

The Struggle for Trade Union Democracy

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The most immediate question arising from the struggle of Cape garment workers is the question of, and struggle for trade union democracy. The article by Martin Nicol in SALB 10.2 on the "Cape Underwear Strike", fails to draw the lessons from the strike and to link it to this task.

In initiating the debate on the struggle for trade union democracy, this reply will reject the implicit argument that garment workers are passive actors, who "lack militancy" and the will to struggle. This view is implicit in the arguments of Nicol, Bloch and particularly Shefer. (1) They all admit to simmering discontent in the industry, but cannot see how this can crystallise in militant worker action.

This reply will focus particularly on the CLOWU's strategy and struggles of garment workers. It is necessary to consider the nature of the industry and how this engenders class struggles within the labour process. The strategic conception of this argument is situated in the context of struggling to democratise the Garment Workers Union

The nature of the industry

There are more than 60,000 workers employed in over 400 factories. (2) The clothing industry is still highly competitive. The extent of monopolisation is offset by the labour intensive nature of the production process. The industry is characterised by a host of small and medium sized establishments. The following table will illustrate the atomised nature of the labour force. The production process, organised on the basis of targets and piece rates varies in all companies and is strewn with conflict. This conflict is active but unco-ordinated and atomised like the labour force. The nature of the industry is an important factor in understanding the struggle of garment workers.

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Concentration of Industry

Size of establishments	No of establishments (Total 1220)	No of workers (Total 112,744)
1-99	937	22,067
100-499	249	56,221
500 +	34	34,456

Per Capita Capital Investment in Selected Industries (Cape Town)

Clothing	R 436,50
Textiles	R2,155,00
Wood	R1,968,00
Total manufacturing	R2,385,00

Average Wages in Garment Industry according to size of Establishment

1-99	R33,00 per week
100-499	R29,00 per week
500+	R28,00 per week

Source: Statistical Yearbook 1982, figures based on the 1976 census.

The fierce competition for labour and markets amongst the smaller companies has lead to an increase in the average wage of workers employed by smaller companies. Their rate of profitability will decline further with the tendency by medium and large establishments to acquire new technology thereby increasing productivity.

The atomised nature of the labour force, combined with different conditions of work and intensities of exploitation creates a heterogeneous mass of workers referred to generally as the "rank-and-file" of the GWU.

"Lack of militancy"?

Class struggles in the garment industry generally tend to

focus on the labour process. This is caused by the nature of the industry and the absence of a militant position by the GWU. Martin Nicol argues: "The industry has a reputation for industrial peace second to none." (3) This is a repetition of Joanne Bloch's assertion that there is a "...ment workers". (4) This argument is continued by Shefer "...this lack of militancy has prevailed up until last year!" (with the emergence of CLOWU). (5)

These arguments lack the knowledge of material conditions within the industry and particularly of its labour process. The relationship within the garment industry between workers and union leadership cannot be explained by a "lack of militancy" or controls imposed by the "hierachical" and "partriarchal" structures of the family reproduced in the workplace. (6)

The ability of the Garment Workers Union to exercise political control over its membership rests on the nature of the industry, as Joanne Bloch correctly assesses:

The fact that most clothing factories are small and isolated and that even in the larger factories the nature of the labour process is such that workers are split up into autonomous groups,...militates against industry-wide worker contact and solidarity. (7)

The bureaucracy of the GWU rests on the division and isolation of garment workers, from each other. The inability of garment workers to mount an industry-wide strike against low wages and intense exploitation does not mean that class conflict and class struggle is absent from this industry. The objective weakness of garment workers is clear.

The "lack of militancy" arguments lack a class analysis of the labour process. A romanticised view would see the struggles of workers waged in the labour process as indicative of a high degree of class consciousness. These struggles are the result of intense exploitation and atomisation of the labour force - a response to the weakness of organising united action against capital.

Struggles in the labour process

The labour process in the garment factories can be summarised by the Radio Good Hope slogan "Push up production". The intensification of exploitation is at the heart of struggles for control over the labour process. The workers are divided into "lines" of 30 workers with a supervisor. In the smaller factories one or two lines can compete to "put out" and "push-up" targets. In the larger establishment this process is intensified. Supervisors do not perform a productive function they control and discipline workers to ensure production targets are met.

