisive industrial agreements and strike action.”¹¹⁸

How would students ignite the consciousness of workers? How would they enable them to speak for themselves, rather than letting others speak for them? For Hemson and other Wages Commission members in Durban this became a complex exercise in mediation between employers, the Wage Board, stevedores, and indunas. Around September of 1971, six months after UND’s Wages Commission got off the ground, about 2000 stevedores threatened to strike if the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company (DSLSC) did not raise their wages. At this point, Hemson’s involvement with stevedores—dockworkers who specialize in the loading and unloading of cargo—began to shift dramatically from that of an observer, a student conducting research, to an intervener and a direct advocate of the stevedores. The history of

¹¹⁶ “What is to be done,” NUSAS papers.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

dockworker militancy is familiar to students of South Africa. Less so are the ambiguities of the relationships between stevedores and students.¹¹⁹

In September of 1971, stevedores posted a notice in Zulu on the wall of a compound, threatening to strike again if wages were not raised to R14, which, as the notice pointed out, was the same amount asked for in 1969.¹²⁰ This wage was not equal to the PDL however. Soon after the pamphlet appeared, the *Daily News* published a statement by the Wages Commission warning that the events of 1969 would be repeated if more direct channels of communication were not made legal.¹²¹ On the 23rd the *Daily*

¹¹⁹ Dockworkers as a group Durban have a long history of resistance to state and company control over the conditions of their employment, now familiar to students of South African history. In the first decades of the twentieth century the Durban municipality essentially corralled dockworkers into paying for their own oppression, using the revenue of municipal beerhalls to pay for migrant worker hostels, policing, and the department of Native Administration in Durban. [See Paul La House] Following price hikes in the immediate post war years, workers struck in 1919. Dockworkers participated in pass burning demonstrations in 1929 and women beer brewers protested the beerhall system. Dockworkers struck again in 1941 and 1942, after the first wage determinations set down by the Wage Board for unskilled workers, bringing the harbor to a stand still. There were several strikes in the 1950s, including in April 1958, when workers were forced to live in compounds and indunas were first given differential rates of pay from other workers, like winchmen, gangway men and stevedores. [see Hemson, Class Consciousness As middlemen, indunas were treated by employers as traditional Zulu leaders. They supervised small teams of stevedores (typically of 8 or 9). By giving them increasing power, the labour supply company helped keep the docks relatively quiet until the late 1960s. The Wage Board met in 1968 to set wages for dockworkers, setting off a series of events on the docks. Notable here is how the exchange of pamphlets between workers and employers had become the de rigour means of communication. As Hemson notes in his account, when the Board's determination finally came into effect in April 1969 and wages had not increased, while taxation had, a pamphlet was found pinned to the company notice board alerting workers the extent of the taxation on their wages. A second leaflet appeared, demanding higher wages and instigating workers to contact the Bantu Commissioner. On the 5th of April roughly 2000 dockworkers refused to work and police were called in to stand by. Here stevedores and workers seem to have banded together. According to the press, a "large force of helmeted stevedores, gangwaymen, winchmen and their indunas, refused to book in for work at their local labor pool, the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. Instead thousands of them camped in tows outside the company's offices in South Hampton Street, in Durban's Point Road dockland." *Daily News* 5 April 69. According to the Durban press more than a thousand people lost their jobs, although some were later rehired. The company was forced to find replacement workers from around the city. As a result of the strike, 35 ships stood idle in the harbor and one shipping company estimated that R35,000 was lost while the harbour was shut down for 48 hours. Most of the striking workers were fired, with new recruits hired and trained, although about 450 were rehired after screening. *Daily News*, 7 April 69. [This summary draws heavily on Hemson's narrative]

¹²⁰ Hemson highlights how the pamphlet approach proved successful in 1969 in precipitating a strike without exposing leadership, and argues that the note evidences underground organization among workers still in place despite the "screening" of workers that were rehired following the mass dismissals that ended a the stevedores strike in 1969. Hemson, "Class Consciousness," 554

¹²¹ "A pattern emerges. Without a negotiation apparatus strikes are bound to occur. Port activities are disrupted. With the standard reaction to strikes from employers, the police are called in, arrests are made and unskilled workers are recruited only to make the same demands at a later date. . . . Should not an impartial inquiry be set up to prevent yet another crisis situation at the docks?" *Daily News*, 22 Sept 71. Hemson also quotes this article, see Hemson "Class Consciousness, 554. The Commission also called on employers to negotiate with stevedores, aided by an impartial board. Narrating these events in his PhD

News ran an editorial entitled “Wage Slaves” noting an announcement by the Minister of the Interior of a wage increase for white public servants equaling about five times the increase being given to non-white public servants. The article also called attention to the great disparity between wages earned by British stevedores and South African stevedores who are “still paid below the poverty datum line.”¹²² On the 24th of September it appeared that labor had forced the DSLSC into a 30 per cent increase, although management claimed this was not a result of the threat of a strike, saying that the increase had been under consideration since May.¹²³

By the end of the strike threat on the docks in September, the most significant contribution made by the Wages Commission may have been in getting the attention of the white press, especially in terms of wages below the PDL. In October of 1971, Durban’s daily newspaper ran a small favorable editorial on the wages commission. “The abysmally low wages paid to non-Whites in general and unskilled Africans in particular is a potent weapon in the armory of overseas critics of this country’s policies,” it read. “More than that it is the cause of untold misery, frustration and bitterness in the vast mass of our labour force.” The writer described the Natal’s student wages commission’s contact with the Wage Board as playing an important and constructive role: “For those who lightly dismiss students as ‘immature cranks,’ the Commission’s activities provide food for thought. They should not have to fight this battle alone.”¹²⁴

While the UND Wages Commission helped prod public outcry against low wages, it would be several months until the Wages Commission found itself directly mediating

thesis completed in 1979, Hemson qualified that such an inquiry was not likely, and was only put forward “to draw off any public support from the DSLSC and indicate support for workers demands.” Ibid, 55.

¹²²*Daily News* 23 Sept 1971 (also cited by Hemson, 559). On the same day it was also reported that the Wall Street Journal had run a critical article on American investments in South Africa, the exception being the Polaroid Company, which was trying to improve working conditions for its black South African employees. [Had Horner begun his research on foreign investment yet?]

¹²³ According to Hemson, the Assistant Manager, WS Dryer claimed that the notice was irrelevant: “The system of communication between employees and management is based on custom and common usage. It has not failed because we have received repeated assurances that there is no support for whoever wrote the note.” Hemson presents this response as a smoke screen for the fact that workers had won an unscheduled wage increase by the date of the deadline indicated on the note, which included an ultimatum that the workers would strike unless their demands were met by a certain date. Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 556-7.

¹²⁴*Daily News*. 23 October 1971. Independent News clippings collection. File:Universities: Natal.

between workers and employers in the context of a stevedores strike.¹²⁵ In November of 1971, public and official interest in the question of black wages picked up considerably when 2000 Ovambo contract laborers in Windhoek struck for higher wages and to protest being housed in company barracks. Perhaps surprisingly, and at the end of 1971, Minister of the Interior, Theo Gerdener, issued strong warnings about the potential repercussions if the gap between white and black standards of livings continued, arguing that whites should have more realistic expectations about their own standards of living and that “the earnings of Whites should be virtually frozen” until the wage gap narrowed.¹²⁶

In December of 1971, while students were preparing for their summer vacations, the Durban Wages Commission began printing *Isisebenzi*, a newspaper for workers.¹²⁷ The Commission also began publishing the *Bulletin of the Wages Commission*, which reported on strikes, the efforts of the Commission, as well as giving short histories of labor disputes in South Africa.¹²⁸ It was hoped that *Isisebenzi* would be a regularly published worker’s newspaper, but students only published it sporadically throughout 1972. At this stage Hemson and Cheadle asked SASO to collaborate with them in producing the newspapers, but according to Hemson, they disapproved of the mass meeting at Bolton Hall called to protest the unskilled wage determination in 1971, and rejected any cooperation with white students.¹²⁹ Out of the blue, the night before publication of the first edition of *Isisebenzi*, a letter was sent to the commission’s office from J.B. Buthelezi, the head induna and compound manager of the stevedores, and paternal uncle of Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi.

