# The Decline of Stevedoring Labour in Durban: 1959-1990.

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The movement of commodities around the world has been a crucial way in which capitalist and colonial economies have functioned. Ships and harbours have been the focus of the transportation of commodities for many centuries, and today, while there are faster means of transporting lighter cargo, such as mail, shipping remains at the centre of relations of the production and exchange of heavy commodities. Technological innovation has made globalisation possible across the world, and likewise technological change has accounted for massive changes in sea transport and in carrying of cargo.

During the age of imperialism, harbours facilitated the exchange of commodities between the coloniser and colonized. Yet during those times, facilities in colonized countries had to be developed and controlled by the colonial powers to allow the easiest possible utilization of colonial extraction. It is evident that the facilities in different countries differed, according to the specific resources of individual countries. While the transportation of cargo has necessarily been of an international nature, port authorities and workers in the stevedoring industry have reflected the politics and culture of the countries and social systems of which they are a part. During the 1970s, new technological changes in the transportation of cargo that can broadly be called containerization, radically changed the positions of ports and harbours worldwide.

This paper outlines the changes that have occurred in the stevedoring industry from the later 1950s until the early 1990s. I aim to show how world technological changes have had a profound effect on local social conditions, structures and struggles and that in many instances, local initiatives (both progressive and reactionary) have been destroyed by global imperatives. The most profound of these has been the changes that containerisation has brought to the carefully developed systems of labour control and coercion developed under Apartheid. Yet while undermining Apartheid controls of stevedoring workers, containerisation has also smashed important local initiatives to secure and develop a labour force. In short, containerisation has brought new sets of

power relations and given increased power to international shipping lines to dictate prices and conditions. I view containerisation as a manifestation of globalization, of increased flexibility of markets and increased power to large international private companies in which state autonomy is undermined at the cost of a single global market.

The discussion begins during the early Apartheid era. During this time, conflicts had arisen because of the state's concern with the character of the labour in the city, and the interests of the shipping lines and stevedoring companies to ensure as high as possible profits by using as the cheapest labour possible. It ends in the late 1980s, with stevedoring workers more insecure about their employment than ever, with neither local companies nor unions nor state being able to guarantee anything about their future

1. Stevedoring work and the Durban harbour: Some material details.

For most of the twentieth century before containerisation, there were three ways in which cargo was transported. Oil and Petroleum products were transported by tankers and involved little or no labour power. Bulk products included coal and were not very labour intensive. All other cargo was transported as 'break-bulk'. Break-bulk cargo was loosely stowed in the hold of ships and was transported in bags, drums, boxes or simply as loose cargo and included anything from mail to motor cars. These were commodities that were essential to the functioning of the South African economy, whether by import or export. The function of stevedoring workers was to go onto the ships and load and off-load break-bulk cargo. Throughout the world stevedores were organized as workers in gangs. A gang was a team of workers, with a supervisor or foreman, ranging in size from 8 to 16 depending on the type of cargo handled.

Until the early 1970s, most of the companies that organized and employed stevedores were owned by the major shipping lines. By having control over these companies, the shipping lines ensured that the turnover time of loading and off-loading cargo was controlled by them and that a stevedoring companies could not set rates independent of their interests.

The regional importance of Durban as a harbour had much to do with its relative proximity to the Witswatersrand and to the sugar cane fields in Natal. By 1915 Durban

had become the dominant port in South Africa[1]. Throughout the century Durban maintained this position, and in the 1970s began to invest in the container terminals that would see the decline in the importance of stevedoring in the 1980s.

In the early 1970s, a fundamental change occurred in the way in which cargo was handled. Instead of cargo being transported loosely in the hold of a ship and stored in the ports, most of the break-bulk cargo was containerised, that is, stored in containers that could be loaded on to ships and transported from one area to another, without it having to be manually stored on the ship or in a warehouse. Furthermore, containers were lifted off ships by massive cranes on the shore instead of having to be physically carried to and from the land. There were also new kinds of ships introduced called Roll-on/Roll-off, meaning that containers could literately slide off the ship. Containerisation thus had two important effects;

In the first place, containerisation meant a decline in the stevedoring industry. While containerisation occurred as a process and did not just mean an overnight change, the amount of cargo stored as break-bulk declined substantially over a period of 20 years. Secondly, the nature of port infrastructure itself changed. Because ships had to change in order to accommodate transporting huge containers, this process of docking vessels became different. Furthermore, warehouses and previously important storage facilities gave way to container terminals. This port infrastructure required an initially large investment in these new facilities. As a result of these two changes, the port authority (controlling all shore based activity) became much more powerful in relation to the stevedoring companies.

In the past, although ports looked similar, they were able to maintain a variety of different physical infrastructures. With containerisation, a standardization of ports occurred. If ports did not have facilities to accommodate containers, the cargo could not be landed there, and ships would inevitably go elsewhere. It is important to realize that this process reflects globalization, both in a standardization of facilities and in the flexibility of operation.

[1] Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. Research Monograph, Economic Research Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1997. p. 14

Yet Durban has survived containerisation as a port and is flourishing. In terms of Container traffic, Durban is the 23rd busiest port in the world, and the busiest in the Southern Hemisphere[2]. The investment in containers has meant that stevedoring workers have had to be content with less lucrative cargos and their numbers have dropped substantially. In addition, ship based technological improvements have meant that the numbers of stevedores that need to load a ship itself has decreased. This impact of this will be discussed later in the paper.