Larger factories employ two supervisors per line a production supervisor and a quality supervisor. These functions for obvious reasons cannot be combined. This structure of the labour process is engendered by class struggles within it:

This struggle is not primarily about the distribution of income, most fundamentally it is about the control of the labour process. If workers did not resist, if they were...happy and obedient, capitalists would not need the enormous and complex apparatus...to ensure exploitation. (8)

The production targets, coupled with "incentive bonus schemes", ie. piece rates, are sites of intense struggles within the factories. Worker responses and action within the labour process differ. Methods of struggle employed by workers include absenteeism, organised go-slows, go-slows to maintain low targets, demonstration strikes, sabotage etc. It emerges that the Cape Underwear strike resulted from management's constant attempts to increase levels of exploitation. A Cape Underwear striker Mrs Daniels said in an interview:

The worst thing about working at Cape is the high targets we have to reach. Just before the strike I was producing 30 garments an hour. My bonus was then R7,00. Targets are increased all the time, I used to get home feeling more and more tired every day. But all the time targets were increasing bonuses were not.

Because wages were too low:

Individual workers did approach management about decreasing bonuses but nothing happened. We then decided that we had had enough and we got together and downed tools. (9)

Had CLOWU not existed it is doubtful whether this initial demonstration strike would have gained publicity to be marked out as the first example of "emerging militancy" by garment workers or an end to "industrial peace".

At another factory in the Cape, a worker interviewed for biographical details said about the production process:

In January they tried to lower the cost of a unit to five cents; we get ten cents at the moment. They also tried to increase the target from 25 to 30 per hour. We sometimes make R30 bonuses per week. The boss saves on overtime pay and transport allowances if we work for bonuses. We had to do something. After tea-time we all refused to go upstairs. We spoke to the boss. He said no to our demands.

We decided to work to target nothing more. We made less than the target. We weren't striking, we were working, but holding up production. He couldn't fire us. After two days he threatened to call the union.

We wouldn't budge. The next day he gave in. (10)

Struggles within the labour process cannot be rigidly divided into those over wages, or to gain control over production. Later in the same year the same workers had another stoppage because of the manager's "filthy language". The garment workers participating in the "go-slows" illustrates the extent to which they are relied on to produce. The functions of the supervisor are extraneous to production but necessary to police workers and intensify exploitation.

It is necessary to develop these shop-floor struggles into an industry-wide offensive against capital and the union bureaucracy. The necessity for democratising the garment workers union remains the most important task facing workers in the Western Cape.

The fight-back: its importance

In themselves struggles within the labour process are limited, their real significance is the fact that the workers are prepared to struggle, but lack co-ordination and industry-wide organisation. To show the limitations and importance of factory floor struggles we will quote from an article "The piece rate: class struggle on the shop floor", where Nina Shapiro-Perl argues:

The greatest importance of the fightback over piece rates probably lies in the summing up of the struggle itself, that has yet to be done. The fightback that workers wage daily over piece work is not recognised as the struggle against management that it is. With the virtual absence...of union drives in the...shops, management prerogatives go largely unchallenged. The fightback appears as an individual war to earn a fair wage or as an unsystematic group strategy...Summing up the struggle can educate the less conscious participants to their existing power as workers, not to mention their potential power. (11)

The struggle on the shopfloor explodes the myth that the garment workers "lack militancy". The "summing-up" of class struggles on the factory floor to challenge capital and to democratise the Garment Workers Union brings the strategy of CLOWU to the fore. The strike by Cape Underwear workers backed by CLOWU contains a number of lessons for this task. Except for Joanne Bloch's analysis of the Action Committee, strategies to bring garment workers into the independent union movement as an organised class force have not been debated or explored.

The GWU, CLOWU and the struggle for democracy

Within a decade we have witnessed two attempts to organise garment workers into a democratic force, the first was the attempt by the Action Committee to democratise the existing Garment Workers Union. Bloch's study is commendable for its analysis. The second attempt is the "CLOWU...a brand new union for clothing workers in Cape Town". (12) These attempts provide us with the parameters for analysis

ing the GWU. This union is nearly sixty years old. It has a membership of 60,000 workers contributing a membership fee of 65 cents per week; giving it a monthly income of R160,000. The accumulated funds of the union allows it to pay organisers extravagant salaries, it owns Industria House (union offices) valued at R3 million, while details of other investments are unknown. It prints a weekly newsletter distributed free amongst 60,000 workers, printed on its own press. (13)

At an AGM attended by the author in 1981 about 200 workers were present. Clearly there is little active enthusiasm amongst workers for the trade union. The union and Industrial Council provides workers with a set of "benefits". As a result most workers are not prepared to lose these "benefits" by forming another trade union. These benefits include sick benefits, housing loans, sick pay, bursary funds, distress funds etc. The sick benefit fund for instance allows a garment worker to see any doctor on its panel free of charge. This also includes the cost of medicines. Workers pay for this benefit but clearly this is something no worker would want to lose considering the costs of health care. Sick pay now equals about 65% of a workers wages. (14) Clearly these benefits (funeral, retirement funds, social and legal aid) are exploited for control by the bureaucracy.

