

claiming that workers were accusing him of murder. He told bystanders that the deceased workers were like his own kids and wondered who could have done such a horrible thing.

What came as a surprise though, was that the police were told that there was no forced entry into the premises. Locked doors were found unlocked and nothing was stolen. The big question was who opened the doors and who murdered the workers and stuffed them in bins? Workers wanted answers and

decided to attend the first court hearing.

This action did not go well with the employer. The trial was well attended by organisations and community members and both blacks and whites came out in support of the bereaved families. Workers decided to go to work everyday and just stand outside Protea dry-cleaners. This was when, on 1 February 2006, they were told that they were all suspended without pay and charged with absenteeism.

Evidence led to the six owners being arrested. They were the owner, his daughter, son-in laws and a family friend. These alleged murderers are now out on bail. The deceased families feel that the judiciary has failed them up to this point. Up until now Protea dry-cleaners has remained guarded by police.

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Retail workers at odds with unity

Casualisation and contracting have transformed the retailing labour market. **Bridget Kenny** discusses the divisions of labour that have emerged in this process and how workers maintain these schisms. She contends that such divisions also suggest new ways of organising and unifying.

The retail sector continues to be one of the rare areas of employment growth in South Africa. Research, however, shows the increase not of full-time, stable jobs, but of various forms of part-time employment. The new sectoral determination removed the term 'casual' but still allowed for certain categories of employment such as part-time hours, and also provided for the variation of basic standards through individual agreement. Retail workers continue to earn the lowest wages of unionised workers (excluding domestic and farm workers) in South Africa.

Retail managements have also introduced increased contracting out of employment. This not only the non-core services of cleaning and security, but also shelf packing

and in some cases service work. The use of labour brokers in the industry maintains the low wage and unskilled character of the jobs.

Research with retail workers in three branches of a major national chain several years ago found that labour market divisions were deeply meaningful to workers themselves. Current follow-up research at the stores suggests that these divisions persist and have worsened because of the changes to employment described in this article, which outlines the main content of workers' views in the period before the promulgation of the sectoral determination in 2003. Understanding this can assist to think through how processes of division can also produce new collective possibilities.

DIVISION OF LABOUR: PERMANENTS & CASUALS

Workers in all categories understood that employers tried to 'divide and rule' in order to maintain control. Despite this awareness, workers reinforced divisions amongst themselves daily.

Within the labour process, three categories of employment defined differences in wages and conditions. These were firstly permanent, full-time workers labouring a 45 hour week who took home about R1 900 per month, and had some benefits. Secondly, casual workers who worked on average 19 hours a week, and earned about R570 per month with no benefits. And finally contract merchandisers who worked for many different labour brokers, but on average worked at least 45 hours per week and earned on average less than R1 300 per month, generally receiving no benefits.

Permanents were almost all unionised by Saccawu (South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union) while very few casual or contract workers belonged to a union, although many casual workers had joined and left again after servicing problems. Most workers were black. Just over half of the permanent workers were women while casual workers were mainly women and, contract workers were mostly men. The average age of permanent workers was 36, compared to an average of 30 for casuals, and 31 for contract workers.

Permanent workers had a contradictory relationship with casual workers. They regarded casual jobs as exploitative, and showed sympathy to workers in

these positions. However, they also maintained a status difference between casuals and themselves.

Permanent workers struggled daily for basic rights and dignity within their workplace with branch managers. Permanent workers often embarked on informal sit-down strikes in the canteens over issues of recognition of informal arrangements with store management, over racism, or over attempts by managers to assert unilateral control to change procedures. These actions relied on branch-level union structures, which consisted mainly of permanent workers. They were often successful in maintaining the status quo. These were defensive struggles to maintain a basic level of respect for their collective voice as workers, and as such, they often emphasised permanent workers' differences from casuals.

Permanent workers categorised casual workers as having little experience or knowledge of their jobs. They portrayed them as reliant on permanent workers' privileged position to broker their relations in the store. Permanent workers also saw casuals as a secondary labour market not eligible for promotions into the ranks of permanent employment. Permanent workers sometimes felt that casual workers' weakened their own position. One said, "these ones [casuals] are donkeys. Permanents won't stand for bad conditions, but casuals will be abused".

