Stevedoring and the General Workers Union
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Part I: THE STEVEDORING INDUSTRY AND THE GWU'S IMPACT

The General Workers Union's (GWU) control over the stevedoring industry is unique in South Africa. In no other industry is any union let alone an emergent union, so totally dominant as to have 90% of the workers as members. Furthermore, stevedoring is a highly strategically significant industry. It is this fact that has given this relatively small union much greater organisational significance in the South African labour movement than its membership size.

The character and policy of the GWU is another reason why this relatively small union is also well known in trade union circles. It has always been vocal and open about its policy. In previous years for example, the GWU was the main public exponent of a number of positions in the trade union movement: general unionism, non-registration, anti-industrial councils.

The process whereby the GWU came to exercise such dominance, and its effect on the stevedoring industry, is obviously very important for any historical understanding of the labour movement in this country. It is, however, also very important for understanding the changing character of the GWU, for the publically articulated policy of the union did not remain static throughout this process; it shifted and changed to a remarkable degree. The very process of becoming a national union via its stevedoring section had fundamental effects on the whole character and policy of the union. This article aims to explain the dynamics of that process.

Part I deals with the specific conditions of stevedoring and the GWU's impact on the industry. It lays the groundwork for understanding the importance that its success in organising a whole industry had on its policy. Part II [in a future edition] is concerned with the reciprocal impact that the process of organising the stevedores nationally had on the union's policy in regard to industrial unionism, alliances with other unions, registration and industrial councils. Clearly there were other important influences (internal and external, political and economic) that also shaped and influenced its policies and direction. Those, however, will be left for when a comprehensive history of the union is written.

Shipping lines and the stevedoring companies

Originally stevedoring companies were extensions of the main shipping lines, existing primarily to ensure that their liners were serviced as fast as possible from the moment they entered port, almost regardless of the price. For example, one of the largest lines, Union Castle, owned and operated a stevedoring company called African Associated.

The mail boats of the Union Castle line carried the Royal Mail between the United Kingdom and South Africa. In addition they also carried large quantities of breakbulk cargo; ie. cargo that was in boxes, bags, drums or other loose cargo like motor cars etc. Stevedoring labour was poured onto the Union Castle liners with little regard for the unit cost of labour. These liners had a separate gangway for the stevedoring labour to move up and down on because there were so many stevedores on board ship. The stevedoring companies operated on a simple "cost plus" basis with regard to labour charges: the cost of the number of men working on the ship, plus any other costs, plus profit. As far as the shipping companies were concerned their primary interest was to see that the liners were well serviced, rather than the relative cost of one stevedoring operation vis a vis another.

As far as the stevedoring companies were concerned, the decades when the great ocean liners plied their trade routes were the "golden days of stevedoring". Work was assured. The mail boats came into port with a fixed and frequent regularity. The stevedoring company knew it had at least 52 ships a year to service, on which would be found up to 8 gangs of stevedores working day in and day out.

There were a few independent stevedoring companies, not tied to the shipping lines, that tried to break into the market. On the whole they were unsuccessful and had to be content with mostly handling the bulk cargo - eg. maize, wheat, coal - that was not transported in bags but in bulk.

At the end of the 1960's some of the shipowners demanded a change from the cost plus rate structure (what was called the standard contract) to an "all in" rate structure. The stevedoring company would then quote a fixed rate per ton of cargo moved irrespective of the type of cargo and the number of stevedores utilised to move it. Each stevedoring company set its own all in rate, as opposed to the standard contract which was set jointly by all the stevedoring companies in joint agreement. This, therefore, facilitated competitive undercutting and enabled the independent stevedoring companies to compete on the basis of productivity - utilising less men on the ship to move the same amount of cargo or ensuring that the stevedores moved the cargo faster, thereby increasing their profit. On this basis the independents began to nibble away at the main stevedoring companies' hold on the market.

The independents were not a significant factor in the stevedoring industry before the 1970's. However, by 1985, through a process of mergers and takeovers, they had dramatically swept the boards and emerged as the dominant force in the industry.

The decline of the shipping companies

In the mid-seventies two processes occurred which fundamentally affected the stevedoring industry: (i) the decline of the great shipping companies with their passenger liners, and their exit from the stevedoring industry; (ii) the containerisation of a large amount of breakbulk tonnage. Their coincidence in the mid-seventies was to radically alter the character of stevedoring.

By the mid-seventies the great shipping companies of the previous decades were no more. The Union Castle line no longer carried the mail, and the great passenger liners no longer ploughed the waters linking the colonies with Europe. Even parcel mail was able to be carried by air. Flying time to Europe had been cut to 12-14 hours making it hardly worthwhile for passengers to take the equivalent number of days to travel to the same destination. Furthermore, decolonisation radically reduced the importance of the colonial expatriate. The direct colonial linkage became less important and the clause in the expatriate's contract granting 14 days sea travel time disappeared. In addition the replacement costs of the line mail boats had radically escalated. Higher safety standards and requirements as ships get older made it more economical to sell the great ships like the "Pendennis Castle" off as scrap, rather than expensively refurbish them. Manning costs were also becoming exorbitant for these types of passenger service. International shipping underwent a major shakeup. The great shipping companies either disappeared, merged or radically reduced their operations.

But if the great passenger liners were to be eliminated or radically reduced in the scope and frequency of their operations, then what was the point in maintaining expensive stevedoring operations in every major port? The shipping companies thus had a major incentive to discard their stevedoring operations.

Coincidental with this, and with even greater impact, was the advent of containerisation which radically altered the character of stevedoring. Larger and larger quantities of breakbulk cargo were transported by container rather than as breakbulk for stevedores to load and offload. This, plus mechanisation of the loading and unloading of cargo, radically reduced the need for the conventional stevedore. These new cargo handling techniques made it technologically impossible to refurbish the great ocean liners as primary transporters of sea borne cargo.

