

Working on the edge: dock casual workers and privatisation

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A number of studies have identified that under globalisation the conditions of labour do not improve. This seems a contradiction as the increase in mechanisation and computerised systems should lead to a release from heavy manual labour, higher wages, and shorter hours. Instead globalisation is associated with considerably longer hours work, more casual conditions, fewer jobs, and uncertain wage increases. This contradictory phenomenon is explored in the Durban docks which are one of the largest in the southern hemisphere in the approach to the privatisation of the profitable container port.

Under apartheid African workers suffered under a contractual regime in which the government and employers of migrant workers colluded to limit the months worked per year to less than twelve on fixed term contracts. This meant that the workers would not graduate from the slave conditions of migrant labour to entitlement to urban residence and greater bargaining power. These contract workers did, however, resist and through trade union organisation raised their conditions of work under late apartheid. The response of employers was to retrench, reduce the number of permanent workers, and maintain power through divide and rule tactics.

In the conditions of freedom there have been considerably greater legal entitlements in basic conditions, education and training, and trade union rights. These entitlements, however, are most beneficial to permanent workers and operate unevenly in relation to casuals. Retrenchments have continued with greater ferocity and new forms of casual labour have emerged. A new contradiction arises in that many benefits which should apply to the most marginalized workers do not reach them; holiday benefits are consolidated into the basic wage, education and training does not apply to casual workers, and trade union democracy is evident in its absence.

Bargaining forums in the docks have been set up only to collapse and the state which is governed by neo-liberal principles is extremely reluctant to intervene. A plethora of departments; those of transport, labour, and public enterprises and public utilities; Transnet, Portnet, and a variety of subsidiaries are all involved but none take the initiative to improve conditions. Any public initiatives to reform conditions are paralysed by the imminent advent of a port concession in the Durban Container Terminal (DCT) which is promised to revolutionize productivity and bring in a new era of regional development to KwaZulu-Natal.

In a 10 year review of freedom dock workers spell out their disappointment and anger with the lack of progress in their lives. In this paper the basic conditions of work are examined in the life stories and employment history of dock workers. The transition from permanence to casualisation is traced and some idea given of the strategy of survival of casual workers under globalisation.

Conclusions are drawn about the nature of trade unionism under these conditions.