As senior induna, J.B. Buthelezi’s position could be interpreted in conflicting ways. At times, as seen in the letter, he voiced workers’ concerns and complaints, and

¹²⁵ Also in October, 148 people were raided by the Special Branch, including students and lecturers, and 30 NUSAS office bearers. And in November, 11 students and 2 lecturers were detained under the Terrorism Act. “A Brief History of NUSAS,” NUSAS papers.

¹²⁶ *Race Relations Surveys, 1972*, 239. However, the South African Confederation of Labour, a white union, rejected this warning.

¹²⁷ This echoed the name of the former SACP newspaper. Editorial meetings between Cheadle, Hemson, and David Davis were held in semi-secret, Hemson noted to me.

¹²⁸ The *Bulletin of the Wages Commission* was the predecessor of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, published by academics affiliated with the GFWBF and the Institute for Industrial Education.

¹²⁹ Hemson writes: “SASO at that this time was more geared to cultural projects and theatre which attracted the black petty bourgeoisie and white students!” See Hemson, *Class Consciousness*, 597 note 120.

articulated their extreme annoyance about being spoken for by unwanted intermediaries. However, later it became clear that he was perhaps the most insidious spokesman of all, siding with the employers, and overpowering the voices of stevedores. Here Buthelezi sounds a sympathetic tone with stevedores working under him and praises the Wages Commission:

Greetings,

We greet you who have been sent by our Lord to enlighten us by your pamphlets on those things that we do not see or understand. We work very hard and there are so many dangers which we have to try and avoid in our job. Some people get injured and have to buy food for themselves. When they are well the Boss chases them away stating that they are useless at the job. Again, although we have homes, wives and children, our pay is just the same as those people who are not paying taxes. We are working hard they sometimes they sack us. We beg you to hear our voices from the darkness. Although our pay is R6.50 per week our income tax is 35 cents. When we ask about this we are sacked. The old system of income tax was better because we paid taxes to the Bantu Affairs Office ourselves, but today's system we don't understand.

The problem is this: we don't speak for ourselves and the people who talk for us are goody-goodies of the Boss and these people give the Boss power to play around with us. We don't get our leave pay, sick pay or a bonus. When they employ us they give helmets to us and when these hats are damaged on the job they tell us that it would have been better if we workers were dead instead of the helmets which belong to the company being damaged. We pay for these helmets and when they sack us they take them back.

In some other districts workers were sacked from their jobs although they worked very hard. These districts are: Mahlabathini, Nkandla, Nquthu, Nongoma, Matubatuba, Estcourt and Ixopo. They don't go to the farms to employ new workers before they have begged the old workers to return to their job, even though they were sacked for absolutely no reason.

Written by,

J.B.

By the time Hemson completed his doctoral thesis on stevedores in 1979, Hemson viewed Buthelezi as representative of the "petty bourgeoisie." Dockworkers interviewed for an oral history project in the early 1980s also remember J.B. Buthelezi as a slave

driver, erratic, and quick to dismiss people.¹³⁰ However, can Buthelezi be thought of as representative of the “class interests” of all indunas? Rather than treating indunas only as false representatives and obstacles in the formation of class consciousness, it seems important to try to question the complexities of the relationships between workers and indunas. [I have decided not to try to develop this point here. See Appendix]

In the months following the letter from J.B. Buthelezi, David Hemson and Holton Cheadle began to lose interest in the Wages Commission themselves, as they explored the possibility of trying to organize labor. This shift took place just as the Wages Commissions were getting off the ground at other universities. By the end of 1971 Hemson had grown more emboldened in his views on the extraction of surplus value from labour, but perhaps more modest about the role students could play in serving workers’ struggle and sparking social action. This was reflected in a paper given at the December NUSAS congress entitled “Students and Workers,” which defined the contribution students in South Africa could make to the struggle and re-asserted the research agenda for the Wages Commissions around the country.¹³¹ What could students do? In short they should *redirect the flow of information* to those who could use it, while they could also mobilize labor to speak for its self.¹³² Along with presenting evidence based on the PDL to the Wage Board, students were instructed to systematically collect and circulate data on various industries, campus staff, municipal employees, domestic servants, and agricultural laborers, they were to produce pamphlets and handbooks, collect newspaper clippings, investigate taxation of Africans, correlate wages to income

¹³⁰ See Bernard Dubbeld, “Labour Management and Technological Change: A history of stevedoring in Durban, 1959-1990.” MA thesis. University of Natal, 2002.

¹³¹ Hemson asks how students can contribute to the struggles. The answer he offers is “in redirecting the flow of information...it is in the field of the flow of information; the right meeting publicized at the right time, the pamphlet on wages translated into Sesuto, the knowledge that whites are earning increasingly more than blacks; that the greatest possibilities for immediate action and long-term planning are most evident. It is in this area that students who have ready access to industrial information and the means of publication can perform a useful task.” “Students and Workers,” NUSAS papers.

¹³² Emphasis mine. “At many Wage Board meetings in the past there have been no representations at all speaking for the workers. The militant trade unionists of the fifties and sixties have been picked off one by one. Students can play an important role in publicizing the wage investigations, writing letters to the newspapers telling of the disadvantages of workers in presenting evidence and point out how far the wage are below the poverty datum line. If trade unions exist the Wages Commissions can work through them to gather evidence for unorganized workers. The Wages Commission can stimulate meetings of workers and to draw up demands, which can be signed by all the workers and presented by representatives at the Wage Board sittings. At the time of the investigation works committees and other worker organizations should be stimulated.” Ibid.

to diet and rates of malnutrition, publicize their findings in newspapers, and develop times with ministers of parliament. Several students signed on to the cause, but the Commissions yielding patchy results at first.

The frequent correspondence between Hemson and Jeanette Curtis in Cape Town reflects some of the difficulties of translating this agenda into action. “It is very satisfying in a way to really get involved in these wages commissions,” Curtis wrote in mid-December 1971. “I have been so desperately worried about them getting off the ground and it is such a relief to see the Jo’burg and Cape Town commissions operating at long last. The Grahamstown commission as far as I can see it will only really come into its own after the vacation.”¹³³ In Durban, Hemson felt disappointed by his committee.

The meeting last night went off fairly well but we have tremendous problems of organization...You really wonder if members of the WC really want to change this society...Maybe I am too ambitious for the level of activity of the WC, but what happens generally is that I explain what needs to be done in some detail and then nobody volunteers to do the work, or if they do agree nothing is done by the next WC meeting, unless I ring up and made some arrangement to do the work with that person. Maybe it would be better if I withdrew completely to let the WC/UND sink or swim.

Curtis replied: “Speaking with you on the phone this morning, I thought you sounded helluva down or depressed or overworked or irritated with me...You really must try to get a break occasionally....I am helluva sorry to hear that the commission is not operative on the level that it should be...The Cape Town Commission is facing basic working difficulties too...we need re-organizing and re-structuring if only to prevent people running away with themselves and moving away from the basic rational of the commission....people are always telling me to delegate: perhaps I can tell you the same thing!”¹³⁴

By January of 1972, the campus wages survey at UND headed by Charles Nupen had yet to be completed. An internal report of the Wages Commission at UND pointed out that the campus survey represented “at once the most important original reason for

¹³³ Correspondence from Jeannette Curtis to David Hemson, 16 December 1971, Dudley Horner private papers.