Understandably the shipping companies were the first to realise the long term effects of containerisation and changes in the labour process in stevedoring. Coupled with the decline of the great liners and the change in the shipping traffic, containerisation provided a powerful incentive for them to get out of stevedoring. They sold off their stevedoring interests to the independents, like South African Stevedoring Services Company (SASSCO), whose sole rationale was stevedoring and who had been attempting to break the stranglehold of the shipping companies over the industry. The result was a very rapid and major concentration/centralisation of capital in the stevedoring industry.

Centralisation of capital in stevedoring

The centralisation of capital in the South African stevedoring industry in the 1970's, as we have pointed out, has its cause in international developments. The very same process had occurred in the previous decade in Europe and the USA. The trends in the UK are particularly indicative of the process that was taking place internationally and that was to radically affect South Africa in the next decade. In 1962, there were 751 stevedoring companies operating in six major British ports. By 1981 the number of stevedore companies in these very same ports had been reduced to one in each port.

This process of monopolisation has also resulted in massive redundancy of the stevedoring work force internationally. Numbers have shrunk phenomenally as the effect of the mergers and containerisation has had its full impact. In 1970 there were 70,000 dockers in Great Britain, whereas by 1985 the numbers had shrunk to 20,000. Redundancy in the London docks dropped the workforce from 26,000 in 1965 to 5,600 in 1985. In Hamburg over the same period the number of dockers dropped from 17,265 to 7,666. There were 30,000 dockers in Australia in 1957. By 1975 their numbers had been more than halved to 13,650, and by 1985 they were more than halved again to 6,500.

Taking the same period for South Africa, a similar process occurred. The large number of stevedoring companies in each port in the 1960's was finally reduced to one company by late 1982. (Table 1) *Before 1970 there were around thirteen stevedoring companies in* existence. In 1980 there were only 3; SASSCO by far the biggest with 60% of stevedoring business, Rennies Stevedoring and Grindrod Cotts Stevedoring with the other 30-40% between them. In 1981, in order to try and counter SASSCO's dominance, Rennies and Grindrod Cotts merged. This desperate bid failed and in August 1982 the inevitable occured: there was only one stevedoring company in South Africa. This was South African Stevedores - on paper a merger with SASSCO controlling 50% - in practice in the operations of the new company, it was a SASSCO takeover. The process of monopolisation was seemingly completed in all South African ports.

In the mid 1970's there were around 8,000 stevedores in all the ports; by 1985 there were only around 2,500. In Port Elizabeth, in the mid-1970's, there were around 800 stevedore labourers below serang level (called induna in Natal), yet by 1978 this had been halved to 400, and by 1985 had dropped to only 155. East London had around 270 stevedores below serang in 1978, whereas in 1985 there were only 70. In Cape Town, in 1978, there were approximately 950-1,000 stevedores below serang level; in 1985 there were only 352.

Durban illustrates this process in a telescoped form over the past *two and a half years since the merger between SASSCO and Rennies* Grindrod Cotts in August 1982. At the time of the merger there were 2,241 stevedores (excluding drivers and other ancillary staff, but including indunas) in the new company. In January 1983 over 500 stevedores were retrenched as a direct result of the merger. In March 1983 Trident Marine which did lashing and container securing and was owned by Freight Services collapsed and the operation was taken over by SAS, with the 214 workers being incorporated into its workforce. Even with this retrenchment and the add-

Table 1: South African Stevedoring Companies, 1960-82

1960-1970	1976	1981	1982
Brock & Co	SASSCO	SASSCO Freight Services	SAS Ltd
Buffalo Bay Steve.			
Cape Town Steve.			
Table Bay Steve.			
AAAS	Aero Marine		
Tafelberg Steve.			
Consol. Steve.	Rennies Group	RGCS	
East London Steve.			
Southern Steve.			
Thomas Watson Steve.			
ACS	Grindrod Group		
Frank Robb & Goodwin			
Storm & Co	Insolvent		
Afship Steve.			Dissolved

Key:

AAAS	African Associated Agency Stevedores
SASSCO	South African Stevedores Servicing Company
RGCS	Rennies Grindrod Cotts Stevedores
ACS	African Coasters Stevedores.

itional lashing and securing work stevedores were still having to go on a compulsory stint of 6 to 9 weeks unpaid leave a year in lieu of short time. Finally, in March 1985 a further 557 stevedores were retrenched. The number of stevedores in the company had dropped to 1,248, and this included the additional ex-Trident Marine workers. In only two and a quarter years around 45% of the stevedoring labour force in Durban has been retrenched.

Containerisation and mechanical aids

A ship is essentially a self propelled mobile warehouse which unlike its counterpart ashore, is subject to continuous movement, stress, strain and extreme climatic conditions. Hence compactness and securing of the stowed cargo, correct ventilation, possible contamination and liability to spontaneous combustion are extremely important factors which must be considered when the cargo is loaded. The load has to be stowed in such a way that the vessel will stay trim under all conditions, that goods are in the right order for off-loading at ports of call, and that every square centimetre of space has been used effectively. The art of stowing a ship is therefore very important and that is essentially what the stevedore is - an artist in stowing a ship. The name is, in fact, of Spanish origin, from "Estivador", which in turn is traced back to the Latin verb "stipare", meaning "to press, to pack tightly".