The corporatist nature of the Garment Workers Union has allowed it to permeate the industry with an ideology of benefits and economism. Yet despite direct opposition of the union and the bosses to stay-aways, the rank and file garment workers provided the backbone for these struggles in 1976 and 1980. During periods of heightened political struggle the garment workers have also struck for wage increases. In 1980, directly linking increases in bus fares to wages, stoppages occurred:

Several firms in the garment industry have experienced short work stoppages since the recent increase in bus fares.

A 10% increase in wages was negotiated after a stoppage at Rex Trueform last week, but dissatisfaction among garment workers still appears to be widespread.

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About 200 workers at the Tej Knitwear factory... stopped work...demanding an increase. (15)

The stay-away from work on 16 and 17 June was supported almost unanimously by garment workers: "Employers said absenteeism was worse among women who make up a large proportion of the labour force." (16) The Cape Times reported: "Production came to a standstill in the 56,000 worker clothing industry." (17)

Amongst garment workers there exists virtually no tradition of democratic organisation. Democratic processes are absent from their trade unions, communities, central government and even the family serves as an instrument of control and domination. In the workplace, class struggles tend to be directed at the labour process, and the high rate of labour turnover and absenteeism also suggests subjective and individual responses to exploitation.

In 1981 the Argus reported about the garment industry: "Recruitment is barely keeping ahead of labour turnover which runs at 50 % a year...!" (18) The Director of Kangasling a factory employing 49 workers said:

I spent about R400 advertising for machinists. In an effort to attract and keep staff we introduced a R10 attendance bonus...

She complains:

I always try to pay above average wages, and I allow my workers to be...15 minutes late each week. But absenteeism is high (this is a common problem)... (19)

The struggle by capital against labour turnover committed the corporatist GWU to police what they call "desertion". GWU warns workers:

As from 13th December a worker who intends to leave her job MUST give notice on the prescribed form.

Desertion causes the factory problems. And it causes problems for you! At the worst you will be at risk of prosecution. (20)

The disjuncture between shop-floor militancy, participa-

tion in political strikes, and the apparent inability to challenge the union bureaucracy must be placed in the context of the atomised nature of the labour force militating "against industry-wide worker solidarity", and the absence of a democratic tradition in the Western Cape amongst the majority of unionised workers, coupled with the ideological control mechanism of "benefits". This allows effective division and policing of the labour force by union bureaucrats.

CLOWU: "A brand new union" and the Cape Underwear strike.

Martin Nichol has written elsewhere:

CLOWU has tried to take the Garment Workers Union by storm. In its brief nine months existence, it has issued over 125,000 pamphlets and newsletters attacking the GWU-WP and agitating on wage, price, housing and transport issues. (21)

CLOWU's strategy is summed up by Virginia Engel in SALB: CLOWU went on a much broader campaign trying to conscientise workers more generally...rather than concentrating on the problems of workers in a particular factory, slowly making small victories in order to build up confidence of people in themselves to be together in a democratic union. We have not used much outside support (NUTW)... We think that it is important to build up the worker leadership... The workers themselves must have the confidence and feeling that it is their organisation and that they are in control of it. (22)

CLOWU's lack of grassroots organisation, disciplined and concrete work on day-to-day issues and the building up of a strong membership amongst workers was evident in the Cape Underwear strike and the Rex Trueform stoppage. In the Cape Underwear strike only 157 out of more than 600 workers struck "and became members of CLOWU on joining the strike". (23) At Rex Trueform the same high-profile strategy of handing out pamphlets and encouraging strike action without organisation is apparent. Grassroots reports:

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On Tuesday, April 24, the workers of the fourth and sixth floor went on strike. In the afternoon they went to CLOWU for help. CLOWU distributed a pamphlet informing other Rex Trueform workers of the demand.

On Wednesday morning all the workers came out on strike ...Floor managers told us different stories...We didn't know what was going on in the other sections so some of us went back to work. (24)

The tactic of CLOWU relies on worker discontent and the absence of organisation illustrates its youth as a "brand new union". There is a clear-cut case for opposing this as a strategy to organise garment workers.

The effects of CLOWU's stormy approach has allowed the GWU to consolidate and activate its bureaucratic apparatus. (25) The flaw in CLOWU's strategy is clear. It reduces the problems of ideological influence, division of workers, political control to an organisational experiment. Generally what has emerged is that "brand new" unionism will not attract the majority of workers.