¹³⁴ Dudley Horner Private Papers.

the formation of the WC, and the basis for legitimizing all other activities carried out by the commission...hence it is disturbing that 4 ½ months since the survey started...it is still incomplete.”¹³⁵ Hemson wrote to Curtis “We have been having a lot of problems with our campus survey. The questionnaires which have been filled in by members of the Wages Commission are hopeless and have to be redone. IT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL THAT BLACKS DO THE INTERVIEWS AND SUMS OF MONEY SOULD BE BUDGETED FOR THIS PURPOSE...”¹³⁶ [say something about the role of translators and research assistants]

With the UND campus survey still floating, Mike Murphy at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (UNP) was asked to take over the Wages Commission.¹³⁷ Murphy asked Schlemmer for assistance in determining a representative sample of campus employees. Working with a translator, he and other students began conducted interviews. The survey of unskilled and semi-skilled university employees completed in March of 1972 found that among the fifty-nine African unskilled employees interviewed, over 70 percent received wages less than the PDL. Advocating a complete and immediate revision of the wage structure for university employees, incorporating the Minimum Effecticive Level (MEL)¹³⁸ as the minimum wage, the Wages Commission recommended that all university employees be paid a “living wage... even if this involves cutting back on other expenditures.”¹³⁹ The Durban campus completed its survey shortly after. Like the Pietermaritzburg commission, they recommended the PDL be incorporated as the minimum wage level by January 1973, and the MEL be used by January 1976. However, the University apparently only agreed to these measures when students threatened to go to the press with their findings. As Murphy explained to me, the rational behind focusing on wages paid by the universities is that they represented an easy point of access, with liberal management that was already familiar with the PDL.¹⁴⁰ This does not mean they were eager for labor to organize. Under some pressure from the

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Undated letter from Hemson to Curtis, Ibid.

¹³⁷ Some time prior Murphy distributed pamphlets on the PDL to all the Catholic parishes in Natal, working in connection with the National Catholic Students Federation. Interview with Mike Murphy, 17 January 2003.

¹³⁸ 1.5 times the PDL.

¹³⁹ [Insert compete citation, from NUSAS papers]

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Mike Murphy, 17 January 2003.

commission, the university administration allowed black workers to form an employee association and eventually wages were raised.¹⁴¹ This minor victory in organizing black workers, while fulfilling one of the initial goals of the Wages Commission, was quickly overshadowed by students' successes in organizing stevedores.

[Note: after the Durban strikes, in March 1973, Hemson persuaded Murphy to conduct a survey into wattle farms. Murphy enlisted the help of Marc du Bois, a junior lecturer in Geography, in drawing up samples. Du Bois contacted farmers and secured permission for students to carry out research on the farms under the auspices of the department of Geography. The results of this survey formed the basis of Adam Raphael's startling expose in the *Guardian* on "starvation wages" in South Africa.¹⁴² This report led to a British Parliamentary investigation of foreign investment in South Africa, which made repeated reference to the PDL and led to new employment codes.]

New voices in the minimum needs debate emerged in 1972. In January the SAIRR published a study by Michael Hubbard, "African Poverty in Cape Town, 1960-1970," which concluded that the PDL for an African family of 6 in Cape Town in 1970 would be R73 per month, while the Minimum Effective Level (MEL) would be R73, a measure the UCT wages commission would use later in the year.¹⁴³ The University of Port Elizabeth published "The Poverty Datum Line in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and Despatch." Potgieter and Roger assumed African and coloured families had different tastes and different needs, arguing that in Port Elizabeth, for example, the PDL and MEL

¹⁴¹ (these organizations have proved so strong on some campuses that wages sky rocketed and some campuses have recently dismissed long-time employees in favor of cheaper subcontract workers) The organization met on the Pietermaritzburg campus, then on the Durban campus in July 1972. The first leader of the Durban committee was Fidelis Ngobese. After being addressed by Desmond Matabele and Halton Cheadle (both identified in the minutes of the meeting as Wages Commission representatives) questions were taken from the floor. Issues raised included sick pay, the use of the terms "boy" and "kafir" by white staff members, and the different wages paid to the different race groups. There was also some discussion "as to what sort of representation should be operative: whether one person would represent the different 'race-groups' in each department, or whether there would be one representative for the whole department. The latter course was adopted, as the meeting declined to pursue the apartheid policies imposed on them by external authorities." Meeting of the University of Natal Workers Association, 21 July 1972. FOSATU papers.

¹⁴² The *Guardian's* "starvation wages" campaign has been covered by Saunders. He completely sidelines the extent to which Adam Raphael got his information from the Wages Commissions in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, making it seem like Raphael did the research. He also tends to see the PDL as a "natural" entity, rather than an artifact produced and reified in specific debates such as those discussed here. James Saunders, *South Africa and the International Media, 1972-1979: A Struggle for Representation* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), See chapter five.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 232.

for an African family of five would be R63.98 and R 95.97 respectively, while for a coloured family the minimum needs were slightly more, R73.68 and R105.64 respectively.¹⁴⁴ Some weeks later, Schlemmer updated the ISR's research in a fact sheet called, "Africans in Durban and the Poverty Datum Line," which estimated a PDL of R77.30 and a MEL of R115.95.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, TUCSA warned about the dangers of the wage gap between black and white earners in South Africa. And in March, M. G. Buthelezi spoke out against the hardships caused by black wage levels.¹⁴⁶

These were some of the expert views on minimum needs available to students. Although the Wage Board had publicly excused itself from any responsibility for workers' standards of living (as Chairman Hugué Tindale expressed in March of 1972), the Wages Commissions continued to offer evidence of wages below the PDL. In February of 1971, the UCT Wages Commission presented evidence on behalf of unskilled labor in the stone-crushing industry, as well as the soap, candles, edible oils and fats industry, where they argued for a clause linking minimum wages to the consumer price index. In March students spoke on behalf of workers for the glass and glassware industry and the heavy clay and allied products trade. At the Wage Board determination for the mineral waters manufacturing industry in April 1972, UCT students pointed out that the Prime Minister had stated in parliament in February that the policy of the government is to reduce the historical wage gap between blacks and whites. Citing signs that the wage gap had actually widened between 1969 and 1970, with whites earning 6.3 times more than blacks, the Wages Commission argued that it was "necessary to question the role of the Wage Board in preventing the position of the Black worker from deteriorating further."¹⁴⁷ Thus, at the same time that the Wages Commissions honed their approach to petitioning the Wage Board, a new academic industry was taking shape geared toward the production of PDL data to meet growing demand. The field of poverty

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 240. Also in March of 1972, the Minister of Labour stated that there was no chance of the government granting collective bargaining rights to even skilled African workers, citing the adequacy of existing legislation. *Race Relations Survey, 1972*, 334.

¹⁴⁷ NUSAS papers. Also in April, Paul Pretorius presented a paper at a NUSAS seminar entitled, "Where to now white student?" summarizing the dilemma facing white students after the formation of SASO, he declared "...we must find a way out of this dilemma, for if we fail, we and our organization will fail to exist meaningfully in terms of our stated aspirations."

studies was becoming more crowded. Without any apparent origin to the cycle, research on black poverty and minimum needs and attempts to use this data in different spaces of debate began to snowball.