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## 2. Problems of casual labour

Historically ports have relied on casual labourers, irrespective of where in the world they are located. Because the quantities of work vary daily, it has been profitable for ports to employ most of the labourers by the day, rather than permanently or on fixed contract. Stevedoring work has also been dangerous, unreliable, and not particularly financially rewarding for workers and they have often chosen to be casuals rather than permanent workers. Casual labour has often been a feature of emerging industries that are still struggling to understand the amounts of regular labour needed. In the colonial context, using casual labourers was seen to be very lucrative, since no benefits needed to be paid to workers, and employers could release workers without much hassle or extra cost.

In some cases workers chose to be casual workers, in others workers were casual by virtue of the fact that they could not find regular employment. Workers who chose to be casual often had another potential source of income, such as in rural agriculture, and used urban centres to supplement their incomes. The advantages of being casual were an increased mobility between workplaces, and the structural ability to constantly search and find better conditions of employment. Workers would generally choose to be casual only when there was an oversupply of work and an undersupply of workers, and when they had an alternative source of income. In a study of Mozambican migrants in the second half of the nineteenth century, Harries has shown that unrestricted labour mobility was

[2] Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. . p. 23.

used as a bargaining tool for higher wages and better conditions[3]. In Durban in 1950s, casual stevedores still had links with the land, were not tied to particular stevedoring companies and could move freely between these companies, depending on differing requirements on any particular day.

But there were significant social problems that arose from casual labour. The ability to employ casual labour was often as a result of an oversupply of unemployed people in a particular town or city. Casual labourers were also not responsible industrial workers and gained little on a long-term basis from the success of a business venture. Casual dock labour, that was employed to offload cargo form ships, often stole goods off those ships. A large number of unemployed poor people were seen to threaten the social fabric of the society in which they lived, they were men without regular work or masters.

Gareth Stedman Jones has done a study of casual labourers in London in the second half of the nineteenth century. He has discussed how casual labour from the residuum was seen to be a problem by conservatives, liberals and socialists alike, and how these people were psychologically characterized as those 'with weak character and a poor physique' who were morally dangerous to society and should be eradicated by progress[4].

In Mombasa, Frederick Cooper has described the transformation of work and shown how casual labourers became a threat to the functioning of the economy[5]. Because workers were not entirely dependent on employment in the city for their livelihood, they were able to work whenever it suited them. When demands on their labour power became too strenuous, they were able to organize and strike, crippling production. If the function of casual labour in the British colonies had been to prevent labour organization and militancy by circulating labour and not making them dependent on the work, it had failed. Casual workers were able to become militant and to materially disrupt colonial extraction. The solution for the British was to re-make the labour force, giving them permanence, decent wages and a stake in the success of the industry.

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[3] Patrick Harries. *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa c. 1860-1910*. Portsmouth and Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1994. p. 42-43.
[4] Gareth Stedman Jones. *Outcast London: A study in the relationship between classes in Victorian society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. p. 11
[5] Frederick Cooper. *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa.* London: Yale University Press, 1982.

If the concerns about casual labour in Victorian London had been primarily moral, and in Mombasa mostly material, South African concerns with casual labour problems were a combination of both. Initially South Africa had been a site of colonial extraction and trade, intensified by the discovery of diamonds and gold. Unlike most of Britain's other African colonies, there was a large settler population in South Africa whose interests were not simply that of extraction but of building a moral order in the areas in which they lived. If British imperialism in Africa was primarily about the extraction of cheap commodities, the national party government program who based far more on the building of a moral order.

The concern about casual labour in South Africa was centred around African labour coming into the cities and disrupting the moral order. In the 1930s and 1940s many Africans had come to cities, living in slums on the outskirts and working where and when they could. Many of them had been driven from ownership the land by English and Afrikaans speaking whites, but retained some links in rural areas. This process of African urbanization had been intensified during the Second World War, to such an extent that by 1948, the ruling United Party had accepted that African urbanization was inevitable and based its election promises on this acceptance, arguing that this urbanization should be carefully controlled[6]. In response of the generally vague position of the United Party regarding urban Africans, the National Party produced a strong document called the Sauer Report that arguably won the election for them. The Sauer report protested 'the black *oorstroming* of the cities' and argued that 'natives from the country areas shall be admitted to the urban areas only as a temporary employees obliged to return to their homes after the expiry of their employment'[7]. The National Party government sensed the fears of the white electorate that poor and causal African labour presented a moral and material threat to their existence, in the form of Africans without regular employment, and willing to work for less than a white worker.

For the first 12 years of its power the NP sought to develop its election promises into fully working policies. Part of this was the centralization of controls in labour

[6] Dan O'Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 33.
[7] Sauer Report, quoted in Dan O'Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 34-35.

bureaus centrally controlled by the Minister of Bantu Affairs. There is some evidence to suggest that this process faced difficulty with individual industries, notably in the docks. In 1956 the stevedoring industry faced pressure from government on the numbers of casual labourers which they employed and issued a report on the conditions of stevedoring workers based on a request by the Department of Native Affairs. Among other things, the report indicated that a little over 2000 Africans were employed in Durban of which the majority were togt labourers (labour employed on a day to day basis) and that 'workers themselves prefer to work as casuals'[8]. Stevedoring companies realized that togt labour was far more profitable and argued that they did not create instability. As Minister of Native Affairs Verwoerd announced in 1957 that only 2000 Natives would be allowed in Durban. Stevedoring companies protested that this would lead to a serious decline in efficiency although by 1958 seemed willing to agree to a centrally administered compound whereby African workers would comply with influx control regulations[9]. However, this was not an acceptance of an end to casual labour on the docks, and tensions between the state and the companies continued.