Before the advent of containerisation, a stevedore was essentially required to be big and strong. This was in addition to having the acquired skill of stowing cargo. Without that skill his strength was useless. Loading and unloading liners was an extremely labour intensive operation. Most cargo was breakbulk - the bread and butter of stevedoring - utilising large number of stevedores to pick up bags, boxes etc. Cargo was essentially loose, ie. it was not pre-packed into large standard units, nor was it loaded onto pallets for forklift trucks to move around.

In the mid-1970's a number of processes came together to have fundamental effects on the stevedoring industry in South Africa, particularly on the utilisation of labour. Essentially the issue revolves around the fact that the vast amounts of capital that are tied up in a ship can only be realised if it is productively utilised. When a ship sits around in port the capital invested in it yields no profit. In addition the ship owner has to pay a fee to park his ship at a berth. The longer it stays there the more it costs him. Speeding up turn around time is therefore the critical driving force for the owner of capital in the shipping industry. The trend has therefore been to introduce streamlined cargo handling systems in order to shorten the amount of time spent in port.

This pressure from the ship owners to decrease turn around time is reinforced by all those interests involved in the export/import industry, including government. In the latter case this derives from the need to make exports more competitive, and from the point of view of the balance of payments, to cut the cost of imports. All these pressures have forced the mechanisation of the stevedoring industry on a world scale. Hence the emergence of containerisation and other mechanical handling aids like palletisation, big lifts, unitisation, and roll-on/roll-off (RORO).

The most fundamental of these has been containerisation. Suddenly, instead of most breakbulk being handled by stevedores, it was being packed into containers either at the supply source or at a container depot hundreds of kilometres away from the port. The traditional liner type of cargo just about disappeared out of the stevedores hands in South African ports. At the end of 1979 approximately 62.5% of the pure general cargo traditionally carried in liner type operations had been containerised.

The effect that this has had on the stevedoring industry has been enormous. *The impact on capital was partly cushioned by the government*'s decision to allow the three stevedoring companies operating to have major control over the container packing traffic through the creation of a monopoly company - South African Container Depots. For the stevedores, however, no such cushioning was available as employment in the industry plunged and thousands of men became redundant.

In addition to containerisation there were other mechanical innovations introduced on a large scale in the last decade, further reducing the demand for stevedore labour and fundamentally affecting the role of the remaining workers:

(i) unit loads, ie. several small packages strapped together to form a standardised large unit, requiring mechanical rather than manual stowing methods;
(ii) palletisation, ie. unitisation on a wooden pallet;
(iii) forklift trucks;
(iv) roll on/roll off (RORO) ships requiring only special forklift trucks and tractors for loading and unloading cargo;
(v) mechanisation of bulk cargo (eg. loose grain, sugar etc.) via mechanical suction mechanisms.

All this has had a major impact on the utilisation of stevedore labour. On RORO ships the ordinary stevedore is hardly utilised. The trend towards unitisation means that the ordinary stevedore cannot pick up units of this size anymore. Less labour is required, and its function is radically altered. The stevedore now hooks up the steel, secures the clamps, and guides the lift as it starts to go up or come down. The emphasis for the stevedore labourer has dramatically shifted away from picking up to skill in stowing. The need is less and less for men to be "big and strong", but rather that they be "small and smart". Forklifts and drivers and winchmen are increasingly important in the industry as the handling of cargo comes to rely heavily, if not nearly exclusively at times, on mechanical aids. Only two decades ago stevedoring was a highly labour intensive industry with a comparatively small capital investment requirement. Now it is rapidly becoming a highly mechanised, capital intensive industry.

The historical character of the workforce

Historically stevedores in South Africa, as in most countries, were casuals employed by the day. There was a small minority of more skilled workers that were paid by the week or the month. Obviously office staff and line management fell into this category, but it also included storemen, lorry and forklift drivers, and mechanics. In most ports, with the exception of Durban, this also included some of the more skilled, supervisory positions (ie. serangs/indunas).

The rest of the productive workers (ie. stevehands, gangwaymen, winchmen, and, in Durban, indunas) were casuals of one sort or another. Although they were not guaranteed a job, or pay every day of the normal working week, they were still regular workers in the stevedoring industry. Notwithstanding their historical lack of daily job security and normal weekly pay, the same floating population of workers would congregate every morning at the booking centres seeking employment on the ships for that day. Indeed as far as the workers were concerned, they regarded themselves as working for a specific stevedoring company, or the stevedoring industry generally. There are numerous old men in the ports of South Africa who have been in the stevedoring industry for most of their lives. One very old man, who lived in Durban in 1982, had first come into the industry in world war I. The fact that he had been a casual employee up until 1959 was, for him, just a quirk of the industry. It in no way detracted from the permanency of his occupation as a stevedore.

In Cape Town, in 1977, approximately 50% of the stevedores were between the ages of 40 and 50 and the majority had been in the industry for the greater part of their working lives. In East London, in 1977, over 90% of stevedores had been employed for over 10 years, and many had been in the industry for over 20 years. This is further exemplified by the length of service of workers retrenched. In Durban, in the retrenchment of 1982, most of the workers retrenched on the basis of LIFO had been recruited in 1975. In the 1985 retrenchment all the workers retrenched were recruited in 1974 or late 1973; ie. the shortest service in the industry at that point was 11 years.

In prior decades there was a specific arrangement with the stevedoring companies that if the father died or retired his son would have first preferance and be entitled to employment. Thus, at the last round of retrenchments in Durban, one of the youngest workers,with the shortest service, protested vigorously against his retrenchment on the grounds that his length of service should include the years worked by his dead father. Moreover, the son had been taken out of school to come and take his father's place.

The casual nature of employment, coupled with the low pay and the hazardous nature of the work meant that the vocation of stevedore was looked down upon by the more sophisticated urban sections of the African working class. Stevedores in Durban were called "Nyathi" which meant "shit bucket removers". The stevedores, of course, in turn, had their own hierarchy. Those dock workers who didn't handle cargo, but merely cleaned ships were, in turn, looked down on and called "Madageni", meaning "those who can't keep themselves clean".