[An important development within the Wages Commissions in Natal towards building unions came in June of 1972, at a meeting of textile and furniture workers in Bolton Hall.¹⁴⁸ Hemson recalls putting forward the idea of starting a union at this meeting.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps for fear of reprisals by employers and the state, or because there was an impression that it was illegal to join a union, those present showed no interest in this idea. Harriet Bolton suggested a fund be set up that would collect subscriptions from workers and give out funeral benefits.¹⁵⁰ Workers embraced this idea enthusiastically. From this, the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) was launched in Durban, while the first members would be signed up in October of 1972 by the Benefit Fund's Pietermaritzburg office.¹⁵¹]

IV Stevedores take up the PDL

Some weeks after the initial proposal to start a benefit fund, about 200 stevedores attended a meeting of the Wage Board on 18 July 1972, appearing with pamphlets from

¹⁴⁸ In June of 1972, Drake Koka, a Black Consciousness leader, announced the formation of the Sales and Allied Workers Association (SAWU) a union intended for African workers, but one that never drew a large membership. He expressed his opposition to the idea of African unions relying on White sister unions. *Race Relations Survey, 1972*, 336. SACTU in exile submitted evidence to the ILO, calling on "all industrialists to recognize African trade unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike" and for trade unions in the West to pressure companies to grant African workers the same rights as Western workers. *Ibid*, 340. In the late 1970s, SACTU remained reluctant to support black unions in South Africa.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with David Hemson, 2 August 2002. It may have been at this meeting that Rick Turner spoke to workers. Harriet Bolton advised Turner that he should use the language of the workers instead of university jargon, a lesson she learned through working in the Industrial Council. Bolton recalled saying to Turner: "when you speak to workers, you actually listen to how they speak," even though, she recalls, workers were "a bit shocked" when he actually did so. David Hemson's recorded interview with Harriet Bolton, 16 July 1993.

¹⁵⁰ In speaking to me both Hemson and Cheadle both recall how disappointed they were when this idea was initially posed, and workers went for it. Hemson noted later that, "coming from bourgeois families, members of the Wages Commission were able to grasp the resistance of black workers to racial oppression quite readily, demands on issues such as pensions and sick benefits they found difficult to grasp." David Hemson, "Class Consciousness," 597 note 122.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Mike Murphy, 17 January 2003. Harriet Bolton asked Norman Middleton, a union leader and member of the Coloured Labour Party, to give them office space in Pietermaritzburg.

the Wages Commission in hand.¹⁵² The meeting was so crowded not everyone could fit in the small room in the Department of Labour Office. Hemson recalls how employers and state officials shifted uncomfortably a crowd of workers pressed against their seats.¹⁵³ Notable here is that stevedores readily took up the Wages Commission's pronouncements of what wages would meet worker's minimum needs. Although not using the language of the PDL, stevedores had clearly already decided on demanding a wage equal to the PDL (R18 per week) before attending the meetings, as evidenced by the following letter received by the Wages Commission on the same day as the hearing.

Sir,

According to my wishes to be at the meeting, but because we were not allowed to be there by our bosses. He told us that, that is him who will elect some people to stand for us at the meeting. The problem is this, we did not know these people and also we don't know whether those people will be like those who stood for us in 1969. The truth we would like to know is this:

- (1) Is it true for people who are working very hard to earn the wages which are half of the wages of the indunas who do nothing but stand, and also these indunas are uneducated and they are not helped by us.
- (2) Is it true for us that the first time we were employed we were given a hat to work with and then after two years being given that hat if it fell down on the floor and was broken we must pay R1.30 for it and if you don't want to pay it your might be chased away from work.
- (3) The money which we earn doesn't satisfy us because it is very low and the work is very hard.
- (4) And we hard workers as we talk together we agreed that the money which would satisfy us per week would be R18 and they must pay us for overtime. We agreed that they must pay 50 cents overtime per hour instead of 29 cents per hour.
- (5) We complain that someone who has worked for this Company for only one year must not get the same wages as the person who has worked almost 15 years as it is done here.
- (6) If the workers can get R18 per week they wouldn't have many complaints.
- (7) The main problem which makes the workers to have many complaints is that if they ask the wages from their boss they refuse to give them and after that the people strike to go to the work and they after that they are chased away from their work and after that the bosses try to raise the wages for those people who did not ask for it.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ David Hemson, "Class Consciousness," 568.

- (8) In all strikes which we have had here even a single induna was chased away in connection with that. How many people who were chased away from the work in 1969 in connection with strikes for money? Among those people who were chased away how many indunas were there? Why do the bosses give enough money to those people who said they were satisfied with the amount which we earn?
- (9) All complaints which are in connection with strikes for money come under people who are working very hard and who are not satisfied with the money which we earn. –Other indunas they just laugh at and said you are playing if you ask for higher wages because the money which we earn is enough. The time the manager called them and asked about the wages which we earn they put it clear that they were satisfied. And the question is this: Why do the bosses give them higher wages because they said they were satisfied?
- (10) If the Wage Board doesn't see any worker at the meeting the problem is this: our bosses refused to let us go there. But there will be some workers who will stand for us at the meeting as a sign which we have talked about.
- (11) The money which we earn during the night hours must not be exactly the same as the amount which we earn during the day time as we cry for sleep.
- (12) The food which they give us during the night time is fee an we don't like it because it is not fit food for human beings. Even prisoners they don't eat this food, therefore we don't like to be bluffed about it.
- (13) As we workers we want the sum of R18 a week plus overtime paid of about 50 cents and must be separated from that amount of 75 cents which we earn per day.
- (14) i) If we workers can get that amount of money we all agree that we will be satisfied.
 ii) 50 cents per hour
 iii) 75 cents per day which we earn at the moment
 iv) The money which we earn during the night times must not be the same as the money which we earn during the day time because we want more money during the night times.
 v) We must get a bonus at the end of the year like any other factory or company, so where is the bonus which we must get at the end of the year?
- (15) These hats which we are given during the first day of employment must at least be given to us yearly.

FROM THE STEVEDORING WORKERS, SOUTHAMPTON ROAD, DURBAN ¹⁵⁴

According to Hemson's account of the meeting, the first person to offer a statement was J.B. Buthelezi, who claimed to be speaking on behalf of the workers.

¹⁵⁴ The Wages Commission then submitted this letter to the board with their evidence, saying it represented "the real feelings of the stevedoring workers on wage and other issues." Framing the letter as the authentic voice of the stevedores, the voices of indunas should, "in light of the letter, be seen as representing a separate interest group," it was argued. David Hemson personal papers.

Hemson recalled that Buthelezi asked for certain “technical improvements” and attacked the Wages Commission for distributing pamphlets calling people to attend the sitting. Buthelezi did propose a specific raise in wages, only requesting that employers pay as much as they could afford.¹⁵⁵ A member of the Wages Commission then interrupted Buthelezi and suggested that the proceedings be translated into Zulu so that the bulk of workers could understand what was being said.¹⁵⁶ Once a translator was found, the meeting went ahead and Buthelezi addressed the students, asking them not to interfere or “raise unfounded hopes.” Hemson notes that Buthelezi also reminded workers of the loss of jobs following the 1969 strikes.¹⁵⁷

The manager of the labor supply company asked the chairman of the Wage Board to ask stevedores to identify themselves when they spoke. “This caused an uproar, and the Wages Commission spokesperson accused the employers of trying to victimize the workers.”¹⁵⁸ Chairman Tindale restrained the employers and allowed the workers’ case to be put forward, but under some time constraints, notes Hemson. Workers apparently supported Jock Espie, of TUCSA, who argued that they should receive wages equal to the PDL, R18 per week. But when L.D. Thorne, head of the Natal Employers Association, expressed his view that present wages were adequate because each African family has more than one wage-earner and workers did not have to pay transport costs as they were housed in compounds, “he was shouted down by the workers” and one man stood up and showed his railway season ticket.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Hemson recorded what happened at the meeting in his thesis and in a brief summary of stevedoring in Durban sent to Dudley Horner in November of 1973. It is unclear which portions of his account of the Wage Board sitting were written at the time, or in 1973.