There was a strike by a most of the stevedoring workers employed at African Associated Stevedoring Company on 25 February 1959. Although the demands of the strike were not immediately clear, it was ascertained that the cause was a rise in wages for indunas, winchmen and gangwaymen and not for the general stevedoring workers as published in Wage determination no. 183 of 6 February 1959[10]. The striking workers were met by the Bantu Affairs Commissioner of Durban and a manager of African Associated Stevedores and were requested to return to work. The stevedores demanded an increase in pay, to which the Bantu Affairs Commissioner replied that the Wage Determination stands. The meeting ended in disorder[11]. Police then dispersed the area and

[8] SAB ARB vol. 3317 file 1196/5/4/1. "Report on Conditions of Employment of Stevedoring Workers".
[9] Quote from David Hemson. "Dock Workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles: 1940-1959" in Journal of Southern African Studies. Vol. 4, 1977. p. 117-118.
[10] SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/332. Police Report. "Strike: Native Dockworkers Durban: 25 February 1959". 27 February 1959.
[11] SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/322. Notes of a meeting held between the Native Affairs Commissioner of Durban, A manager from African Associated and 1200-1400 Labourers from the stevedoring industry, 25 February 1959.

any workers left after a certain time were arrested. It was also decided to suspend the employment of all togt labour on the docks and dismiss all striking workers[12].

Instead of blaming individuals togt workers, the strike was seen as reflecting the dangers of casual labour. The report of the industrial dispute by government officials reflected that all stevedoring in the port had been brought to a standstill, a loss of almost 2340 'man' hours and that the cause of the general standstill was a result of intimidation by togt workers, who were dismissed. The report ends on the happy note that the employment of togt workers had been suspended[13].

The strike by togt workers was the breaking point for the companies. Already facing heavy pressure from government for employing workers that contravened the laws of Bantu labour, they could no longer argue that these workers did not affect productivity. The five major stevedoring companies met government officials over the following month and by the beginning of April 1959 had refashioned the conditions under which stevedoring workers were able to be employed in Durban. The companies decided that a central system of labour should be introduced where workers would be recruited on a weekly basis, stay in company compounds and be signed on to work when work was available. This resulted in the cutting of the total workforce by about 500[14]. Weekly labour soon became ten month contracts of employment, approved by traditional leaders in African areas (mostly in Zululand) and by representatives of the department of Native Affairs. The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company (DSLSC) was born out an agreement between African Associated Stevedores, Consolidated Stevedoring and forwarding agency, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, Jack Storm Ltd. on the 15 April 1959 [15]. The moral concerns of the Apartheid state in regulating African labour and eliminating casual labour had been successful, and the stevedoring companies had to come to terms with making this new system of labour control materially viable.

[12] SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/332. Police Report. "Strike: Native Dockworkers Durban: 25 February 1959". 27 February 1959. see also SAB MAR vol. 81 file A2/44. Memorandum by Department of Labour. 16 May 1959. See also *Daily News*. 25 Feb 1959. "Harbour paralysed by stevedore strikes."
[13]SAB ARB vol. 1229. file 1042/15/1959."Industrial Dispute involving stoppage of work" 6 March 1959. See also *Ilanga lase Natal*. 7 March 1959, New Strategies to Control Dockworkers."
[14]SAB MAR vol. 81 file A2/44. Memorandum by Department of Labour. 16 May 1959.
[15] SAB BAO vol. 3075. file C39/1171/1 Memorandum of Agreement: ''The formation of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company''. 15 April 1959.

## 3. The functioning and character of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company

The DSLSC was more like a labour bureau for a particular industry. Its sole purpose was to house, control and supply labour to stevedoring companies when they needed it. It was based in a compound in Southampton Street in the Point area. Two white directors, Kemp and Dreyer ran the company with labour superintendents and African indunas[16]. They were responsible for the recruitment of labour, the housing of labour in compounds and the signing on of workers for particular shifts. The five stevedoring companies financed the operation and sat on the board of directors, but had little to do with the daily operation of the company. From accounts of senior and middle management, it was rare for there to be any trouble in compounds or with workers[17].

African workers were recruited from specific areas in Zululand (with a significant minority from Pondoland), and could only live in the compound in the Point on condition that they respected their fixed term contracts of nine or ten months. The number of workers that the companies needed were signed on every day at the compound and transported to their workplaces. There were no more togt labourers or weekly contracts. During the early days of the DSLSC, in 1961, stevedoring companies decided to give a basic retainer to workers to ensure that they would be able to keep a constant workforce even during times of little work. The government-run South Africa Railways and Harbours (hereafter referred to as SARH) objected to this, because they did not give any such retainer to workers[18]. The stevedoring companies decided to go ahead with this anyway, but it showed that the stevedoring companies would not yield entirely to government pressure and marked the beginning of a very tense relationship between the stevedoring companies, whose management was predominately English speaking, and the very Afrikaans SARH.

Despite the retainer most of the workers' wages came from the work that they actually performed. The Labour Supply Company kept detailed records of each of the

[16] David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban.* PhD. thesis, University of Warwick, 1979. p.

