

# Class in Soweto

## No longer hidden in rural sinkholes

What are the class divisions beyond the world of permanent work? And what do they mean for forging unity? **Claire Ceruti** came up with this picture from research conducted in Soweto.

**K**arl von Holdt and Eddie Webster use an onion to represent new worlds of work. In the onion diagram below the arrows represent the movements of workers between the different 'worlds of work'. The movement from the periphery of unemployment and informal

subsistence activities and the non-core low-wage workers with few rights into the solid line of core permanent stable work is difficult to achieve.

Amongst people of working age, there are more people unemployed or selling on the street than are employed in this country. One third

of the employed are precarious workers: casuals, domestics or outsourced.

What are the chances of forging a common identity across this sharply divided workforce? Can we still talk about THE working class in South Africa? The example below illustrates some of the barriers to unity.

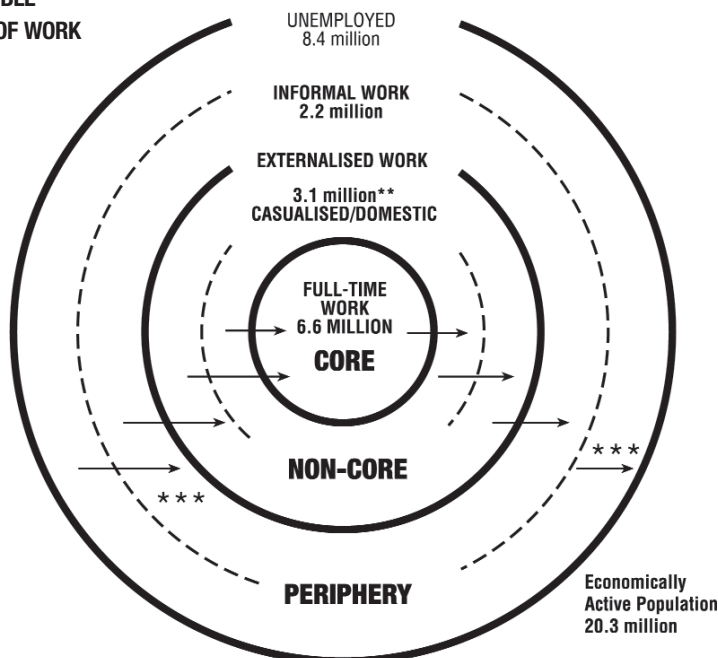
During a meeting of the Saccawu (SA Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union) Soweto Strike Support Committee, strikers, mostly casuals, mentioned that young people in particular crossed the picket lines and pushed past strikers to go into the shop during their strike. Commented a striker, "To them the money we are getting already seems like a lot. They don't see what it's really like to work."

To get a sense of the chances for forging a common identity, we conducted research in Soweto.

### PEOPLE'S DEFINITION OF CLASS

The research is about class in Soweto. In the first phase we started discussions with 63 people, usually by asking "What class are you?" We got a variety of interesting responses. People, for example, often referred to "middle class". We couldn't tell from the interviews

### THE FLEXIBLE WORLDS OF WORK



Source: May and Meth (2004); The Presidency (2003).  
From these figures it is not possible to distinguish between temporary, part-time and outsourced work.

\*\*We include one million domestic workers because of their extreme employment vulnerability.

*One of the Sowetans interviewed in the research.*

how widespread it is for workers to call themselves middle class, but we can explore why. We don't know yet how many households eat pap and chicken feet night after night, but we know that people label that fate "poor class". People also described their world in detail when they talked about class and this gave us important information.

We discovered a rich language of stratification, such as "cheeseboy" which means that the parents can afford to slip a wedge of Melrose cheese into the school lunch box.

Words describing class are used even by people who do not recognise the word class. We asked a petrol pump attendant his class and he replied, "Eish, I don't know what you are talking about". A minute later we asked about Diepkloof Extension, which is a classy area on the edge of Soweto. He laughed, "oh, ama-bourgeois!"

A facecloth vendor interpreted class to mean her type of business and at first she insisted that everyone is the same in Soweto. But when we mentioned Diepkloof Ext, she compared herself, one of the "sisiwana" (orphans in Venda) with "labofuma" (the rich, those with fat to smear on their bodies). "His children get money to go to school, but us, as a poor person... our children, when school closes, they arrive here [at the market] so when the sun comes and the rain comes it hits them."

Few people called themselves working class. Almost everyone

recognised rich and poor, and there were big debates about whether the rich have all left Soweto. But most people drew a line through the township.

Unemployed and street vendors usually called themselves lower class, and easily called cashiers, nurses and teachers middle class in the township. It was more surprising that a number of workers called themselves middle class (and sometimes working class at the same time). This might be expected from teachers and bank clerks, but we got it from some cashiers, a store clerk and several textile workers.

Like most of the Sowetans we interviewed, these workers drew class lines with a sharp eye for differences in living standards. Said a scrap metal seller, "One determines class through affordability and what a person has... When you meet some people on the streets, you can see that they have been wearing one and the same thing for the whole month. So it shows that they do not have clothes. These people are very low in social classes, and need some attention. They need some help. Those who are in upper classes are visible because they are usually

wearing expensive clothes and changing them everyday."

The puzzle was that the lifestyle of cashiers and textile workers is worlds away from the young managers and middle-aged empowerment executives we met at the Soweto Wine Festival. They know they are middle class according to the fashionable night club they frequent or the make of car or luxury brand of clothing they choose. The workers, on the other hand, know they are middle class because they put pap and gravy on the table every single day without fail.