¹⁵⁶ David Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 569

¹⁵⁷ Hemson writes that Buthelezi “pointed out the copies of *Isisebenzi* which he said were circulating among ‘uneducated and ignorant workers’ and would lead the workers to believe there would be results far beyond what could be achieved. ‘We don’t appreciate going behind doors.’ He said and asked the Wages Commission to leave the workers alone; they were quite able to look after themselves.” In Hemson’s view, Buthelezi’s most telling remark, giving the best insight into his position, was when he said: “If we are fighting a losing battle, we will refer these matters to our own governments.” He also suggested that the students redirect their energies towards feeding the poor, if they wanted to help, not endangering those already employed. In Hemson’s account, workers frequently interjected, saying: “Who is this man, who elected him to represent us?” much to the alarm of employers. See, David Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 569.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 570-571. Mike Murphy also recalls workers shouting at Thorne when he argued that their wages were sufficient.

The Wage Commission presented their evidence, claiming it was reasonable to set the lowest minimum wage rate at the poverty datum line so that the worker will not find it impossible to earn a living wage without working overtime. And any additional income from other family members would only allow money for schoolbooks and other such necessary items, they claimed.¹⁶⁰ In further seeking to justify the PDL as a wage-setting device, the students invoked the view of the former Wage Board chairman: “In connection with the relevance of the Poverty datum line to minimum wage rates, it is worth noting that in 1962, Professor W.F.J. Steenkamp, former Chairman of the Wage Board, wrote: ‘It is possible that, provided the average annual increase in our real net national income were raised to about 5 per cent, we could thus succeed in placing the large bulk, if not all, of the metropolitan Bantu households of five beyond the poverty datum line by the end of the sixties.’” The GDP for 1960-70 had been about 6.0 annually, the Wages Commission argued, and 60 per cent of Durban’s households were still below the PDL. Moreover, the employers could afford to pay this rate based on their earnings.

The Wages commission used both the history of militancy among stevedores and the recent strike of contract laborers in South West Africa (Namibia) to get the Board’s attention, but they also used the presence of stevedores themselves as proof.¹⁶¹ Halton Cheadle argued to employers: “This memorandum represents only part of our evidence. The rest lies there,” pointing to the workers.¹⁶² At the end of the meeting Chairman Tindale said the Board would do the best they could, but according to Hemson, it was implied the demand for R18 would not be met. Stevedores returning to work from the meeting explained to those others what had happened. Stevedores seem to have understood from the meeting that the Board had agreed to R18 per week. Managers tired

¹⁶⁰ Ibid [check page].

¹⁶¹ It is useless to pretend that stevedores are satisfied with being migrant workers, they claimed: “The Ovambo workers who are relatively less sophisticated and educated that the workers in our docks demonstrated through strike action their total rejection of contract labour. They demanded the right of urban accommodation and of collective bargaining The stevedoring workers in Durban also demand these rights. . . . The Wage Board should have in mind the growth of a stable labour force in urban areas when deciding minimum wage rates. The prescribed rate should be sufficient to keep the stevedoring worker and his family alive and healthy in urban conditions.” They also noted that 1959 stevedores opposed higher wages going to indunas by striking, and that the Wage Board “should resist the temptation of building a structure of inequality among the stevedoring workers.”

¹⁶² David Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 571.

to prevent employees who had been to the meeting from talking about it to others. But some workers began demanding to know when the R18 wage would come into effect.¹⁶³

How does this compare with how stevedores articulated their claims for higher wages in Cape Town with the assistance of the Wages Commissions? Two days after the meeting in Durban the Wage Board met to hear evidence on stevedoring in Cape Town. The UCT Wage Commission distributed pamphlets prior to the meeting, reading: “Up to now the lowest wages which can be paid is about R8.00. Many of you are paid these low wages which Professors at the University work out to be less than the lowest amount needed to eat properly, have enough clothes, and get an education for your children... On Monday 200 stevedores went to the Wage Board meeting in Durban and demanded a wage of R18.00. YOU IN CAPE TOWN CAN DO THE SAME.”¹⁶⁴ According to the Wages Commission’s records, 13 employers, 2 TUCSA representatives, 6 people from the Bantu Labour Board (4 black and 1 white), including the Bantu Labour Officer (white), 3 students from the Wages Commission, a reporter from the Argus, 2 members

¹⁶³ The day after the Wage Board meeting in Durban back in July, David Hemson met with seven stevedoring workers at Grinrods and Maydon Wharf, and recorded some of their complaints. One worker, identified as “K,” is recorded as saying to Hemson: “After the Wage Board (WB) we were summoned by the employer who wanted to know word for word what happened at the WB meeting. We told the employer that the WB decided on R18 and that Saturday and Sunday were not to be worked. He enquired how much indunas were to be paid and we replied that we only knew the amount payable to ourselves as labourers. The employer said that he read in the news that R18 was the minimum wage ‘for sure’ but further investigations were still to be carried out. We informed the workers what was discussed at the WB when suddenly the employer called upon myself and “N” and warned us not to tell the other workers about the sitting and events. When we went to the workers we told them that we were warned not to tell them what was said at the WB meeting. The workers demanded the following: ‘So we now demand that you who went to the WB to tell us of the events of the sitting in front of the personnel officer or we won’t go to work.’ Such a discussion was lead before we commenced duties. When we were commencing duties, the workers inquired from the indunas whether or not they had told the boss that we the workers want to be told what was said at the sitting. The employer did mention when all the workers were summoned that he had read in the news that R18 was the decided minimum, and we told him that Saturday and Sunday were not to be worked. The workers demanded a fixed day of commencement for the R18 and we from the WB workers advised them not to do this...we advised the workers not to fight the employers.” Among “K”’s other complaints: “Many people die in the docks, how can R10 suffice before and after death? As a result of the death of such a worker his wife is forced into the urban areas to get a job as he was before, and if she fails to get a job she becomes an illegal resident and becomes a prostitute. We haven’t money to manage our affairs, that is why we have grievances.” The grievances of other workers at Maydon Wharf centered around issues such as five instead of six day weeks, no tea time, compulsory overtime, incomprehensible rules of taxation, overalls the workers had to pay for themselves. At Grinrods, “K” noted that there was time for lunch, not enough holidays (he reported that the employer says to workers “if you persist in asking for a holiday you can go to hell!.”) “K” complained that workers had been punished for organizing and questioning Wage Board agreements. Others at Grinrods claimed there was no allowance for night shift work, and they suspected time-keepers were stealing wages from workers. “Interview with workers at Maydon Wharf and Grinrods” David Hemson private papers.