[17] Interviews done by author: Captain Gordon Stockley (25 June 2001), Hugh Wyatt (4 September 2001). Both worked in the docks from early 1970s, Stockley as Operations Manager and Wyatt started as a foreman.

workers, listing where the worker was recruited from, the number of contracts he may have had and any disciplinary offences committed. A distance was thus created between the companies and the African workforce that served to deal with dissent. It also helped to eliminate the problem of large numbers of African workers in the city without fixed employment. Stevedoring companies did have to pay a little extra in terms of this retainer and to the officials of the DSLSC, but in return they gained a stable supply of labour, available whenever they needed it, effectively their own labour bureau. The retainer was a very small amount, and neither the companies nor the workers really noticed it because of the economic boom in the 1960s that meant that workers often worked most days of the week and that the companies were making large profits. The economic boom was reflected in the increase of total cargo landed in Durban between 1962 (4323 tons) and 1966 (8557 tons)[19]. If a worker became ill or retired, or when more workers were needed (not uncommon in the 1960s), the DSLSC had contact with traditional leaders in Zululand and could request more labour.

The compound was run from the start of the DSLSC until the mid 1970s by a senior induna called JB Buthelezi (incidentally an uncle of MG Buthelezi). He used to sit on the board of the DSLSC and on labour liaison boards to represent workers, and was in charge of recruitment. The structure of the DSLSC was very hierarchical, in accordance with Zulu tradition, and senior administrators and indunas achieved these positions through a link to Zulu royalty or through age. Buthelezi and his indunas had a final say on recruitment, on which workers worked on particular days, and on matters of discipline. Most of the workers were illiterate and could not speak English, and the only people that the foremen of these companies could issue instructions to were the indunas from the DSLSC. Companies kept a register of workers who had worked on a particular ship on any day and paid the DSLSC accordingly. There was very little interaction between workers and white foremen, except that the foreman kept a register of workers by referring to the band on each worker's wrist that gave critical details about the worker, such as his name and length of contract. These bands were heat sealed onto each worker

[18]SAB MAR. vol. 81 file. A2/44. Department of Labour. "Re: Native Labour: The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company". 18 May 1961.
[19] Statistical Year Book, 1976, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban.* p. 512.

when he became part of the DSLSC[20]. A worker tended not to see his family for the duration of his contract, women were not allowed in the compound, and could get very little access to the city if they stayed in Zululand. During the mid 1970s, when compound control became a little more relaxed, workers often went out in townships at weekends and sometimes started a second family there.

There is an important distinction that needs to be made between indunas that operated on the ships and those in the compounds. While both undoubtedly replicated tribal hierarchies, those on the ships were far more involved in the actual labour process. They were paid according to the amount of work they did and this in turn depended on the availability of ships. They were subject to the orders of white foremen, and were held responsible for any mistakes on the ships. In this sense they were far closer to the position of an ordinary stevedoring hand. The compound induna was paid for by the DSLSC and his sole function was to control and recruit workers[21].

The actual process of work was done according to a system of gangs that averaged between 8 and 12 workers depending on the particular cargo handled. At the compound workers were allocated to a particular gang that included stevedoring hands, winchmen, gangwaymen and indunas. A white foreman would be at the vessel and together with the induna, co-ordinate the operation. Once workers were finished clearing or loading a particular ship, they would be finished for the day. Workers were paid as gang per ship rather than per hour. This gave workers some leeway as to how fast they worked. Although it was in their interests to work fast to earn more money, they could not be transferred from one ship to another without getting extra money for it.

In fact, the DSLSC was so successful that in a report to the department of Bantu affairs and development written by Kemp, the manager of the DSLSC, suggested that it be used as a model of labour control and supply for other towns and industries[22]. He went on to discuss why the company had been so successful:

[20] Interviews done by the author. Capt. Stockley, 25 June 2001, Yoga Thinnasagren, 6 September 2001. Mr Thinnasagren worked as a labour superintendent in various stevedoring companies during the 1970s.
[21] David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 393-396.
[22] BAO 2401 file 31/3/336. Letter from PJ Kemp (general manager) to Dr P. van Rensburg (Dept of Bantu administration and development). 22 April 1966.

"'n Groot mate van die sukses wat hierdie Maatskappy bereik het in hantering van sy Arbeidsmag en die nywersheidrus was daaruit voortgevloei het, is te wyte aan die feit dat die werkers (met uitsondering van 182) almal gehuisves word in kampongs van die Maatskappy".[23] [a great deal of the success that this company has achieving in controlling its labour force and the accompanying industrial calm has to do with fact the all workers (with the exception of 182) are housed in the compounds of the company.]

In whichever way we may understand the operation of the DSLSC, it was certainly successful at controlling strikes. In the mid 1960s the stevedoring companies and the state investigated how the DSLSC was functioning. WS Dreyer, the deputy manager claimed that:

"since February 1959 we can proudly say that not one day of work has been lost because of disruptions or strikes" [24].

The success of the DSLSC had interesting effects on the workers. Although I will not go into detail here, it will suffice to say that there were definite processes of inclusion and exclusion that occurred within the DSLSC, as contrasting statements by workers reveal;

"I would say that this system was better than the togt system…we were able to work every day. Before sometimes we could not get work. On some days there were no ships for us to work. And when there was no work we even had to sell our clothes to buy food."[25].