Moreover, permanents often spoke of casual workers as 'children'. Permanent workers portrayed themselves as 'adults', a status that carried expectations of respect from management through discussion and communication.

They stated, "These casuals are exploited. We'll just speak for them. They do not know how much they're supposed to earn. Management forgets how much these children [abantwana] spend on transport...". Children were told what to do while adults were accorded the respect of making decisions.

Generally, casual workers were younger than permanent workers, but on average only by about five or six years. Sometimes a permanent worker assisted a younger relative or actual birth child to get a casual job. This practice reinforced the age division used to distinguish the status of casual workers in the eyes of permanents. The history of the entry of casual workers into retailing, as students, also may have given the impression to permanent workers that casuals were 'school children'. However, many casuals were in their thirties and helped to support families of their own. To many permanent workers, then, casuals were dependent workers and class victims.

Casual workers, however, contested their secondary status. They claimed a collective worker identity within their category, 'amacasual', for in their words they were the truly exploited. They drew a line of difference between themselves and permanent 'privileged' black workers as a whole. Casual workers spoke of permanent workers' idleness: "...casuals are the ones who bring more money into the store. Permanents do not bring in even a cent... From the first till to the last one, it's all casuals". In casuals' stories, permanent workers did not bring in the 'profit' because they



did not work directly in taking money from customers.

Casuals spoke of doing “permanents’ jobs” when they stayed late into the evening to tend to customers while permanent workers left. They said that permanents ordered them to do hated tasks like back-shopping, returning un-purchased items to their shelves. Indeed, one phrase that I heard more than once was that “casuals are permanent workers’ slaves”. Defining themselves as those employees who physically laboured and who generated profit was to confirm their claim that they were the true “workers”.

Casual workers claimed this collective identity in their demands. They distanced themselves from favouritism that might single some casuals out for reward against others. For instance, while longer hours was their most immediate demand, casuals rejected solutions that allowed some of them to work

longer than others. They phrased demands for longer hours in terms of equity: “no one must get five days, everyone must be given three days”. When casual workers sought uniformity against favouritism, they claimed the high ground of historical black union strategy. They also did so to counter what they saw as permanent workers’ reassertion of patronage within the stores.

Casual workers affirmed a collective worker identity defined by their difference from permanent workers. By contrast, contract merchandisers expressed a collective identity based on their occupational skill and in doing so, they also emphasised their difference from permanent, full-time workers.

PERMANENTS AND CONTRACT MERCHANDISERS

While permanent workers were virtually completely silent about the position of contract merchandisers,

contract workers’ defined their status in relation to permanent workers. Merchandisers argued that permanents discounted their competence, and they argued for better treatment because of their real skill compared to permanent workers: “The permanent staff don’t regard the merchandisers as people, they are just regarded as filling the shelf, you are not using your reasoning capacity”. Contract merchandisers felt that permanents gave them a status of manual labourers without ‘reasoning capacity’.

In their experiences, permanents reinforced exclusion. For instance, merchandisers said that permanent workers reinforced managerial views of them as criminal black men. When permanents went on break, they locked equipment that merchandisers used away from them. Speaking of the permanent workers as ‘the bosses’, one contract worker said that the merchandisers had to wait for them



to return from lunch and unlock the trolleys before they could continue their work.

Merchandisers argued that despite their outsider status, they worked harder than retail staff. Like casual workers, they claimed that permanent workers were lazy, relying on their privileged position with managers. Unlike casual workers, merchandisers also criticised the quality of permanents' work: "In the morning... when I get there, I find that they've done too many mistakes with the stock I am supposed to pack. So when I raise it with management, it's like I am an *impimpi*".

Merchandisers' stories portrayed themselves as questioning racial solidarity between all black workers against management. They had not been able to gain much support from unionised permanent workers when they protested around grievances pertaining to contract workers. Instead they focused their organisational energies around forming store-level committees of contract workers. These committees worked at establishing fair procedures with branch level

managers. Thus they were more interested in management recognising their ideas and skills in product knowledge and supply management than in identifying as black workers with permanents, whose 'mistakes' could affect their job security.