¹⁶⁴ “Workers in the Stevedoring Industry” FOSATU papers.

of the Security Branch, and about 100 African and coloured workers attended the meeting. The white Bantu Labour Board member noted that the cost of living had risen since the last determination and recommended a minimum wage of at least R13.80 per week. Sounding a somewhat sarcastic tone, the Wages Commission reported that the four black representatives of the stevedores added little to this: “nothing substantial emerged from their discussion which more or less followed the line: ‘thanks for what you have done for us in the past but we feel that rises in the Cost of Living necessitates some more rise in wages; this we leave up to you, Baas.’”¹⁶⁵

Two “coloured” laborers spoke after this, emphasizing the inadequacy of their wages, especially in relation to rent hikes in the coloured township. They also noted causal worker faced difficulties associated with wages that fluctuated with the demand for services. African workers apparently spoke through an interpreter and “stated that they were unable to make ends meet given their present wage.” Employers hardly spoke at all in the meeting, which lasted over two hours, and only one manager expressed sympathy with the worker’s situation, although his concern about the plight of casual workers was not supported by any of his fellow employers. Stevedores in Cape Town made the same demands as stevedores in Durban for R18 per week. Noting how the Bantu Labour Board members misrepresented workers, the commission concluded that it was the presence of workers that made the biggest impact on employers.¹⁶⁶

What did stevedores take away from this event? Interviews conducted with dockworkers in 1982 by Tina Sideras offer some insight into workers’ perceptions of students.¹⁶⁷ Morris Ndhlovu, for instance, recalled how David Hemson and David Davis would “come and give us advice; telling us that, look, without unity we will never get our grievances resolved.” When asked about how he met these students, Ndhlovu answered: “It was a Wage Determination Board sitting. It is at that meeting where we realized our power because we were talking for ourselves at that sitting.”¹⁶⁸ When asked why he

¹⁶⁵ Wage Board hearing for the Stevedoring Industry, Cape Town, 20 July 1972. NUSAS papers. [check citation].

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ These were collected for a popular history of the docks. The records of this project indicate Ms. Sideras had problems finding suitable translators, suggesting the English transcripts of these interviews are not ideal sources.

¹⁶⁸ Here and throughout this paper I think it is important to consider how rarely people spoke for themselves. Rather voices were significantly intermingled. This is almost the same phrase Mike Murphy

decided to go to the meeting at all, he replied, “it is because I was actually encouraged by the advice I received from the students about organization, that without uniting and speaking with one voice we were not going to win. I actually wanted to hear on my own and to speak out about higher wages...”¹⁶⁹ Another dockworker, Nkuzu Zulu recalled being told about the Wage Board meeting by “a group of young white women and white men who were distributing pamphlets which were telling us that we were being exploited and there was going to be a wage board meeting which we were supposed to attend.”¹⁷⁰ None of the men interviewed in 1982 made specific reference to the PDL, although Nkuzu Zulu mentioned that “the workers had been told how much they were supposed to be paid.”¹⁷¹ Dockworkers seem to have remembered SACTU’s “pound a day” campaign with more specificity as compared to what university professors said about the PDL.¹⁷²

However, as these meeting demonstrate, the Wages Commissions had succeeded in getting stevedores to demand minimum wages based on the PDL from the Wage Board in the two main port cities of South Africa in 1972. The Wage Board, for its part, operated slowly with long lacunae between sittings and the implementation of wage determinations. In August, W.S. Dryer, the manager of the DSLSC, asked the Secretary of Labour to speed up the determination, arguably because stevedores made their impatience known.¹⁷³ Around the same time, the Secret Police raided the Wages Commission office and all their pamphlets, letters, and other materials were confiscated. By October, the new wages for dockworkers had yet to come into operation and stevedores struck in both Cape Town and Durban. In the context of these strikes, when an executive of the DSLSC asked Durban stevedores to put forward a few spokesmen with whom they could negotiate, he was reportedly answered with angry shouts, and workers said they would simply be fired if they did so. People demanded to know how often they would have to go on strike before receiving higher wages. Hemson’s thesis

used in expressing to me how this meeting was a turning point for students. He described it as a turning point for Hemson.

¹⁶⁹ I thank Bernard Dubbeld for alerting me to these interviews. SAIRR Oral History Dockworkers’ Project. William Cullen Library. Hereafter SAIRR Dockworker’s Project

¹⁷⁰ SAIRR Dockworker’s Project.

¹⁷¹ Here I think he means that students had told them how much they should be paid. Ibid.

¹⁷² Mr. Ncema recalled Phungulu as the workers spokesman: “He would tell the (employers) that we wanted a pound a day because our children were starving.” Ibid.

¹⁷³ See Hemson’s thesis.

notes that the striking dockworkers asked Chief Gathsha Buthelezi to represent them. Eventually the strike ended when stevedores received an ultimatum to go back to work or be retrenched.¹⁷⁴

In December, stevedores were still insisting on their original proposal of R18.00 when the new determination came into effect, considerably less than the PDL: R9.50 for stevedores, R11.00 for gangway/winchemen, and R16.50 for indunas (a R1 increase for stevedores and a R1.50 increase for indunas).¹⁷⁵ 2000 workers in Durban went out on strike again and 20 were dismissed.¹⁷⁶ Among the statements made on the strike, the Catholic Archdiocese of Natal protested the dismissals as well as the separation of workers from their families. Arthur Grobbelaar said the strike showed the need for proper channels of communication.¹⁷⁷ In Cape Town, the Wages Commission apparently feared that stevedores would face dismissals if they stuck as well.¹⁷⁸ The students suggested that stevedores write to the Secretary of Labour with their demands before the end of November, but that they also consider joining a trade union:

In Cape Town you have refused to work overtime later than 5 o'clock. You did this because you wanted better conditions. But, because you have not been working overtime, you are earning less money than before. Before, your money was little, but now it is even less. How are you going to find money for rent and food for your family? Why is this? Is there not a better way of telling your bosses that you need better conditions?

Yes! There is! You must form a trade union.

Here is how to form a TRADE UNION:

1. call a meeting for all stevedores
2. elect a committee of your own people who you can trust and who will not sell out.
3. get a secretary who will collect money, deal with your complaints and do office work.

¹⁷⁴ See Hemson's thesis and '73 Race Relations document.

¹⁷⁵ Hemson, 348 [check citation]

¹⁷⁶ This was after "a witch-hunt lead by J B Buthelezi" says Hemson. See '73 Race Relations document.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁷⁸ In a poorly-typed pamphlet, the UCT Wages Commission conveyed the new daily wages for workers (R3.50 for stevedoring hands, for instance, and R4.80 for indunas). It read: "IMPORTANT: you will not get these wages now as they are only suggested wages and the bosses may say no to these wages. You will still have to work 48 hours ordinary time (which is more than workers in other industries have to work). The bosses can still as you to work any number of hours overtime, up to 9 o'clock at night. These wages will not become law until the government and the bosses and YOU have agreed to them." NUSAS papers.

4. draw up a list of demands. For instance, for higher wages, a longer break in the afternoon.
5. send the committee to see the bosses, and to demand all these improvements.

By standing together, you have already won yourself better wages. By going to the Wage Board, and by refusing to work overtime, you have forced your bosses to pay you more. Well done! ...

Write to us and tell us if you need help in forming you trade union.”¹⁷⁹

On Monday, January 9, the *Daily News* reported that more than 1000 laborers had downed tools at the Coronation brick manufacturing factory in Durban, demanding first R20, and then R30 per week. “Hundreds of chanting Africans carrying knobkerries and sticks marched down North Coast Road in two separate columns from other Coronation Brick and Tile depots at Avoca, to join about 600 colleagues in the football stadium at the compound.”¹⁸⁰ Worker’s reportedly shouted: “Filumunti ufilusadikiza” (man is dead but his spirit still lives.)¹⁸¹ This was the beginning of the massive Durban strikes of 1973, the extent of which took everyone by surprise. The strikes resulted in an upsurge of worker interest in organizing and many more joined the Benefit Fund. The strikes also fed into corporate, state, and public concern about low wages.