Except for the coloured workers in Cape Town and the Indian drivers in Durban, most stevedores were migrants, recruited from some of the more far flung rural areas. Local African workers only worked as stevedores as a last resort. The reasons are fairly obvious - work was casual, pay was low and it was an extraordinarily dangerous occupation.

In Port Elizabeth, at the request of the local Bantu Affairs Department, the stevedoring companies kept a rough 60:40 ratio in favour of contract labour in order to provide employment for local African workers. In 1977, the ratio was 50% locals and 50% contract workers from Peddie (200 km from PE). This ratio was totally misleading as more than 70% of the supposedly local workers with relevant urban rights also came from the Peddie district and made little use of their residential rights. Instead, like the other contract workers from Peddie, they lived in single quarters and maintained families in Peddie.

In East London, stevedores were traditionally migrants. However, as the Ciskei rural areas collapsed many were resettled, in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a resettlement camp which later became Mdantsane. Since that time, the stevedores have become local residents of East London. In Cape Town, all coloured workers were obviously local, whilst 95% of African workers had legal rights to live in Cape Town. Yet the majority of them also maintained their families in the Transkei.

In Durban, the stevedore labour force of contract workers was drawn mostly from the heartland of Kwazulu (eg. Nongoma, Mahlabatini, Mtunzini), but also with a significant minority coming from Eastern Pondoland. In 1977 about 20% of the workers had Section 10(i)(a) or (b) rights, but the vast majority of them did not exercise these rights in the adjacent townships. The majority stayed, and still do stay, with no charge for rent and a free meal a day (although before 1979 a worker only received the meal if he worked that day), in ancient Dickensian compounds in Point. These were owned by the stevedoring companies on land leased from the Durban Corporation.

The compounds comprise blocks with rooms containing anything from 10 to 30 beds in each room. With the successive retrenchments that have occurred in the past few years, the number of workers actually staying in a room now leaves a fair amount of living space per worker. This was not at all the case in the past. Two glaring examples stand out. In the late 1970's, after the South Arican Railways introduced two shifts for its dockworkers, the compounds became hopelessly overcrowded. The reason was that the stevedoring companies feared that if they were unable to cope with the change in shifts, and the expected increase in demand for stevedores per day, the SAR would use it as an excuse to take over the stevedoring side of the dockwork. Hence they very hurriedly recruited additional stevedores to swell the numbers. The result was that workers were having to "hotbed": as the one worker climbed out of his bed to go on shift another coming off shift would climb in.

After the breakup, in 1979, of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company which had controlled the compound, there were insufficient beds in the section that became the Rennies compound and fell directly under its control. A number of workers, consequently were forced to live on the open verandahs, until the arrival of the General Workers Union and the merger of the two companies under the effective control of the previous SASSCO management, eradicated the attempt by Rennies management to recreate Dickens on a human as well as an architectural level.

Prior to 1959 the vast majority of stevedores, although not registered with any particular stevedoring company, lived in these compounds in company leased blocks, turning out for that company when work was available. In May 1959, after a major strike, all stevedore labour was registered with a specially created company - the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company (DSLSC) - owned by the stevedoring companies that utilised the stevedoring labour managed and administered for their benefit by the DSLSC.

Similar associations with certain differences that are not pertinent here were also set up in Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town in later years to administer, control and allocate stevedoring labour from a labour pool. However, I shall concentrate on the DSLSC since it was the first labour supply company to be set up, it operated in the biggest port, and it is the company I am most familiar with.

The DSLSC: controlling the workforce

The DSLSC existed solely for the purpose of recruiting, employing, housing and controlling labour which it then subcontracted out on a daily basis to the various stevedoring companies. Stevedores were now legally and effectively employed by the DSLSC with its own administration. The exception was Grindrod which maintained its own system with stevedores working for the company, directly under its own control and booking in from another section of the Durban harbour.

The use of migrant labour from deep in the tribal heartland and the control mechanisms attached to that were developed to a fine art in Durban. Indeed, management preferred to use contract workers who were rurally based and had deep tribal ties. Rooms and blocks of rooms were arranged by tribal area in the Point compound. The companies developed special arrangements with various chiefs to recruit labour for stevedoring from their areas. There were, in fact, designated jobs within the compound administration for the recruitment and control of labour (labour controllers/allocators).

This placed great power in the hands of the compound administration to manipulate tribal divisions. For example, a certain notorious Mr Buthelezi was appointed as labour controller in the Point compound by the DSLSC in 1959, and he very quickly achieved the dubious reputation of being the most hated member of the compound management. After his appointment no Mpondos were directly recruited, although some came by themselves via a relative already working in the harbour.

When more labour was required the compound management would arrange with the magistrate and chiefs of the selected areas to announce that they were coming to recruit. Between the chiefs and the labour controllers men would be selected who were deemed to be fit. This clearly created a very close relationship between the compound administration and the tribal authority and was open to a wide array of abuses, including personal aggrandisement. Moreover, these tribal links became part and parcel of management's control over their workforce. It was common practice for a worker who was disciplined at work to be reported to his chief so that the latter could take whatever further action he also deemed fit.

The operations of the unpaid leave system also served to constantly reinforce the strong relationship between the rural tribal/peasant base and wage labour in the stevedoring industry. Contrary to most other industries, under capitalism, where management attempts to keep their workforce at the point of production for as continuous a period as possible, the DSLSC encouraged the constant renewal of stevedoring workers' ties with their rural base through the leave system. In addition to the statutory 14 days paid leave, the DSLSC operated a compulsory unpaid leave system of 6 weeks on a roster system in order to match the available labour with the expected requirements for the harbour in any given working week.