ORGANISING POSSIBILITIES

Retail work has become deskilled and devalued. High unemployment and company restructuring means that all workers in these shops have experienced declining power within the workplace and labour market. Employers centre on complying technically at the level of bare minimum conditions with employee rights. For instance, since these interviews were conducted, the company contracted out the casual employees to a labour broker, and the workers felt the division with full-time staff even more sharply. This fragmentation has deepened, but the terms of division seem to have remained the same.

Permanent workers and shop stewards experienced the erosion of the power of their union to fight

for improvements of conditions of employment. Even with new rights of association constructed under South Africa's democracy, permanent, full-time workers felt unable in practice to claim these abstract rights. They focused on maintaining informal relations with branch level managers, but were unable to contest their declining social wage. When they acted to reassert respect within work relations, they drew distinctions between themselves and casual workers as subordinates.

Casual workers' marginalisation became the basis of their collective 'worker' identity, and led to claims for recognition as 'employees' while at the same time accepting the necessity for casualisation. Their demands drew distinctions between themselves and privileged permanent workers.

Contract workers also found it increasingly difficult to contest their conditions of employment. They realised that their fragmentation as employees of many different labour brokers made it difficult to organise within a trade union. They also faced the reality of

anti-union sentiment of their direct employers in a context where legal protections would be difficult to enforce and fear of dismissal was great. Instead, they organised collectively around their occupational skill with their 'clients', the retailers, which required them to mark their difference from the other workers.

The power of capitalism partly rests in its ongoing ability to segment workforces. Yet, new divisions also always produce the possibility for new solidarity. Research with these workers for over ten years shows the limited bargaining power of the workforce and their trade unions to do more than maintain minima levels.

In the past year, Saccawu has dedicated new energy to organising casual workers in the sector. However its focus on organising and representing casuals as a separate category within the union has carried the unintended consequence of reproducing divisions amongst workers. At the same time, contract workers remain excluded from the core focus of the union. Other unions, such as Giwusa, also seem to be focusing their organisational energies on providing representation for casual workers, but again, in their status as a secondary category.

A SHIFT IN ORGANISING FOCUS IS NEEDED

Firstly, organising to protect different categories of employees' interests alone will serve to reproduce divisions of labour where employers use these differences for control. Rather, the single most important commonality amongst retail workers was that all workers felt their broader

economic vulnerability.

All workers were household providers – responsible mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. All worried about their ability to continue to pay for their children's education, to pay for the electricity and water, to hold onto their grandmother's house. As capital and the state spend less on the social wage, workers and their extended families and social networks come to bear more of these costs. Yet these common experiences of 'social reproduction' were not brought into shop floor organising. They were instead marginalised as the plight of casuals only, or individualised into private worries.

Experiences of workers in other places repeatedly shows the importance of broader political campaigns which express workers' rights in terms of social justice issues, for instance through living wage campaigns. Retail, a low wage, low skill workforce, is ideal for linking wages to the common experience across all categories of employment to the declining ability to provide.

Secondly, organising within the boundaries of the employer will limit the bargaining power of retail workers. Contracting pushes some workers out of the employment relationship, and workers' power has begun to rest more and more on their collective capacity to disrupt the supply chain rather than to just halt service work.

A geographic focus for organising might also counter the localised targeting of branch level relations. This would mean organising a broad regional labour market of retail workers, rather than a particular store. This model comes from Justice For Janitors in



the US. Such a strategy would ultimately not only build the political power of these workers regionally, but could also strengthen their bargaining power as supply chain workers have become more critical to retailer profits.

Ultimately, as Marx understood, divisions of labour produce possibilities for new solidarities. Recognising workers' identifications in these processes becomes important in helping to forge new models.

Bridget Kenny is a lecturer in the Sociology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. This article is based on her PhD research conducted between 1998 and 2001. The research included 242 interviews, 24 focus groups, and 59 life histories with retail workers. Follow-up research with workers from the same stores began in 2005 and is ongoing.