

# Workplaces of the future a challenge for labour

*A recently completed study of workplaces in four sectors of the economy reveals how they have changed since apartheid. The **Labour Bulletin** reports on a presentation made by **Professor Eddie Webster and Rahmat Omar** who analyse these changes and what they mean for unions and workers.*

**T**he research examines changes in South African workplaces in the context of the transition from apartheid. Key features of the 'apartheid workplace regime' included a racial division of labour, discrimination in wages, conditions of work, training, facilities, and racial despotism in the workplace.

In many workplaces, workers' rights to collective bargaining, grievance procedures, some degree of employment security and strategies to overcome the 'apartheid wage gap' have been introduced.

## **Restructuring not always working**

The research covers white goods, mining, call centres and footwear. The main findings are that restructuring is not always working as intended. There is a gap between rhetoric and practice and there are disturbing continuities with apartheid practices. Furthermore,

the impact of new legislation is limited in the context of increasing casualisation and informalisation of work.

Formal sector employment has dropped in some of the traditional sectors while new jobs have been created in new workplaces such as call centres. However, it is unclear to what extent these are new jobs or a reorganisation of previously existing ones.

The employment relationship is changing with a shift towards more precarious forms of work. There has been an increase in casualisation while migrant labour persists in mining. The most significant trend is the dramatic increase in the informalisation of work.

New employment and career opportunities were identified especially as a result of legislation such as the Employment Equity Act.

However, there is evidence that the racial hierarchy persists at the higher level.

In terms of collective bargaining and employment contracts, there is a drive on the part of employers to move to plant level bargaining. At the same time, in line with international trends, there is a move towards individual contracts. However multi-level bargaining is strongly embedded in South African industrial relations and continues.

## **Union responses**

Union responses vary. Relationships with employers continue to be adversarial, especially at plant level. However, there is some evidence of greater cooperation in the workplace as employers and workers recognise that it is in the interests of all to ensure the sustainability of the company. This was evident in the

white goods sector where the employer threatened to close down the company. In an attempt to retain jobs the union made significant concessions, but despite this, the company relocated outside South Africa.

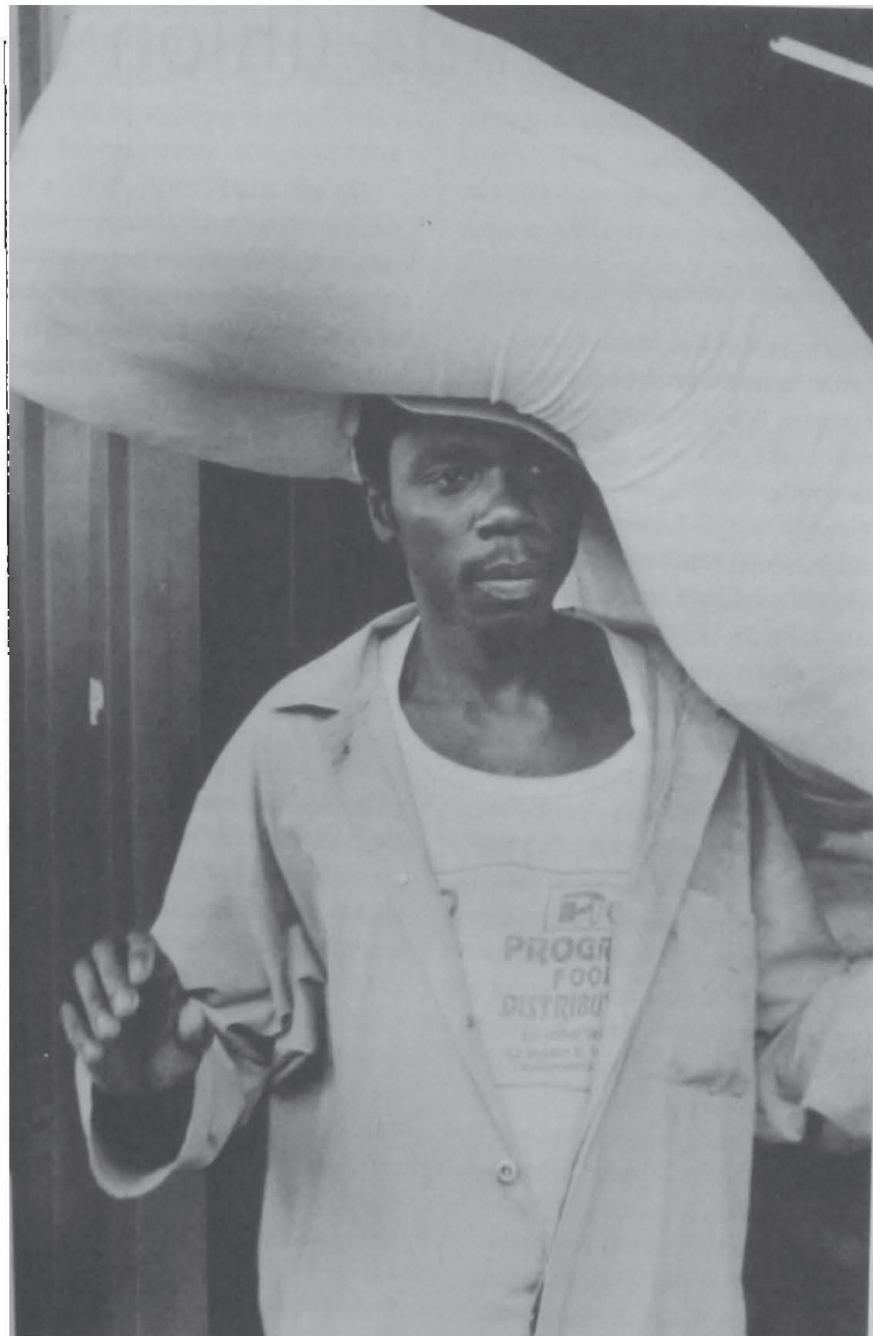
Across the case studies, there is evidence of unions intervening proactively at national level to shape industrial policy through sector summits. However, at plant level, unions seem to lack capacity to engage strategically with the new human resource practices that are emerging, such as individualisation of contracts, outsourcing and casualisation.

The case study of informalisation in the footwear industry in Pietermaritzburg highlights the issue of the state's capacity to enforce its own legislation. In this case workers have little protection even though progressive labour laws are in place.

#### Conclusion

The political transition has severed the link between the state and racial despotism in the workplace. Traditional apartheid workplace regimes no longer exist in their earlier form. But there is not a simple rupture to a new workplace; rather there are hybrid combinations emerging, in which new practices are evident as well as continuities with the past. What is clear, they conclude, is that workplace change cannot be understood in isolation from the broader transition taking place in South Africa.

*The research was presented by Webster and Omar at a SWOP workshop. Copies of the research report titled 'Work restructuring in post-apartheid South Africa' are available from the SWOP office, telephone (011) 717-4460*



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