Lessons of the Cape Underwear workers strike

Nicol argues: "the strikers never had to confront directly the objective weakness of their situation." Yet he fails to analyse the weakness and lessons of this strike. CLOWU he says: "...hoped the demand [R10 increase] would ignite the industry." CLOWU's wish for an industry-wide conflagration is not doubted - but represents a clear lack of understanding of the industry and worker organisation.

The Cape Underwear strikers were not supported by other workers in joint action against the bosses. The workers realised their objective weakness. With no organisation their resistance would crumble. CLOWU had not sunk organisational roots amongst garment workers and therefore the demand in itself could not cause an industry-wide strike.

The unemployment levels in Cape Town are increasing and many workers realised that the clothing industry faces

stiff competition from imported products. The readiness of the state to side with the employers and the union bureaucracy clearly remained at the back of workers minds particularly with the absence of organisation amongst workers. CLOWU clearly relied on publicity and "prominent figures" like "Dr Boesak, Rev Lockett, Professor Wilson, Dr Adonis, Sheikh Najaar" to demand a "speedy solution" to the strike from the Cape Underwear management. They also pressed the "liberal" Woolworths management: "Dr Allan Boesak, patron of the UDF, telephoned the management and made... clear to them...if the employers still refused to sign, CLOWU would call for boycott action against them". (26)

Unlike the strikes by NFAWU in the motor industry, the Dunlop strike and the half-hour work stoppage for Neil Aggett which showed the penetration of organisation amongst workers on the shop-floor, CLOWU remains isolated from the majority of garment workers. The task to democratise the Garment Workers Union remains a prerequisite for united industry-wide worker action.

The lessons learnt from the Cape Underwear strike show the need for patient careful organisation, spanning years of struggle to unite garment workers to democratise their union. The Cape Underwear workers were isolated, the reliance on "outsiders" to assist the workers emphasises the objective weakness of the strike and CLOWU. The diversity of the industry isolates and divides workers, the struggle directed at the labour process needs to be co-ordinated. This can only be done through mass worker intervention. The democratisation of the Garment Workers Union demands an appreciation of every aspect of their exploitation by leading workers in the garment industry.

This contribution hopes to start a fruitful debate about strategies to adopt vis-a-vis reformist trade unions who control all the workers in a particular industry. The strategy of "brand new unionism" isolates the leading militants in the industry from the majority of workers, this could have the effect of strengthening the bureaucracy. Clearly we are entering a period of heightened social tensions and increasing class struggles. CLOWU must abandon

its isolationism and its leading workers must work to democratise the GWU.

Footnotes:

1. M Nicol, "Strike at Cape Underwear" SALB 10.2, Oct-Nov 1984, and "RAWU and CLOWU: controversial twins", WIP 32, 1984; J Bloch, "The Action Committee versus the Garment Workers Union", in L Cooper and D Kaplan (eds), Selected research papers on aspects of organisation in the Western Cape, (Cape Town 1982), J Shefer "The hand that rocks the cradle, the hand that threads the needle...A study of Coloured women in the clothing industry in Cape Town" in G Bloch and D Kaplan (eds), S A Research Papers, (Cape Town 1984)
2. Clothesline 6.26, 13.7.84 and 6.36, 21.9.84
3. Nicol, "Strike at Cape Underwear"
4. Bloch, "The Action Committee", p72
5. Shefer, "The hand that rocks the cradle"
6. *ibid*
7. Bloch, "The Action Committee", p73
8. D Clawson, Bureaucracy and the labour process, (Monthly Review Press 1980), P24
9. Cape Herald 12.5.84
10. Interview with garment worker, November 1984
11. N Shapiro-Perl, "The piece rate: class struggle on the shop-floor", p298
12. Nicol, "Strike at Cape Underwear", p87
13. Clothesline 6.36, 21.9.84
14. *ibid* 6.31, 17.8.84
15. Argus 28.5.80
16. *ibid*, 16.6.80
17. Cape Times 21.6.80
18. Argus 28.6.81
19. Clothesline 6.28, 27.7.84
20. *ibid*, 6.45, 23.11.84
21. Nicol, "RAWU and CLOWU", p36
22. Interview with V Engel in SALB 10.2, Oct-Nov 1984
23. Nicol, "Strike at Cape Underwear", p98
24. Grassroots May 1984, "Worker Supplement"
25. See Nicol, "RAWU and CLOWU"
26. Grassroots May 1984; Nicol, "Strike at Cape Underwear",