Tribalism consequently permeated the workforce, operating to divide workers along narrow regional, clan and tribal lines, thereby running counter to other processes stemming from the socialisation of work and compound living. For example, the Zulus looked down upon the Mpondos, and amongst the Zulus some clans were given greater status than others (eg. the royal family). The compound administration intentionally played upon this and utilised it for their own benefit in controlling the workforce. For example, in 1969 the Mpondos were, it seems, advised by the compound management that if they struck with the rest of the workers they would be the first to be fired. They took the hint and kept working.

The power of the compound administration was considerable. Thus promotions were not decided by the stevedoring companies, but by the compound administration of the Durban Labour Supply Company. Corruption was rife. It was common practice to pay a set bribe in order to ensure promotion. When, for example, the same Mr Buthelezi died, there were a number of complaints from workers that had paid their bribe to Buthelezi, before he died, in the expectation that the next promotion that arose would come their way.

Now they wanted either to be promoted on the strength of the bribe paid, or, to have their chickens, goats etc paid back.

The DSLSC management portrayed themselves, at once, as both the obedient and co-operative servant of the stevedoring companies, and, the dedicated and concerned employers of a large body of simple and vulnerable rural workers. In effect the labour supply management attempted to set itself up as the mediator between the workers and the stevedoring management, and in the process served only its own interests. Certainly the interests of the stevedoring workers were not satisfied by this mechanism, even if the most absurd lengths were gone to in order to play out the role. For example, the only industrial relations framework that existed before the General Workers Union was recognised, in 1982, in Durban was a liaison committee system. Half the workers' representatives were appointed by management, the other half were supposedly elected by the workers, but with the compound manager who had done the appointing running the election. He then chaired the liaison committee's caucus meetings and, when the liaison committee met with management, he was also the chairman of that meeting.

By the mid-1970's some of the new independent stevedoring companies began to realise that the labour supply company was no longer suited to the requirements of the industry. The changes in the stevedoring industry initiated by containerisation and the withdrawal of the shipping lines from stevedoring operations would require new systems of labour control and utilization. The labour supply company was, however, unable to adjust to the changing requirements. It was an empire with all its processes geared to the maintenance of orthodoxy, rather than to the modernisation that was clearly going to have to come.

The DSLSC was stevedoring capital's form of institutionalised control over the workers. But it also set itself up as the ultimate arbiter and interpreter of what the workers wanted and desired, as well as, from the stevedoring companies side, what change was possible. It was able to do this precisely because it portrayed itself as the interposed white mouthpiece of tribal custom, tradition and aspiration. Nothing could be altered in conditions of employment etc. unless the management of the labour supply company agreed with it, because anything that threatened their interests was met with the reply "No you can't do that! The workers will never accept such changes in their customs, etc."

By 1979 there were only three stevedoring companies in Durban and, only two of them (SASSCO and Rennies) were using the DSLSC. SASSCO in particular, as the largest stevedoring company, with 60% plus of the market, needed to re-establish control over its own labour force in order to modernise and restructure labour utilisation on its own terms. Hence the DSLSC was disbanded in 1979 when SASSCO pulled out of it and the stevedores were divided up proportionately between SASSCO and Rennies, under each company's direct control.

Each company, but SASSCO in particular, attempted to establish a corporate identity amongst its own labour force, fostering a further element of competition and division amongst the stevedores who were previously all together in the DSLSC. The compound was divided up and stevedores from one company's compound were kicked out of the other's compound. This created a legacy of bitterness and division amongst the stevedores. Coupled with the fact that Grindrod stevedores never booked or were allocated via the DSLSC but were located instead at Maydon Wharf, this exacerbated the problems of uniting the stevedores into one union when the General Workers Union established a branch in Durban. This problem was not experienced by the union in other ports - where all the stevedores were still mediated through a common labour supply association at the time they were organised by the union.

The peculiarities of the wage and employment systems

The industry is highly peculiar in regard to wages and employment practices. Traditionally, stevehands were employed on a daily casual basis. The standard situation in most other manufacturing industries just does not apply. The key to an understanding of the conditions in the industry lies with the fact that stevedoring companies are servicing ships and have no control over when, and how many, ships enter port for loading and unloading. Consequently there are always peaks and valleys in the demand for stevedoring services. Shipping has its own logic and is subject to other vagaries. Hence an even flow of ships plying the worlds trade routes, and therefore an even utilisation of stevedoring labour, cannot be easily engineered. Ships enter the harbour and demand to be loaded and unloaded. If they wait in port, then considerable wharfing fees have to be paid to the harbour authorities. Hence there may be a huge demand for stevedoring labour three days in the week as the ships are piling into the docks, and very little demand for the remainder of the week when the majority have left.

In the past stevedoring companies throughout the world dealt with the problem by operating with a casualised but stable labour force. As long as sufficient numbers of skilled stevedores were available every day the stevedoring companies could utilise as many as they required on that day and leave them jobless when the port was slack. The cost of the convenience of having stevedores, whenever the companies required them, was thus borne by the individual workers rather than the stevedoring or shipping companies.

Of course there is another alternative. The number of stevedores and berths to be worked per day could be set and additional ships be made to wait outside the harbour where they incur no wharfing fees. Whatever work was available could be spread out evenly throughout the week and stevedores could work on a continuous and more secure basis. But this would not suite the other parties involved. The interests of the shipping companies demand that capital - in the form of ships - should not lie idle (waiting outside the harbour). Also, for as long as the workers can be made to remain as daily-paid casuals, while still presenting themselves for work every day, the stevedoring companies face no real pressure to introduce any alternative system. Finally, and most importantly, in order to be able to even out the flow of ships the stevedoring companies must be able to control not only the loading and unloading of ships but also the quayside operations.