"at that time we had no access to seeing Apartheid from the whites the employers. We could only see the 'Apartheid' by people of our own race. You come to the gate, he doesn't know you, no matter how poor you are, he doesn't care, he will only take me because he knows my cousin."[26]

[23]BAO 2401 file 31/3/336. Letter from PJ Kemp (general manager) to Dr P. van Rensburg (Dept of Bantu administration and development). 22 April 1966.
[24] SAB BAO vol. 3049 file C39/29. Dreyer, W. "Some notes on the establishment, methods and organization of a Stevedoring Labour pool". Durban, 1966. p. 10.
[25] Mr Nzuza, quoted in Tina Sideris. *Sifuna Imali Yethu: The life and struggles of Durban Dockworkers, 1940-1981*. Johannesburg: SAIRR Oral history project, 1983. p. 19

## 4. The Crisis in Production

The boom in cargo handling in docks slowed down after 1966, and by 1970 was as low as at the beginning of the decade[27]. Because there was less work available, the stevedores suddenly found themselves earning a lot less. In addition to this, the final wage determination of 1969 based its recommendations on 1966 figures of average earnings, grossly overestimating the actual wages of the workers[28]. A combination of this overall economic decline and the refusal of stevedoring companies and the state to recognize the real decline in wages of stevedoring workers led to a strike on the 4 April 1969 of almost 2000 stevedoring workers. The method for dealing with the strike was immediate, and left little doubt of the state's commitment to urban order. More than 1000 workers were dismissed and sent home[29]. The strike was the first major one in over ten years and, at the very least, showed workers determination to be paid properly.

In the aftermath of the strike, the department of native affairs in conjunction with the DSLSC set up new and stricter controls of recruitment. By 1972, the emphasis of recruitment had shifted to strongly Zulu traditional areas such as Nongoma and Mahlabatini and away from Pondo areas such as Mount Ayliff[30]. While Labour recruitment had always favoured a Zulu labour force, this move entrenched this supply particularly from areas that were known for being conservative and especially traditionally orientated.

The strike was viewed somewhat more ambiguously by stevedoring companies. The strike led to a bottleneck of ships in the harbour, and many of the companies supported the call of many of the dismissed workers to be re-instated. But there were more serious long terms effects. Because the government viewed general stevedores as unskilled, it was possible to simply replace strikers with more 'disciplined' workers. But many of those dismissed workers had gained skills while working during the boom of the

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[26] Interview by the author. Bongani Dlamini, currently a casual labourer. Mr Dlamini began working on the docks in the early 1970s.
[27] Statistical Year Book, 1976, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 512.
[28] David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban.* p. 516-517.
[29] Natal Mercury, 7 April 1969. "Half Durban's dockworkers set off home".
[30] Interview with Dreyer by David Hemson, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban.* p. 581.

1960s. There was a dramatic increase in the incidence of injury through accident in 1970[31]. This is undoubtedly due to a whole set of new workers who were expected to work as productively as workers in the 1960s. The productivity of stevedores also underwent a sharp decline in the early 1970s causing large port delays. A spokesman for Royal Inter-ocean shipping line is reported to have commented;

*"I don't care about the figures. All I know is that I have had ships waiting outside [the port] for four days".*[32]

The pressures of productivity had not faced the stevedoring companies since the inception of the DSLSC. In addition, shipping lines changed their rate structures (see below) which largely increased the competition between stevedoring companies. By the early 1970s, stevedoring companies began employing casual labourers illegally in addition to the pool of labour available from the DSLSC, to meet surplus requirements. Although this constituted only about 12% of the labour force on any particular day, this emerged as a challenge to the Apartheid system of labour control and distribution[33]. A series of meetings were set up by the Port Natal Bantu Administration Board with the Stevedoring Companies in order to try and solve this crisis. Stevedoring companies admitted to using casual labour and insisted at these meetings that they could not function without using casual labourers on particular days. Officials of the Bantu Administration Board stated that casual labourers were bringing havoc to town and drinking illicitly, and that town needed to be cleaned up. Eventually stevedoring companies agreed that they would attempt to register workers and set up a pool that could be drawn on for excess labour requirements[34]. Yet it seemed that this resolution could only solve the crisis on a temporary basis, and that the whole structure of stevedoring labour needed to be re-visited.

[31]David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban.* p. 534.
[32] *Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970. "Mechanisation the Answer to Port Delays, say Agents"
[33] Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). SB. Bourquin (Chief Director). "Registration and Control of Bantu Dockworkers". May 1975.
[34] Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). "Minutes of a meeting addressing the Labour problems in the point on Harbour areas". 20 November 1974.

## 5. Problems of Competition, Effects of Globalisation

South African stevedoring companies had been controlled by shipping lines since the days of the great Union Castle mail-ship line, before the turn of the century, existing to ensure that their liners would be serviced as a fast as possible. For instance, the Union Castle line owned African Associated Stevedores[35]. Private stevedoring companies were not guaranteed work and survived on extra stevedoring requirements during especially busy periods. Towards the end of the 1960s, goods began to be carried in containers, and many predicted that it would make the stevedoring industry substantially less important in ports worldwide[36]. The shipping lines were aware of the coming technological changes and first demanded a change in method of payment from a cost plus rate standard contract to an all in rate structure, irrespective of the cargo handled[37]. This change meant two things; firstly, the cost plus rate structure was based on set amounts depending on what kind of cargos were handled, and made allowance for more difficult cargos for stevedores, secondly, breaking the standard contract allowed for stevedoring companies to set their own rates. This meant that stevedoring companies would continually undercut each other, and shipping lines could always choose the cheapest option. Independent operators (outside the DSLSC) would employ causal labour, despite the government regulations, and actively compete to provide better rates for the shipping lines. There was vigorous protest from the Bantu Administration Board to this[38].

