

Review

Beyond the Apartheid Workplace Studies in Transition

Edward Webster and Karl von Holdt (Eds)

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Reviewed by Roger Southall

AT WORK

In the late 1970s, when I lectured in Politics at the National University of Lesotho, I was in charge of 'General Studies Lectures', which attracted audiences of students and staff from all disciplines. The lecture series was akin to blood sports, as in post-Soweto years, the United States Agency for International Development, a provider of guest lecturers, sent conservative, American academics who preached peaceful change in South Africa. They simply became game to be torn apart by student radicals interested in nothing except the armed struggle.

When I arrived in Lesotho from Britain in 1975, I volunteered to teach South African studies although my ignorance was profound. But by following the golden rule, 'if you want to learn about something, teach it!' I soon became passably knowledgeable about the dramatic developments taking place in the country next door. This led me to invite speakers from South Africa, mainly from the universities, a controversial move during the years of the academic boycott.

One of the earliest of my South African visitors was Eddie Webster,

whose work I was familiar with through reading the *Labour Bulletin*, which had established itself as the authoritative source of information and analysis on the emergent democratic trade union movement. The student audience turned up in militant hunting mode. But the kill never happened, for Eddie soon had the audience eating out of his hand. He received a rapturous reception, and converted my students into disciples as he stayed on to lecture in classes.

I tell this tale because credit should be given where it is due. Webster has been central to the evolution of labour studies in South Africa over the last three decades, and the present book, *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*, is a culmination of that important history.

Alongside his engagement as a founding editor of the *Labour Bulletin*, Eddie became the guiding spirit of the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand, which, with due respect to fine work done at other universities, established itself as the key academic centre studying labour and the labour movement and is

renowned for working closely with unions. It is no accident that the other editor of this very fine collection, Karl von Holdt, earned his doctorate from SWOP, as well as having put in a long and distinguished stint as editor of the *Bulletin*. It is not surprising, therefore, that this book is the product of collaboration between the editors and other well established authors who have long histories of involvement with the union movement and the *Bulletin*, and similarly committed younger authors, some of whom are SWOP products.

Three decades ago Webster and his ilk were talking about the democratic trade unions and their struggles against apartheid repression. Today, they are writing less about unions and more about work. Hence Webster and Von Holdt inform us that the focus of this study is upon the changing nature of the workplace in South Africa, and how this relates to wider society. The key question which they pose is: "whether a new post-apartheid work order is emerging in South Africa, and the extent to which it is characterised by order or disorder."

Webster and Von Holdt argue



that the work order in South Africa is being restructured under the complex impact of a “triple transition” with political, economic and social dimensions. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy has created democratic and social rights for workers, unions and citizens. The transition from a domestically oriented economy to a more globally integrated one has been accompanied by corporate and workplace restructuring. And the social transition away from apartheid has impelled profound processes of redistribution of power and access to resources, occupations and skills.

All these transitions are contested, rendering the workplace order different from that found in advanced industrial countries. For while South Africa is moving away from a racially structured workplace, it is transiting to one where analysis has to go beyond the formal workplace to informal and subsistence work, “from earning a living” in regular paid employment “to making a living” by creating one’s own income-generating or subsistence activities. The student of labour in South

Africa must now, therefore, be as prepared to engage in research in communities and households as much as in formal workplaces. In an era of mass unemployment, work is moving out of the factories onto the streets.

It is from this perspective that the editors have grouped together 17 case studies of the changing workplace order in South Africa, ranging from globally integrated companies such as BMW to informal sector street hawkers and rural production cooperatives. The studies are grouped into six themes, and their variety is impressive.

Studies on steelworks (Von Holdt), the engineering industry (Andries Bezuidenhout), and wine industry (Joachim Ewart and Andries du Toit) query the extent to which the racial restructuring of the formal workplace is being replaced by skills training and employment equity. The answer is an ambiguous one. Formal discrimination has gone, but managerial commitment to transformation is often lacking, while the contemporary wine industry in the Western Cape is characterised by a deepening divide

between coloureds (insiders) and Africans (outsiders), with the great losers being casual workers who have been cast aside by the state and unions alike.

A key demand of the democratic trade union movement is for a more democratic workplace, and this guides the studies under the second theme, which deal with employee participation and productivity.

Historically, unions have been divided about whether employee participation is a management strategy to get workers to work harder, or whether it is a step towards worker control. The four studies presented here demonstrate that there is no easy answer to this question. In the fish-processing industry (Johan Maree and Shane Godfrey), Sea Harvest today arguably constitutes the fullest case of co-determination in South Africa, whereas its rival, I&J, practices a much more authoritarian managerial style which, tied to black equity ownership, is more profitable.

At the BMW car works (David Masondo), management has used various forms of employee involvement to increase the intensity of work on the assembly

line. In a study of underground gold mining, Timothy Sizwe Phakathi shows how workers are being trained for a new workplace, but when they go underground they find that very little has changed, and remain heavily dependent upon worker teamwork in the face of shortages of materials and the breakdown of machinery. And in the plastics industry (David Dickinson), finds perspectives on workplace change varying between management who is concerned with profitability, managing directors who are concerned to relate profitability to national economic goals, and workers who are concerned with improving their conditions and welfare.

The third theme deals with work in the service sector, whose expansion is a reflection of a global shift away from mass production to an information economy where knowledge and knowledge workers are a key source of productivity. A minority of these workers are highly skilled, involved in the new computer, telecommunications and biotechnology industries. However, the overwhelming majority are involved in routine work in the service sector, and it is the latter which Bridget Kenny (food retailing), Darlene Miller (the South African Shoprite chain in Zambia), and Rahmat Omar (growing call centres) concentrate.