However, in South Africa a state corporation, the South African Railways and Harbours (now called South African Travel Services), have always controlled and operated the whole harbour, including all wharfside operations. Almost all activity in South African harbours from the harbour gates which let the people in, to the tugs that guide the ships in, is out of the control of private capital and resides in the hands of the state. The only substantial private companies operating in the ports are the stevedoring companies. Without control over the wharfside operations - the wharfside cranes, wharfside loading and unloading, and the wharfside warehouses - or the agreement of the SAR & H - the stevedoring companies would have difficulty fundamentally altering the manner in which ships enter the docks for servicing. Neither the stevedoring companies nor the SAR & H were inclined to alter this mode of operating. Hence the system that prevailed in South Africa rested on a casualised but stable stevedoring labour force.

In Durban the workers revolted against this system in the strike of 1959. As a result, with the introduction of the DSLSC, the wage system was altered to give stevedores greater job and wage security, but still weighting the convenience factor heavily in management's favour. Workers were paid a basic weekly minimum as a guarantee irrespective of whether they worked or not. This was, however, extremely low as the stevedoring companies only made money if and when the stevedores were working. Therefore to this minimum was added a daily work allowance paid automatically for every day worked in any week. Then there were additional allowances for special cargoes (dirty, toxic, frozen etc.). Prior to the introduction of the two shift system in 1975, stevedores used to work their basic day shift and then so many hours overtime as part of their usual day. With the introduction of the two shift system (eight and a half hours for each shift), they lost out on the standard overtime payment. Hence a further shift allowance was introduced, payable for every shift worked.

Although the Durban stevedores were clearly better off than when they were pure casuals, they only really received satisfactory pay when they were actually working. Yet they had the illusion of being weekly paid (or in their language, having a "five day guarantee"). Thus, in Durban in 1977, the basic minimum guaranteed to a stevedore hand was R19.40 per week, the work allowance was R1.48 per day and the shift allowance was R2.16 per day. The daily guaranteed wage was therefore R3.88, while the two allowances for working added up to R3.64. If a stevedore hand didn't get booked out to work that week he received R19.40 only, even though he had made himself available to the company, as required, every day. If he did work every day then he received nearly double. The stevedores were still very much subject to the vagaries of the industry.

It did not, however, end there. For paying out the basic minimum to workers who did not work the full week was a cost to the stevedoring companies. Hence they instituted a system of compulsary and voluntary unpaid leave to enable them to fine tune their labour requirements to match the labour available in any given week. If additional labour than was available was required, then the reserve army of pure casuals that gathered every day outside the gates in the hope of work, was utilised to fill the gaps.

The wage system in the other three ports differed although the underlying principle for the stevedore companies remained the same - ie. to maintain the stability of the workforce and contain some of the pressure from the workers by paying a guaranteed weekly wage, but to ensure that this was as low as possible so that payments when workers were surplus to requirements were minimised, thus maintaining profits.

In Port Elizabeth, all stevedores, irrespective of the grade, were paid a minimum rate (in 1977, R20 per week), if they reported every day for work. This was in effect booking or "bala" money as the stevedores called it - a sort of transport allowance to enable them to make themselves available. Then there was a daily wage paid for days worked. A shift allowance was introduced in 1975 when the port authorities introduced the two shift system, but management reserved the right to withhold this in cases of indiscipline, late coming, unsatisfactory work etc. In East London a similar situation prevailed, except that more than half the workers in the labour pool were classified as purely casual and paid on a daily basis, only with no guaranteed weekly minimum.

Cape Town had a completely different system. After 1973 stevedores in the pool were guaranteed 3 days full pay (the work allowance was included in the daily wage) plus the shift allowance, irrespective of whether they worked. If they worked more than three days in any week, then they received the equivalent for the number of days worked. They also received a reporting allowance ("bala money") of R1 if no work was available for that day. This system was more beneficial to the stevedores than those operating in the other ports, and the daily wage was also higher.

Wages in the industry up until the early seventies were based on a long standing wage determination which was periodically, but very infrequently (every 3 to 4 years), adjusted by the Wage Board. In the late 1960's stevedoring management in the Eastern Cape was beginning to notice a change in employment patterns. Instead of stevedores voluntarily working 3-4 days a week and spending the rest of their time minding their rural bases in the Ciskei, the obvious breakdown of rural production there meant that the same workers were now working, or needing to work, 5 days or more in the week. In addition, wages were not reviewed annually, and after a year or two of waiting, the rumblings from the ships hatches were very audible. Anger mounted and spontaneous work stoppages became more frequent.

In Durban the tardiness of the Wage Board and the stevedoring companies in not raising wages led to two separate strikes at Point and Maydon Wharf. These, plus the massive Durban strikes of 1973, forced the management to address workers' grievances, rather than waiting for the Wage Board to review wages only every 4 years. Consequently, the stevedoring employers' association began to meet annually to review their own wages and to submit the new rates to the Department of Labour for amendment to the wage determination. More substantial wage increases were granted every year to the stevedores from 1973 onwards until 1980 when the stevedores were unionised through the General Workers Union.

For example, in Durban between 1973 and 1978 the minimum guaranteed weekly wage for stevehands rose from R9.50 to R19.40 per week. The percentage increase was fairly substantial, higher than the CPI increase. But because the base was so low in the first place, the size of the percentage increase was less significant to the stevedores than it was to the stevedore companies, who had to justify the subsequent increase in tariffs to the shipping companies. The new wage determinations were therefore used by the stevedoring companies to justify these increases in their rates with the argument: "Sorry, the government put up the wages again; we have to increase the tariffs".