In discussing the causes of the strikes, some members of Parliament charged students with “agitation.”¹⁸² In a group interview conducted by the Institute for Industrial Education, workers were asked whether they thought students played a role in causing the strikes. All answered in the negative, yet their responses indicate something of how these particular workers perceived white students:

These students know that their fathers are doing something wrong. They learn these things not at home but from school. It worries the students all what is being done to the African people no matter how their parents try to hide these things away from them because the parents are afraid that they might be publicized by their children. This is the reason why the bosses do not like the university students. It is not at all students who encouraged the strikes. Our bosses go in Mercedes cars yet their workers do not even have overalls for work.

¹⁷⁹ “Workers in the Stevedoring Trade” FOSATU papers.

¹⁸⁰ *Daily News*, 9 January 1973.

¹⁸¹ [the paper’s translation]

¹⁸² Although they had been named by the Schlebusch Commission in December of 1972, in February of 1973, Rick Turner, Paula Ensor, and Neville Curtis were banned. See Lobban, *White Man’s Justice*, 93.

Another worker stated that it was “our empty stomachs” that caused the strikes, saying: “We do not want to make love to their women, or to marry them, but we want money.” Another worker responded to the question about students saying: “It is not true that university students encouraged African people to strike because, first of all, we do not know them...we decided to go on strike because we were hungry.”¹⁸³

Although the Wages Commissions succeeded in getting dockworkers to use the PDL to make demands for higher wages before the Wage Board in 1972, it is unclear to what extent this way of talking about poverty and low wages appealed to those outside the university. Some union leaders felt that after the strikes notions of minimum living standards, such as the poverty datum line, had gained widespread acceptance among workers, trade unions and employers alike, but I have not found much evidence of this in my research.¹⁸⁴ Clearly the strikes piqued the interest of the media and corporations, while research bodies focused renewed attention on minimum needs. Yet one wonders about the impact of the Wages Commission’s appropriation of the PDL on workers themselves.

Eventually unions came to rely on the PDL and MEL in wage negotiations, although it was a long road to getting employers to recognize and negotiate with black unions at all. Vusi Shezi emphasized to me that NUMSA is now “totally dependant” on the research done by the University of Port Elizabeth, whose studies of minimum budgets

¹⁸³ IIE, “African Workers Interview” Filed under 1973 strikes, Alan Paton Centre. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁸⁴ Before the strikes, for example, the Garment Workers’ Unions’ Consultative Committee issues objections to the Wage Boards determination for the ladies stocking industry in 1968, used the more vague language of “realistic levels.” For example: “It is most gratifying to note from the recommended wage scales that the Board has adopted a new policy, so as to uplift the Wage Determination wages to a more realistic level at least in respect of clerical and supervisory personal as well as skilled artisans.” The union points out that the Board must have realized that the wages set in 1963 “were not realistic.” Compare this to the language used in the union’s recommendations to the Wage Board, also for the ladies stocking industry, in June 1973. It was noted that subsequent to the last wage determination, “there has been an upsurge in the aspirations of the lower-paid workers and minimum living standards, such as the poverty datum line, have gained widespread acceptance among workers, trade unions and employers. Although there has been widespread labour unrest, which has affected some of the factories concerned, wage levels still lag far behind minimum living standards. As the Minister of Labour said recently: ‘There are sill workers who are underpaid and who lack the wherewithal to feed themselves and their families adequately. How can they in these circumstances be expected to produce a good days work?’ ...The Consultative Committee feels that these comments will apply to the Ladies’ Stocking Industry until the minimum wages are set at the poverty datum line.” FOSATU papers.

are used by organizers not only to argue for higher wages, but also to convince labor not to make unreasonably high demands.¹⁸⁵ For workers reflecting on the causes of the 1973 strikes, other terms seem to have captured problem better than the PDL. One respondent argued that the strikes were caused by “Africans’ disgusting wages.” The aim of the strikes was to “urge employers to meet our demands. It is money we want because we starve. Nowadays money is indispensable. Everything is dear. With our low wages we cannot satisfy our needs.”¹⁸⁶

V. Conclusions and questions

This paper has shown how the Wages Commissions encouraged workers to speak for themselves in the context of Wage Board hearings (rather than letting indunas speak for them), but to do so using the academic language of the PDL. Stevedores in Durban and Cape Town did demand wages equaling the PDL in 1972. Yet, for the most part workers discussed here spoke about the problem of low wages in other terms, despite the interventions of students. In this sense, the history of the Wages Commission space for reflection on the complexities of representation and spokespersonship, and the pitfalls of seeking autonomous ‘voices.’

Philosopher of science, Ian Hacking, has used the term “looping” to describe feedback relationships between social scientists and the subjects of social science research, whereby the latter can come to influence the former.¹⁸⁷ I would suggest something like “forced migration” might better describe how the Wages Commissions (as intermediaries between academics and labor, and between labor and capital) not only deployed academic language strategically, but made pointed efforts to convince workers

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Vusi Shezi, 2 December 2002.

¹⁸⁶ IIE, “African Workers Interview” Filed under 1973 strikes, Alan Paton Centre. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁸⁷ For example, Hacking argues that “child abuse” shifted from being a discrete research area of psychologists to a subject of widespread public discussion (on talk shows, in schools, in group therapy sessions, etc.) and became a prevalent means of narrating one’s personal history. This form of identification gained such currency, Hacking suggests, that social scientists felt compelled to produce more and more research on child abuse, in a sense, to meet the demand of the public. Hacking claims that this kind of feedback dynamic is a phenomenon peculiar to the human, as opposed to the natural sciences. See Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), *The Taming of Chance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

to use the PDL. The Wages Commissions intentionally sought to create a “looping” dynamic, getting workers to articulate claims for higher wages using household budget data, which students hoped would force employers to recognize the legitimacy of the PDL as a wage-setting standard.

It is in this sense that Hacking’s notion of “looping” falls short in the South African context. With the best of intentions, students essentially foisted social science language onto workers, putting the PDL into their mouths. Sometimes people used this idea, but in most cases discussed here, workers used other terms, invoking hunger, decency, their own hard work, the need for adequate clothes, food for their families, transport costs, and the like.¹⁸⁸ In the case of stevedores in December of 1972, workers did use the PDL when they demanded R18 per week, but more evidence would be needed to say if this particular kind of social science expertise really informed workers’ judgments about their own lives in any significant or lasting way.

Indeed, the main hindrance in convincing the Wage Board to raise wages based on the PDL in the years before the Durban strikes may have been that so many other terms for minimum needs were still in play, terms which could be used in idiosyncratic ways. As Wages Commission members in speaking on behalf of poorly paid textile workers in the border areas of Natal in 1971, employers and representatives of labor invoked a multiplicity of kinds of claims, both for and against raising wages, rather than all agreeing to negotiate on the basis of ‘objective’ criteria.

Did the 1973 strikes change all this?

Appendix A

Bernard Dubbeld has recently revisited the role of indunas on the docks and significantly complicated the picture presented in Hemson’s account.¹⁸⁹ Drawing on oral histories collected by the SAIRR and his own interviews, Dubbeld notes that many workers did remember J.B. Buthelezi as authoritarian and explosive, but he was also

¹⁸⁸ Omar Badsha suggested to me that PDL became the slogan of workers, that they spoke about it widely, for example, when he and Rick Turner visited Indian communities before the strikes. I have not found substantial evidence of workers using it widely.