While Miller examines the extent and implications of the export of South African work practices to the wider Southern African region, Kenny and Omar highlight how the introduction of customers complicates the relationship between employers and employees and involves them in 'emotional labour'. This requires workers to

display appropriate attitudes and feelings to customers as part of the production process, with management monitoring them closely to ensure they do so.

A further feature of the changing workplace under advanced capitalism is that of 'labour flexibility'. Central to this is the growing trend towards the casualisation of work, the fourth theme of this book.

In post-apartheid South Africa, we are seeing a shift from the workplace in which employees are employed full time and indefinitely to one in which employers seek to reduce costs and risks by 'outsourcing' work, usually via labour-brokers who enter commercial relationships with firms to supply them with casual labour (Jan Theron). Thus in the footwear industry (Sarah Mosoetsa), trade liberalisation has seen widespread retrenchments and the outsourcing of work to middlemen who set up sweatshops where mainly women workers work in bad conditions for long hours at low wages.

A similar story is told by Christin van der Westhuizen with regard to the clothing industry, where the outsourcing of work enables employers to shift costs such as workspace, equipment, lighting and heating on to the employee. She also tells the heartening tale of how the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union is enjoying some success in organising casual workers and aims to build bargaining relationships to convince 'work providers' to pay minimum rates. Yet as this section's mini-editorial argues, the choice for the majority of casual workers in the context of informalisation of work is whether to have a poor job

or no job at all. Informalisation thus represents a massive challenge to unions.

The fifth theme asks whether self-employed workers are "the working poor or potential entrepreneurs". The key characteristic of informal work is that it is unregulated, income is low and irregular, and those who engage in it are uneducated and drawn from marginal elements in society. This theme therefore explores "the creative livelihood strategies" that unemployed and impoverished people develop to survive.

Informal trading has mushroomed since the collapse of apartheid restrictions against it in the 1980s, and it is hailed by some as the growth of popular capitalism. But Eddie Webster, who examines street vendors and homeworkers in Durban, and Kate Philip, who looks at how rural development projects established under the NUM's Mineworkers Development Agency have fared, both take considerably less romantic views. They see the growth of the informal economy as associated with a widespread increase in poverty. Webster's informants, who engage with Durban Metro for space and wholesalers for better prices, see themselves as workers, yet their attempts at self-organisation require a closer relationship with organised labour. Philip, who sees her rural self-employed as overwhelmingly concerned with the survival of their businesses in unpromising markets, sees rural enterprises as no alternative. A bold strategy of intervention by the state is necessary if rural poverty is to be tackled.

The final and sixth theme concerns itself with negotiating

workplace change in the public sector, and is expressed via two studies which examine the vexed question of privatisation and public service management. The stress upon privatisation was one of the key ideological impulses driving neo-liberal market economics. It was accompanied by an emphasis upon the 'new managerialism' which draws upon private sector business practices of increased management autonomy, decentralised management, performance-based pay systems, and 'cost-centring' to address problems in the public sector.

Both have been opposed by trade unions. Privatisation is seen as an attack upon the welfare state, for false economies, and for reducing formal sector employment. The new managerialism is opposed for destroying the ethos of public service. Yet both have made their appearance in post-1994 South Africa, albeit with mixed results.

Karl von Holdt's study of Spoornet describes how the government came to adopt a privatisation strategy for the freight rail company, only for the trade unions to successfully oppose this by demonstrating how its proposals would create an unsustainable rail business and undermine socio-economic development. At Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital (Von Holdt and Bethuel Maserumule), however, adoption of some aspects of the new managerialism by a traditional public service bureaucracy, coupled with a reduction in state funding and the apartheid legacy, have led to an alarming level of institutional decline.

Taken overall, the case studies reveal a growing differentiation within the world of work,



producing what the editors in their introduction refer to as three major zones. First, there are the core, formal sector workers in more or less stable employment, with access to regular wages, and democratic worker and union rights. Second, there is a zone of casualised and externalised work, where non-core workers are compelled into less stable employment. Third, at the periphery, people have no choice but to 'make a living' through informal sector activities which span petty accumulation, subsistence activities and full unemployment. These three zones are "asymmetrically interdependent, with the third zone increasing marginalised under the impact of marketisation".

Corporate restructuring, the reorganisation of work, and the differentiation of work along these lines is creating new lines of social inclusion and exclusion in post-apartheid South Africa - "a process which threatens to generate a crisis of social reproduction".

In the first zone, dominant trends of managerial authoritarianism breed worker dissatisfaction, alienation and contestation. In the second zone, workers are subject to job insecurity, low wages and alienation, have little access to rights, and unions appear to have little capacity to defend them. In the third zone, more and more people are being pushed to the

edge of poverty, with a corresponding impact on household sustainability.

This is a gloomy picture which calls for a "counter-movement" for the protection of society. The editors conclude that if unions are to be part of this counter-movement, they must rise to the challenge posed by the differentiation and polarisation of work. They must build alliances with new social movements to thrust the emergent social crisis into the public arena in order to influence and restructure state policy.

This collection is more than just another book. It constitutes a benchmark study, whose significance extends far beyond South Africa. It illustrates many trends in the world of work, largely for the worse, for the mass of people in developing countries in our globalised world. And it is a massive tribute to the longevity, depth and quality of work in this country on the sociology of work and labour. Webster and Von Holdt, both veterans of the *Bulletin* and activist-scholars, are to be congratulated along with their authors for providing a firm foundation for all future work in the field.

Roger Southall is a researcher employed by the Human Sciences Research Council.