

Divisions and dependencies among working and workless

In the previous edition of *SALB* **Claire Ceruti** unpicked what class Sowetans believe they belong to. In this follow up, Ceruti looks at Sowetan's work, the interdependence of workers and workless and whether solidarity can be built.

What is the relation between unemployed people, informal labour and workers? Is it one class or two?

Eddie Webster believes that changes at work have "polarised the labour market by increasing the resources to some of the 6.6 million in the core who are formal, permanent workers while at the same time reducing resources" to the rest.

When we asked people about class in Soweto, they divided themselves into at least two classes. People who called themselves poor class were mostly unemployed, casual workers, informal sector, or living in households with high unemployment. Most people with steady work called themselves middle class.

However, we met a number of people in whose households the unemployed and workers go up and down together.

EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED ENTWINED

Tebza is 32 years old and recently got his first permanent job, a learnership. When he added his learnership income to his brother's public sector wage, it meant: "We have better food and more food, and we bought a VCR". But no one had worked in his family from 1991, when his mother, a textile worker, was retrenched, until 2001, when his brother found work.

We met Mr Khumalo at a march demanding more jobs. He was a teacher and now works as a driver. He lives with his wife who is a nurse, and his three children. One child is at university. He supports his brother and his sister. His brother has been unemployed for two years after the factory where he worked as a labourer closed. His sister has been unemployed a long time owing to sickness. Mr Khumalo sees himself and his wife as "working class... trying to push to be middle class." He says, "We don't have enough money to eat what we like at the time we are hungry for it." His sister, he says, would be lower class because, "If I don't support her she won't eat."

A textile machinist from Zondi, interviewed at a Jo'burg shop stewards' meeting, called herself middle class. She lives on the same

stand as her brother, who stays in a converted garage, and her daughter and sister's child stay in outside rooms. Her daughter is a data capturer, on contract with agents, her brother works at Murray and Roberts as a driver, her sister's child is not working. Her son also is at home. He was working at Mr Price before as a contract worker. "But now he's no more working. He was a tiler too [piece-jobbing]." He has been two years unemployed.

The family don't pool their money, but they are buying clothes and maintaining the boys. "Sometimes I do help my sister because she is not working too." She has not worked since 1984. She was working at a factory, in the "financial" section. "Sometimes maybe she gets some temporary work in Sandton. Only a week, then for three weeks she's at home. I want my son to get a job, and also my sister to get a permanent job so she can maintain her children. There are lots of people like my son looking for piece-jobs."

So there is mutual support, but because these bonds involve spreading resources thinly they may be more or less stressed. We glimpsed this when we interviewed a painfully shy 16 year old who was dependent on her resentful aunt, and when Mr Khumalo grumbled about his son copying CDs for his friends instead of finding a vacation job. Nevertheless, the employed and the unemployed are integrated at the level of the household.



Mr Khumalo on a march demanding jobs ... "working class trying to push to be middle class"

These stories show that the polarisation of the labour market, far from making the stable employed into a privileged layer, may have the reverse effect of increasing the responsibilities and demands on their wages.

WORKLESS HOUSEHOLDS

But what about those people who have lost all relation to work and workers? At one extreme of the jobs massacre, we met people like Francinah in a workless household.

"I am unemployed. We are five: my mother, me, my kids, my sister. Not one is working, not anymore. We make some piece-jobs, washing, cleaning. I last worked 15 years ago, in a plastics company. I was permanent but the company left to go to Benoni."

People in workless households do work. But it's insecure, improvised, irregular, outside of the formal sector and it is hard work to get it.

For example Lawrence B, a scrap collector, told us: "At home no one works. Even my older brother does the same job as I do. My mother

sometimes gets piece-jobs of doing people's laundry in the township. In the whole week, she might get a call to do the laundry maybe two or three times only. My father passed away a long time ago. My two younger brothers are still at school. The money that I get from selling these scrap metals, I use it to buy food. Just like today I got R80, I am going to buy food. My brother can also bring home some money, and then we can pool it and get some food. My mother also does the same. Everyone in the house has a responsibility to make things happen. There is nowhere else we get money from except from these activities. We have no relative or friend who sometimes helps us. We have no one to turn to for help."