Evidently, then, the late 1970's was a period of transition for the stevedoring industry in almost all respects. The capital structure of the industry had altered radically, the dominance of the old stevedoring companies had given way to the dominance of SASSCO over Rennies and Grindrod, the labour process had begun to alter radically, the method of guaranteeing work had altered, the pay structure and wage rates started to shift to take into account the pressures from below. All these changes were to lay the basis for major ideological struggles to take place within the circles of the stevedoring management. Basically, the emergence of a more dynamic stevedoring company - SASSCO, owned by Freight Services - which was in the business for its own sake and not just as an adjunct to the shipping lines with their old methods, as well as the impact of sharper struggles from the side of the stevedore labour force, produced the context for more progressive long-term perspectives. These perspectives were to dominate both within Freight Services and over the other two companies comprising the stevedoring employers' council at the time when the stevedores in Cape Town were organised by the General Workers Union in 1979.

The impact of the GWU on the stevedoring industry

Unionisation had a profound effect on both the lives of the stevedores and on the way the industry operated. Both were radically altered. Whereas before unionisation the stevedores might be identifiable as working for a particular company, the management had no necessary commensurate social responsibility for the welfare of their employees. The advent of unionisation in the Cape Town docks, coupled with some of the the new forces operating within management, changed that fundamentally. But it was the pressure which resulted from unionisation that brought about the modernisation of the employment conditions of the stevedores. The stevedore as a semi-casual disappeared and management was forced to accept their social obligations to their employees.

Industrial relations in the stevedoring industry accelerated headlong into a new era. From being an industry where the workers had absolutely no formal say over their working lives; where management prerogative was only challenged through explicit demonstrations of power; industrial relations in the industry were transformed to the extent that almost anything was up for negotiation. Perhaps one of the most important effects that the GWU had on the industry was to fundamentally redefine the relations of power.

As stressed earlier, the stevedores were a somewhat fragmented and isolated group of workers, distanced from the rest of the working class. Unifying them into a union with the internal organisational discipline that this entailed, and beginning the process of linking them up with the rest of the working class, was a watershed in the development and history of the stevedores.

The process of negotiating their rights, conditions of service and working conditions stabilised the unity of the workgangs and their power. For the first time in their experience, the stevedores saw the exercise of this power as a process of continuously altering the balance of force in their workplace, rather than an intermittent demonstration of anger. The stevedores began to understand that if their militancy was organisationally directed and concentrated through the union, then fundamental changes in their living and working conditions could be effected. In short, they learned that power is a relationship, and, in doing so, they fundamentally altered the balance of forces in the stevedoring industry. The despised "nyathi" were no more.

Within the ranks of management many found it almost impossible to adjust to this new environment where issues were negotiated and the views of the workers had to be taken account of. Suddenly, to their horror, line management found that issues over which they had previously had total discretion were referred to a new branch of management: the industrial relations department. Line management's resistance to the new era was quickly set upon by the shop steward committee and union officials. The latter, because of the importance of this breakthrough for the union, spent an enormous and inordinate amount of their time on stevedore issues. The first few years were somewhat stormy. The resistance from line management, however, only served to accelerate the process where more progressive long-term perspectives within management came to dominate. Consequently, Freight Services, who were more prepared for changes in the industrial relations field, increased their own domination over the other stevedoring companies.

The quid pro quo for the stevedoring management was a restabilising of the industry as it entered a most difficult period. Spontaneous stoppages still occurred but, fundamentally, industrial relations were no longer so unpredictable and volatile. In a period where most other unions were fighting to prise management's grip over managerial prerogatives even slightly free, the stevedores and their union found themselves in an industrial relations situation which held new and different disorganising dangers. Instead of having to confront management's refusal to negotiate and the exercise of managerial brute force, the stevedores now had to be wary of becoming locked in continuous cycles of negotiation, and a managerial willingness to talk until the proverbial cows came home.

One of the most important impacts that the union has had on the industry is in rolling back management prerogative on a number of very important issues. Although this has taken place at nearly all levels of managerial control, a number of areas stand out. Equal control and negotiation over all aspects of the pension fund is perhaps one of the most significant gains. The stevedores, and therefore the GWU, have a large majority of seats on the board of control of the pension fund. In a mere five years the stevedores have moved from a situation where management accepted no social responsibility for workers who had been in the industry for decades and consequently had no pensions to fall back on; to membership of the pension fund as well as substantial long service gratuities for all retiring stevedores as compensation for the absence of a pension fund in the past; to equal control of the pension fund.

Size of the gangs working in the hold is another area where management prerogative has been diminished. Gang size is important because by varying the gang size management can affect the speed and intensity of loading and unloading cargo. If the number of workers in a gang is decreased then, all other things being equal, the intensification of labour is increased and the rate of exploitation is also increased. In order to counter this tendency, procedure has been agreed whereby shop stewards can negotiate over gang sizes on the spot, if the workers are unhappy with the number of workers allocated to work a particular ship.

Another area which has been drastically altered with the advent of the GWU has been in the realm of health and safety. Given the extremely dangerous nature of stevedoring, and in most ports prior to unionisation, the absence of even the most basic protective clothing, this has been of fundamental significance to the workers. For example, before the advent of tne union stevedores worked without even safety boots. One of the first workers the union encountered in Durban had his big toe split from top to bottom by a steel bar falling on his broken tackies. Free protective clothing (helmets, steel tipped safety boots, gloves, overalls, rainsuits, rubber aprons, masks and goggles) is now issued on a standard basis to every stevedore and the basic working attire of a stevedore has changed markedly.