These groups also described other classes differently. One aspirational youngster described a lower class person "drinking black label with his Alpha (car) parked outside his shack". But workers sympathetically reported a low class people as having cracked concrete floors, or the child with a hole in the jersey.

The textile workers and cashiers call themselves middle class as if they are giving thanks that they have so far escaped the impoverishment on their doorstep. One of our research group, Peter Alexander, pointed out that the pass laws previously hid the poor and





Claire Ceruti

A Sowetan interviewee.

unemployed in rural sinkholes. Now, the jobs tsunami has cast them up in full view in Soweto, along with people from rural areas and small towns hoping to find work.

The lower class, or poor class, or third class, was described as, "Some people sit on tins in their houses. Then you can see they are struggling" or "The poor people don't have even a fridge."

The cashiers don't feel rich, but they have chairs to sit on. Middle class was called "just okay" and "able to live a normal life" in Soweto. (The suburban middle class by contrast mentioned luxuries like "a movie in the middle of the week".) Notice this scrap collector's description of Soweto's middle class, "I am low class because I grew up in an informal settlement where there is no life... The middle class is neither rich nor poor. It is just in the middle. These people can afford. They have houses and jobs, they have a shelter. They do not earn a lot of money, just enough for their needs.

There is also a high class - those who live in suburbs [that is, outside

Soweto]. They can afford anything they want in life. They have houses, cars, they eat anything they like. They are educated. Their lives are smooth, for example Tony Yengeni."

The workers are 'middle' compared to a deprived layer in Soweto, such as Lawrence A. At 22 years of age he spends all day breaking glass for R1 500 a month. He is the "only one that carries that responsibility" in his family of nine. He described his lot as "a pity life". His dream is to get a proper job so he can "buy myself Nandos, like the cheeseboys".

#### CLASS AND WORK

In most areas of Soweto, less than half of working age people are employed, according to the latest census. Soweto's pavements are therefore full of people making a plan. We interviewed people who spent all day with their hands immersed in chicken feet; people who sat through rain and shine waiting for someone's facecloth to wear out; and people who cut hair on the side of the road.

Piece work provides slim survival for some. A Diepkloof resident explained, "Those who do not work are looking for work like I do. A lot of people I know do not work. They just have temporary jobs for one day. From there, they just sit with us here. If there is someone who says go and hunt somewhere, we go and hunt. If we are unsuccessful, we come back and just sit."

Workless households like Jane's below are a feature of Soweto, and her story demonstrates how subcontracting expanded and maintains the lower class.

Jane worked as a cleaner at Sandton Sun, "Then they introduced Prestige and after a year a manager from the hotel dismissed me... There are eight in my family - me and my children and my two brothers' children. No one is working. Sometimes the young boy gets some piece-jobs, which gets us some money for eating. There is no grant because I don't have a small child. I don't have any income in my house. My sister who is



working at the same hotel tries to help me sometimes. My brother who is also not working tries to help me too.”

A key word for lower class was, “Just surviving”. Their miserable existence seems far away from the renovated house where there is enough to eat and the bond repayments are invisible. It is not surprising that those in poverty as well as those in the renovated house see themselves as different, even if the gap in monetary terms is very slim.

Casualisation and subcontracting has clearly created a world of working poverty next to workless deprivation. It seems that the nearer you are to the outside of the work onion, the more likely you are to call yourself lower class. People from workless households, street vendors and pieceworkers, subcontracted cleaners and petrol pump attendants classed themselves lower class or poor.

People in casual and informal work often support many unemployed, like Lawrence A. It is inevitable that the most desperate people accept the worst jobs. But the line people draw in the township is not the same as the divide between different zones of the work onion, because households cross the zones.

The shop clerk compared two cashiers from the same store. She described one of them, “Her shoes, if they could talk they would say, I’m tired!” The cashier with the weary shoes supports more unemployed. By contrast ZI, a salesman, could see himself as middle class despite his frayed collar, “though not able to afford



luxuries”, because he and his brother supported their wives and only one unemployed cousin. So the number and quality of jobs in a household shapes whether you feel and look deprived.

The quality and number of jobs draws the fine line between affordability and deprivation. Near the bottom, a single wage can make a giant difference. Sello, a youth activist in Kliptown, observes that you can see households sinking into the lower class when they lose earners. Finding a job reverses the spiral. One household might be reduced to sitting on tins by an unfortunate series of retrenchments, while a similar household is able to extend the family house because it retains two steady jobs.

When people draw this line between the deprived and the ‘just okay’, what comes to your attention is that jobs are central to life on both sides of the line. People wish for jobs to prosper, and those without jobs hardly survive. One textile worker said “those people [lower

class] are just the same as me, it’s only that they do not have jobs.”

From this perspective, the deprived and the ‘just okay’ could be seen as part of the same group in society, shaken out on different sides of the jobs’ lotto. One group is working and the other is in reserve for work, making do as best they can. This is supported by the way the zones of the worlds of work rub shoulders at home and how people perceive work (this will be discussed in the next *Labour Bulletin*).

## CONCLUSION

The key point is that the very thing people have in common with each other is also the exact thing which underlines the differences in lifestyles which people interpret as class. This creates both a divided consciousness, and the possibility of a bridge.

The Soweto Strike Support Committee started late in the strike and dissolved soon after it was settled. But its purpose, building support in the broader community for the strike, meant it had to look for ways to build these bridges. It was pushed to look for a wider background to the immediate problems of this or that section of workers or unemployed. Such organisation could be crucial to redeveloping a common identity in a now heavily segmented workforce. LB

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