This competition and undercutting went on for about five years, and by 1976 the major shipping lines pulled out of stevedoring altogether, either disappearing or transporting new containerized cargo[39]. The five years in the early 1970s were critical

[35] Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1" in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 91.
[36] There were many such studies done at the time. I happen to have come across research commissioned by the International Labour Office and done by AA Evans entitled "Technical and Social Changes in the worlds ports". Geneva ,1969. Evans predicts massive changes to cargo handling techniques and to a decline in stevedoring labour, with an emphasis among remaining labourers of flexibility and diversity of skills.
[37] Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1" in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 91-92.
[38] Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). "Minutes of a meeting addressing the Labour problems in the point on Harbour areas". 20 November 1974.
[39] Ibid. p. 92-93.

because it was the last moments of break-bulk as the dominant form of cargo transportation. Captain Stockley explains what the tactics of the shipping lines were;

> *What these guys in the shipping industry knew about was the effects of containerisation. This made me a little bitter, because they knew what was going to happen to the labour and that we would have a massive problem, but they weren't too interested in helping or showing us the direction to go. They just ripped the guts out of it to get better profits and to hell with the future of the industry.*[40]

Facing a declining but still quite large industry, stevedoring companies had to decide the best way forward. The previous five years of fighting had not done any of the companies much good, and it was clearly impossible to continue in this manner from the perspective of sustainability. In 1976 the 12 stevedoring companies operating in Durban, including many of the old companies previously owned by shipping lines, either merged into 4 main companies or went insolvent. At the end of the 1970s the four main companies operating in Durban were South African Stevedoring Services Company (SASSCO), Aero Marine, Rennies and Grindrods. The dominant company was SASSCO, occupying 60% of the market[41].

The exploitation of the stevedoring market and merger of stevedoring companies was perhaps the first tangible effect of containerisation. The second would be on the front of stevedoring labour. As companies merged, and the stevedoring trade became increasing difficult to make profitable, remaining companies looked at ways of cutting costs. Companies like SASSCO in the late 1970s found that they were investing the most in the DSLSC and not getting any real material benefits. Furthermore smaller companies were using the large labour pool of the DSLSC whenever they needed it, making SASSCO feel as if they were providing the labour for these smaller companies. SASSCO also felt that it was important to give workers a company identity and bring workers closer to management[42]. The traditional hierarchies maintained in the DSLSC were expensive and for a SASSCO management far more interested in surviving as a stevedoring company than maintaining Apartheid, the decision to withdraw from the

[40] Interview by the author of Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001. Captain Stockley had been involved with the Union Castle line in the 1960s and came to stevedoring in Durban in 1973. He was the Operations Manager of South African Stevedores nationally until his retirement in 1994.
[41] Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 95.

DSLSC proved quite simple. In 1979, the DSLSC was wound down without a real fight from anybody, in contrast to its difficult and contested beginnings.

## 6. Facing the Challenges of the 1980s.

For the National Party Government the 1980s was a period of intense difficulty marked by a huge increase in the use of violence to maintain its existence. The state faced increased political opposition both internally and abroad and the economy was in real trouble. One of the new areas of political opposition that emerged in the 1970s was from urban Africans generally and the labour movement specifically. As part of a strategy to de-politicize as much of civil society as possible without losing control, the National Party embarked on a series of reforms that led to the recognition of trade unions and a new form of influx control that recognized a permanent African workforce[43]. Gone from NP politics were grand ideological justifications for a moral order called Apartheid, and increasingly the dialogue changed to staying in control and maintaining power against a supposed communist revolution of the ANC. These reforms allowed unions and companies a much freer space in which to operate, organize and employ African workers, but were also misunderstood by many within the ranks of the state itself. Many in the SARH refused to recognize unions and believed that the reforms were a temporary measure aimed at re-building the economy. Some believed that 1960s style labour relations could go on forever, resented the collapse of the DSLSC and the new initiatives undertaken by the stevedoring companies[44].

With the economic burden of the DSLSC gone, stevedoring companies and SASSCO in particular made an attempt to build company identity with their workers. While the technological changes of Containerisation and Roll-on, Roll-off ships had caused much difficulty in stevedoring internationally, other technological innovations specifically affected the stevedoring labour process. In particular, the introduction of forklift trucks and pallitization in the early 1970s meant that some break-bulk cargoes

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[42] Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.
[43] Dan o'Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994.* p. 272-273.
[44] Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.

were transported in far more uniform varieties, which could be loaded on to a forklift truck from the ship. These innovations affected the size of the stevedoring gang, with the numbers of workers working on any ship being reduced from ten or twelve to four or six and co-ordinating these workers to work effectively became a far more difficult task[45]. Before 1979, the African labour force of the DSLSC had been totally excluded from this process and SASSCO developed policies to train its workers how to handle palletized cargo, and also developed training programs to teach its workers English and general literacy skills. In addition, SASSCO attempted to multi-skill workers, giving them the flexibility to be either stevedoring hands or forklift truck drivers as any particular job might require[46]. SASSCO also recognized the right of African workers to be represented by trade unions and in 1981, following vigorous union organizing and a ballot, recognized the General Workers Union (GWU) as the representative of all stevedoring workers in the company nationally. In 1982 Rennies Grindrod also recognized the GWU, giving the union control of almost the entire stevedoring labour force[47].