Obviously the issue of adequate protection when handling dangerous cargo was a burning one. Working closely with sympathetic industrial health consultants from the Industrial Health Research Group, the union had a major impact on this question. A number of examples are available (eg. handling of asbestos and lead), but perhaps the best to cite is the loading in Cape Town of frozen fish for export in bitterly icy holds. This is called working "maru" and regarded as one of the most hazardous and hated aspects of stevedoring. Many a stevedore suffered terribly from frostbite and fingers were lost from packing forzen fish with bare hands or inadequate gloves. Consequently negotiations over "maru" have always been the bitterest. Although the stevedores still hate working "maru", conditions have improved phenomenally with the introduction of special space suits and major restrictions on the amount of time a stevedore is allowed to spend down the freezing hold. Conditions now compare very favourably internationally.

Clearly the major impact of unionisation has been on wages and conditions of service. From being amongst the worst paid in the country, stevedores are now amongst the highest paid workers. The struggle to improve wages has been waged on three fronts: to increase the daily (or hourly) rate; to fight for a five day guaranteed wage; and to equalise the wages between all the ports.

The latter has been achieved in all the major ports and stevehands in Cape Town, East London, Port Elizabeth and Durban all earn the same basic daily wages. In the two small ports of Richards Bay and Saldanha Bay wages are lower but the stevedores there all have a five day guarantee. The system of a daily minimum rate plus shift and work allowances, or equivalents of that system, have been scrapped. The basic wage of stevehands has risen to R21 per day (ie. R2.47 per hour) in 1985. It is difficult to make a time comparison as the guarantee system and daily basic has altered so fundamentally. However, examples from Durban will give some idea of the magnitude of the increases. It must be borne in mind that Durban was the last big port to be organised and hence wages there were the lowest. In 1982, the daily basic for a stevehand who worked was R11.20 in RGCS and R12 in SASSCO, as compared to R21 per day in 1985; ie. daily basic has nearly doubled in three years. In 1982, the hyster drivers were paid different rates and the lowest paid received R62.50 per week, whereas in 1985 all hyster drivers were paid R140 per week.

The GWU has significantly pushed up the number of paid hours per week that a stevedore is guaranteed, whether he works or not. Stevedores in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban are now guaranteed 36 hours pay per week out of their normal 42 and 1/2 hour week (ie. they are guaranteed 4 and 1/4 days pay per week). Conditions of service have altered so fundamentally that in no sense can these stevedores still be regarded as casuals.

These changes, brought about by unionisation, have obviously profoundly affected the working and service conditions of the stevedores. However, there are still a number of important issues that the union has not managed to deal with. The most important are: the utilisation of casuals, the five day guarantee for all ports, and the channelling of redundant stevedores into ancillary stevedoring work in the container depots.

Control over the utilisation of casuals is critically important. One of the major ongoing struggles in the industry is against management's tendency to use casuals rather than spread out the work to allow the registered stevedoring labour force to work a full five days in the week. Basically, the union's aim has been to control the distribution of work so as to ensure that it is evenly distributed throughout the week. The GWU has tried to effect this in two ways: (i) by controlling the number of casuals that management can use at any point in time via a manning agreement, and thereby ensuring that work is evenly distributed throughout the week; or, (ii) by controlling the flow of ships to the berths in the port, and thereby ensuring an even distribution of work.

The first method would require an industry-wide manning agreement encompassing all the stevedoring companies to be effective. The union has encountered severe opposition from the stevedore managements in trying to secure this. Unless it was a statutory, enforceable agreement (eg. an industrial council agreement) there could be no control over non-unionised small companies refusing to abide by such a manning agreement. The problem is to control not only the total number of casuals being used by any particular company, but also the total number of casuals that could be utilised throughout the industry. In the absence of some statutory control over the whole port it has been well nigh impossible to make any progress on a manning agreement with any particular company.

The second alternative that the GWU has tried is to get the stevedore managements to negotiate with SATS in order to restrict access to the port if all available stevedore labour is being utilised. This path has also proved fruitless. SATS has not been at all sympathetic, and will remain so unless the GWU has some muscle to bring to bear against them.

Given these problems, the union and the stevedores have forcibly argued that, since payment of shortfall is now accepted as being an integral and necessary part of stevedoring costs, management should bear the increased shortfall costs that payment of a five day guarantee would entail out of company profits. If this was accepted then the stevedoring management would have to treat it as any other cost and include it in all costing calculations before setting stevedoring rates.

The other crucially important area where the GWU has not succeeded is in organising and controlling the container depots where cargo is loaded and unloaded. This is essential, for the stevedoring industry has shifted a large part of its operations in that direction. Furthermore, in other countries redundant stevedores have been able to secure preferential employment in the container depots. The failure of the GWU to ensure similar status for retrenched stevedores is due partly to a lack of sufficient organisational muscle and priority, but fundamentally it is because the largest and most important container depots are in Johannesburg. This is clearly no solution for redundant stevedores in the coastal areas.

Furthermore, and most importantly, up until very recently the GWU did not have a branch in the Transvaal. However, as a result of the setting up of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), the GWU is well on the way to merging with the Transport and General Workers Union (formerly a FOSATU affiliate). This will result in a major extension and concentration of union influence in the freight transporting industry, particularly insofar as it links up the container depots with the stevedores.

What must be very unclear to many is how the GWU came to be in such a position, given its previous history of antagonism to FOSATU, its propounding of general unionism as opposed to industrial unionism, as well as its refusal to countenance registration? In order to answer that question we have to start again and locate the impact of the stevedoring industry on the GWU, thereby tracing the manner in which the union became a national union. This is to be the subject of the second part of this article.

[TO BE CONTINUED]