¹⁸⁹ Bernard Dubbeld, “Labour Management and Technological Change: A history of stevedoring in Durban, 1959-1990.” MA thesis. University of Natal, 2002.

accepted at times. Dubbeld argument leads one to question why the Labour Supply Company was successful in its use of indunas if they were hated by workers. One possible answer is that workers benefited from the growth of the harbor in the 1960s, making them more compliant. Workers seem also to have profited from reciprocal relationship of co-dependence with indunas. Indunas needed workers to remain loyal to them because they were dependant on workers not to slow operations down to the extent that they themselves lost their jobs. As the patrons of stevedores, indunas were likely compelled to do favors for workers in order to keep their trust and loyalty, Dubbeld suggests. Observers also noted later in the 1970s that Indunas allowed stevedores by to steal goods from ships.¹⁹⁰ They covered for stevedores in times of sickness and injury. And stevedores and indunas seem to have eventually banded together against J.B. Buthelezi when he became an intolerable senior Induna, as they did in several strikes in earlier years.

Dubbeld's work suggests to me that Hemson may have oversimplified the role of indunas, perhaps because the ethos of the Wages Commissions aimed at "igniting" class consciousness. This would have left little room for seeing the complexities of patronage relationships between workers and supervisors, as Emma Mashinini's account suggests [see notes in Introduction]. If indunas on the docks and in other work-places acted as tools of management, a view of the state and capital as seamlessly united with indunas presented as gears in the cog of this machine misses the question of why workers might have supported Indunas and aligned themselves. The SAIRR's interviews with dockworkers in the early 1980s offer several examples of indunas helping workers in specific ways and suggest a much more nuanced picture of the kinds of affiliations formed between workers and indunas, rather than straightforward oversight.

Occupying an intermediary position between chiefs and royalty, on the one hand, and common people on the other, some of the oldest existing accounts of indunas (izinDuna) suggest that in before the appearance of industrial capitalism in South Arica they served both their superiors and their clients.¹⁹¹ A superficial reading of oral

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 70.

¹⁹¹ The dictionary definitions include a wide range of functions. Dohne, of the American Board Mission, gives the following definition: "A signification of rank, something like lord-lieutenant; one who is next to the chief; a sire, minister, or secretary." Rev. J. L. Dohne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary, Etymologically*

histories collected by James Stuart indicates indunas did many things.¹⁹² For example, in selecting who could reap the benefits of the labor of captured children, and in giving tobacco to ranking boys while traveling, indunas in the nineteenth-century appear to have done favors to those under them and in commensurate positions.

What does existing historiography say about this aspect of indunas, namely their role as benefactors?¹⁹³ Perhaps one cannot begin to understand the positions held by indunas in relatively recent situations of work and administration before confronting how observers interested in valorizing “the workers” have, as a result, tended to demonize indunas as instruments of “the bosses.” Is this a valid observation? If so, did this sentiment lead academics to see any identification on the part of workers with indunas (any trust they placed in them, any attempt to speak through them, and any desire to be compensated by them) as mere passing obstacles in the realization legitimate worker

Explained (Cape Town: G. J. Pike, 1857). J.W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal gives, “Officer of a state of army (not of the household), under a chief,” as the primary meaning. Rev. J. W. Colenso, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Durban: David and Sons, 1884). While Bryant signals the use of the word in the context of work, noting one of the meanings of izinDuna as “captain, overseer, foreman” as well as “officer of state, or army, appointed by the chief over others.” Alfred T. Bryant, *A Zulu-English Dictionary* (Durban: Juta, [DATE??]).

¹⁹² *IzinDuna* served the king and chiefs by settling disputes over land, ensuring that only great quarrels were brought to the attention of the king. [See *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighboring peoples*. Volume II. Edited and translated by C. De B. Webb and J. B. Write (Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1979) 257-8 (Testimony of Mayinga). Hereafter abbreviated by “*JSA*,” volume number, name of source, page number.] They distributed oxen to royal kraals slaughtered for departed kings and lead praise-singing ceremonies. [*JSA*, III, (Mgidhlana), 108. Also see *JSA*, IV (Mtshapi), 75-6.] They themselves recited praises to ancestors in preparation for battle. [*JSA*, III, (Mpathana), 313.] In some cases recorded by Stuart, they killed (or directing the killing of) men beaten in battle. Indunas would keep children captured in war and also distribute them to others, with girls sometimes being married off to men of note. “The king of course obtaining their labola,” Stuart writes, while indunas would also put boys in service of headmen. [*JSA*, Volume II, (Mkando) 162-3.] While sometimes called on to “discuss national affairs,” some of James Stuarts’ informants note the stratification among indunas, with only certain indunas participating in important events. [For example, *JSA*, II, (Ndukwana), 318.] *IzinDuna* were also remembered for giving refuge to scattered victims of war. [*JSA*, II, (Mageza ka Kwefunga), 71.] Stuart records Ngidi as describing an expedition when, after the traveling party had used up all its snuff and dagga, indunas would give some of their personal tobacco “to those they knew, boys of position.” [*JSA*, V, (Ngigi), 86-7.]

¹⁹³ Keletso E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money!: The cultural origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (London: Heinemann, 1993). Keletso Atkins defines *izinduna* as “civil and military officials,” (p.11) and “elders of distinction” (p. 184). Notably, her selections from the James Stuart oral histories only emphasize the role of indunas in thwarting the ambitions of others: “The sources demonstrate unequivocally that few opportunities for meaningful advancements were open to young soldiers. Ambitions were thwarted by *izinduna* who feared their own personal status was threatened by others becoming more famous... It was recognized that some *izinduna*, intimidated by some aspirant vying for recognition, often manufactured slanderous reports to justify scattering this man’s forces and “eating up” (i.e. confiscating) his property. (p.56) Also see Jeff Guy on mining, Beinart on sugar production, literature on “boss boys,”what else?

representation and worker solidarity, and thus not phenomena worth considering analytically in their own right?

The aim of this discussion is not to discredit Hemson's substantial contribution to our empirical understanding of work on the docks, or to slight histories written by scholars who contributed to the Wages Commissions and the GFWBF. It is rather to question how Hemson's thesis presents us with one example of an analytic stance towards human subjectivity that tends to treat classes as discrete entities and "class interests" in the minds of individuals as working in a unified manner to dictate behavior.¹⁹⁴ As case in point, that workers and employers pursue fundamentally conflicting "interests" was precisely the lesson the Wages Commissions hoped workers would take home from their pamphlets. The first issue of *Isibenzi* included the following distillation of basic Marxist theory:

Bosses have interests; workers have interests. The bosses come together to protect their interests, and workers come together to protect their interests. What are the interests of the bosses? To make as much money as possible. How do they make money? From the labour of the workers. Machines do not work by themselves, although they can be made to go faster; but workers must be there to run the machines. . . . The bosses make more money by paying workers low wages. . . . It is when workers join together that they form a trade union. . . . They do this to look after themselves and protest their interests.¹⁹⁵

Paradoxically, Hemson himself, and many of those involved in the Wages Commissions, did not act on the basis of "class interests." Rather they negotiated multiple, sometimes conflicting, affiliations to their family, their friends and to workers in unpredictable and often contradictory ways, a puzzling state of affairs for those seeking the origins of agency.

¹⁹⁴In one of the only few long quotes in Hemson's thesis, he uses Lenin to illustrate what he obviously believed stevedores needed to see: "The worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp the meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum camouflages its selfish interest and its real 'inner workings'; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain intuitions and certain laws and how they are reflected." Hemson would have seen workers supporting Indunas as a failure to have this "clear picture" of people's "selfish interests," rather than, as one might also argue, an enactment of people's capacity to operate with different interests in different situations and to negotiate multiple affiliations at any point in time. "Hemson, "Class Consciousness," 623.

¹⁹⁵ *Isibenzi*, No. 1, 4