In an attempt to come to terms with the changed terrain of the stevedoring trade, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod entered into negotiations on a possible merger in late 1982[48]. At the end of the year they submitted an application to the competitions board to create a single stevedoring company in the docks. In their submission, the two companies recognized the need for a stable and well-paid labour force and the need for capital investment in stevedoring industry, which could only really occur with the suspension of the competition between the two companies for the relatively meager resources. A stable work-force could be trained and developed to meet new industrial demands and with the total cost of labour amounting to 40% of both companies costs, it seemed that continued competition would destroy any future for stevedoring. An additional factor for this

[45] Interview by the author. Hugh Wyatt. 6 September 2001.
[46] Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.
[47] The Argus. 23 June 1982. "Dockers Union, industry forge new deal". See also EP Herald. 22 June 1982. "Deal gives GWU 4-port standing".
[48] In 1981, Rennies and Grindrods Cotts had merged into Rennies Grindrod, leaving only two stevedoring companies on the docks.

decision was based on the decline of break-bulk cargo handled nationally between 1976 and 1981 of 6.3 million tons[49].

The merger brought immediate benefits and problems. Casual labour was once again eliminated, but unlike the 1950s the moral threat that casuals in city posed to white South Africa was not a factor. Instead workers were all given 4-day guarantees, which meant that the company would pay the workers for a minimum of 4 days work. Through negotiations with unions, wages in the industry increased at the end of 1982[50]. The merger also resulted in an oversized staff consisting of both management and workers. Almost immediately when South African Stevedores (SAS) came into existence in August 1982, both management and workers were retrenched[51].

With the trimmed labour force, the company existed through 1983 without competition. SAS management believed that the future of the industry was in their hands, and that they could build long-term sustainability in the industry[52]. The 1983 Industrial Relations Report of the SAS Corporate Plan of the next four years highlighted these challenges, emphasizing the need to develop an even more skilled labour force and recognized the potential of conflict with the state run South African Transport Services[53] (SATS), particularly because the government-run SATS resented SAS' liberal attitude to African workers and political unions. The report argued that SAS could not afford to intimidate SATS, who had sole control over stevedoring licenses, and protected the fact that SAS had no competition[54].

The *verkrampte* men in SATS had already had an encounter with the General Workers Union when they tried to organize all dockworkers in Port Elizabeth. The GWU had been forcefully told that their union would under no circumstances be recognized[55].

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[49] SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod. "Rationalisation of the Stevedoring Industry: Memorandum to Competitions Board". August 1982. This document does not come from an archive but rather was given to me by retired management of South African Stevedores.
[50] *Daily News*. 23 December 1982. "Wage increases for stevedores."
[51] *Daily News*. 25 August 1982. "Managers Axed after stevedoring merger."
[52] Interview by the author. Captain Stockley, 25 June 2001. Stockley was now entirely in charge of operations in Stevedoring nationally. He was determined to make stevedoring work, and declared at a speech at the Durban Country Club in 1982 that he was not prepared to move at the speed of the slowest ship.
[53] South African Transport Services was the old SARH
[54] South African Stevedores Corporate Plan 1984-1987. Industrial Relations Report.
[55] Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 2" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 108.

Capital Radio interviewed the industrial relations officer in SAS, Les Owen about the strike and Owen had explicitly said that South African Transport Services were in the wrong and that independent unions must be allowed to operate in the docks. Shortly after the interview, the directors of SAS were summoned to Pretoria and threatened with the loss of their stevedoring license[56].

Relations between the state and SAS were very tense, and when ISCOR complained that SAS was a monopoly and controlled rates unfairly in the stevedoring industry, the state had a perfect solution. ISCOR gave support to businessmen in the dock, SATS issued the stevedoring license and Keeley's Stevedoring was born[57]. At the beginning of 1984, the state actually issued a large number of stevedoring licenses, but Keeleys was the most significant because it had control of the transportation of ISCOR's steel contracts. Keeleys employed casual labour off the street and paid them substantially less than SAS. By having a much smaller labour cost, Keeleys was also able to gain a foothold in many of SAS's other markets. The GWU tried to organize in Keeleys and found that they had absolutely no idea of industrial relations, and even attempted to make GWU a sweetheart union[58]. The Union even complained to the state that Keeleys was paying their workers below the minimum under the prescribed determination[59].

The material affects of containerisation and the added pressure from the new companies made a real difference to SAS. In February 1985, they retrenched 600 stevedores[60], and had to downscale many of their training operations because of this undercutting. But if the companies felt containerisation, the unions did too. A union official expressed his helpless position;

*we couldn't actually deal with it. It drove me out of the union in the end. It was constantly disheartening, we tried to negotiate the best deal we could, and it was never good enough…. It was an impossible*

[56] Interview by the author. Les Owen: Industrial Relations Manager, SAS: 1980-1985. 5 June 2001.
[57] Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 2" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 112-114.
[58] Interview by the author. Mike Morris. 28 June 2001. Morris was an organizer for the GWU in Durban from 1981 to 1985.
[59] *Financial Mail*. 3 August 1984. "Wage Determination: Payment Problems".
[60] *Natal Mercury*. 18 February 1985. "600 Durban Dockworkers to lose jobs".

*situation and I did not realise, until I did the research afterwards, what a worldwide trend this was… we spent our time negotiating retrenchments*[61].