Mamsie is 28 years old with two young children. She has been selling face cloths outside Orlando Station for about four years. She trained as a security worker and sometimes gets a day's work here and there, but "usually they prefer men, so I decided to start marketing, to start this business." She takes home anything from R10 to R80 on a rare

day – sales are slow because "washcloths and basins take a long time to wear out". Mamsie's whole family are vendors: her father sells cow heads, her mother sells chicken feet. The children's father has been selling icecream in town, for about seven years, since he stopped finding piecejobs laying paving in places like Sandton and Roodepoort.

It's therefore not surprising when unemployed people rate jobs very highly in their aspirations. A middle-aged sweet seller oscillates between informal trading and piece-jobs: "... I once worked but now I am not employed. I lost my job in 1982. I have not been working since 1982. I only work piece-jobs. Just as you can see I am wearing these overalls, I paint so that I can get something for a living. I consider myself a worker, although it's not the type of work that you could expect to sustain you. I am looking for employment."

It was the rainy season when we talked to Mamsie, the face cloth vendor, and somehow she kept steering the discussion to the



Petrol jockey Ngcaba and his brother a TV repairer support 16 people.

leaking roof of her rented shack. For example I asked her how you can recognise *labofuma*, the rich class. "Their houses don't leak, but the poor, their houses get swept away!" I thought I knew what she would answer before I asked, "If you could change one thing in your life, what would it be?" She started as expected, "I can have a good shelter," but then she interrupted herself: "Or, wait, the better thing - I want a job especially".

A street vendor from Diepkloof said: "I consider myself as a worker because I get money with which I can do something for my household. What I do is not work as such; it is just to keep me going as I wait for employment. If I could get employed, I could let go of this activity and work. I am looking for work..."

So these people, who are surplus to business requirements for now, remain a labour reserve even while they improvise their own survival because they are available to work and aspire to work.

LABOUR RESERVE

Karl Marx, describing his own time in the 1800s, writes: "[This section] forms part of the active army [of labour], but with extremely irregular employment. Hence it offers capital an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour power. Its conditions of life sink below the

average normal level of the working class, and it is precisely this which makes it a broad foundation for special branches of capitalist exploitation... It is constantly recruited from workers in large scale industry and agriculture who have become redundant."

In Marx's account, this section fills a special place in the economy because their dire conditions make them easy prey for the new, low-rights industries such as security and those where work has been downgraded. We found some evidence of this in Soweto.

We found Ngcaba, a petrol jockey in his 20s, at work. "I'm coming from a poor family. My father doesn't work, and also my mother, my sisters. It's only me and my elder brother who work."

Ngcaba lives alone in a back room and the rest of the family live at Freedom Park, "in the shacks near the RDP houses". He says his class is "lower" and his biggest worry is "to see my family living a normal life". The brothers pool their money with mother and father who are pensioners. Together they support his younger sister, 22 years old. Ngcaba's other siblings are no longer alive so they also support his brother's eight children, and another group of six, his sister's children.

Ngcaba told us, "My brother fixes TVs. I think he's permanent now. Before, he was doing the same work for himself." Ngcaba too moved from unemployment into a mainstream, but poorly protected job.

Mamsie dips in and out of security work, another casualised and poorly protected industry. Every year around Christmas, a new phalanx of unemployed youngsters take up the slack in the retail industry.

Marx says the unemployed become the elastic in the labour

market. It takes some 16 years for a baby to grow to working age, but an industry that wants to keep pace with the demands of the global market might need more workers next month, and maybe for only a few months. Unemployment increases business flexibility while the cost of being unemployed is borne, not by business, but by the unemployed themselves.

Marx's notion of the labour reserve implies that the employed and the unemployed are part of the same class, but in different positions in the labour market. There are similarities with the picture emerging from our interviews. What we still don't know is whether the workless households will eventually become permanently separated from the labour market if their unemployment continues for a very long time.

What we do know is that this basic similarity is not an automatic basis for unity. Dependence on employment can at times deepen the divide between employed and unemployed. For example, the cleaners' strike was undermined by the availability of unemployed people desperate for work of any sort. Building unity across the working/workless divide will most likely require a conscious effort, through organisations such as the Soweto Strike Support Committee and building campaigns that link the right to work and unemployment benefits with the fight for decent wages.

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