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout the world, ports have had to face containerisation. Yet this relatively simple technological innovation has produced new power relations and altered social conditions. Ports have made huge investments in new container terminals, dredged new paths for bigger ships, and abandoned the old methods of docking and warehousing. The increasing efficiency of road transport and communications has also meant that traditionally strong ports have also lost a degree of their power, for shipping companies are more freely able to choose the ports at which they dock. This has led a commentator to suggest that ports no longer have guaranteed markets, and are just one part of a set of multimodal transportation chains. Shipping companies have far more freedom to determine where they dock[62]. In short, the increased flexibility of international companies to dictate local prices and conditions reflects globalisation.

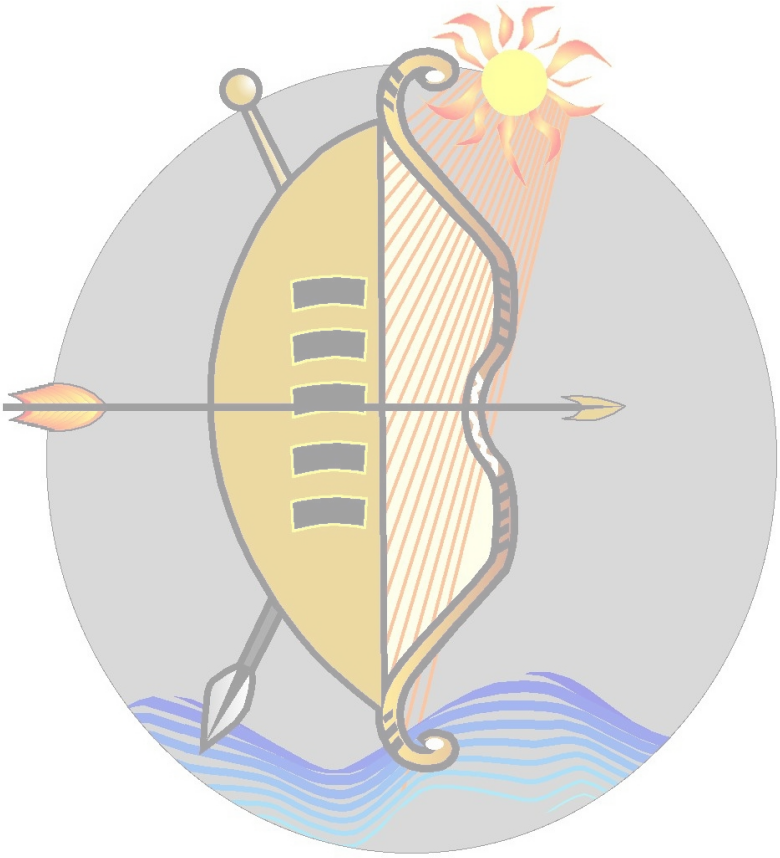
Yet, Durban as a harbour has survived containerisation and maintained a leading position in terms of ports worldwide. In 1994 the total cargo transported through Durban of 41.4 million tons could be divided into Conventional Break-bulk Cargo, which made up 21.83% of the total, containerized cargo, making up 25.86%, Bulk Cargo 14.71% and Oil and Petroleum products 37.60%[63]. Although there is still some break-bulk cargo handled, one must remember that this market is increasingly unstable and that previously all the containerized cargo would have been transported in break-bulk. This paper has been about the decline of the stevedoring industry in Durban and the material reality becomes clear when looking at the total numbers of stevedores permanently employed through the period; at the height of the DSLSC in 1965 stevedoring labour force peaked at 3500 workers, by 1978 this had shrunk to an average of 2500 workers employed and

[61] Interview done by the author. Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.
[62] Brian Slack. "Pawns in the Game: Ports in a Global Transportation System" in *Growth and Change*, vol. 24, Fall 1993. Although this certainly bears more truth in the northern hemisphere, many ports and companies in Durban fear that shipping lines may take their operations to Maputo or Beira if costs are not kept down.
[63] Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. p. 17.

by 1985 the permanent labour force was some 1200 workers. The effects of this decline have been exacerbated by the failure of the state to provide any kind of alternative employment for retrenched workers but these were the days of the Apartheid state.

Indeed it is impossible to tell this story without discussing the role of the Apartheid state and colonial interests in the South African economy. In the early parts of this paper I have tried to contextualize the roles of various actors towards dock labour and how this reflected much broader positions in their thinking.

Likewise, it is impossible to discuss stevedoring in this period without discussing the material consequences of containerisation, and how through a process akin to the broad term globalisation, local markets were undermined and exploited in favour of international concerns. Further, I have demonstrated the fragility of local initiatives to protect and develop in the industry in face of rapid international change.

Despite efforts by different historical actors motivated by vastly different interests, casual labour has remained an enduring feature of stevedoring labour in Durban. In the 1960s it was eradicated by the Apartheid government under conditions of intense control and repression for the political and moral well being of whites in the city. It must be remembered that these were times of economic growth. During the 1970s casual labour re-emerged after strikes, bottlenecks in the harbour and conditions of economic crisis. In the 1980s, the progressive guarantee system negotiated by unions and stevedoring companies attempted to give workers security during times of economic hardship, but these measures were destroyed by the worldwide difficulties of stevedoring at the time and by intense state sponsored competition. A pool of casual labourers today work in the harbour, dependent on the extra work which arises everyday but which is not constant enough to be guaranteed.

While Harries and others have decisively pointed out the agency and abilities of casual labourers to resist industrial discipline and to often ensure better conditions for themselves, it seems highly problematic to make similar assertions about casual labourers today. These casual labourers face a constant battle for survival and have no cards to play in an industry where there is little or no demand for their labour.