

2 The Durban strikes of 1973: Political identities and the management of protest

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Introduction and context

Labour mobilisation, work stoppages and strikes have often been central elements in popular protest in South Africa, both before and after 1994. This chapter is the first of three that focus on workers and protest; it examines the Durban strikes of 1973 – a series of labour actions that preceded the rise of independent trade unions in the course of the 1970s. These strikes provide an important window through which to examine not only labour activism, but also the roles played by the state and company managers in the containment of protest; beyond this, they also provide an insight into the complexities of the relationship between protest and violence in this period. In this chapter I argue that – somewhat surprisingly – the state and employers did not automatically use violence to repress the strikes in Durban; in turn, workers were not provoked into retaliation. This suggests that – in analysing continuities and changes in the potential for popular mobilisation and protest in the apartheid era – it is necessary to consider the rare moments in which the state hesitated to close down political space. This theme is pursued further in the next chapter.

Between 9 January and 31 March 1973 approximately 61,410 black workers in Durban embarked on strikes in their various industries and companies.¹ This made the Durban strikes the largest labour protest since the 1948 election win of the National Party. Indeed, more black workers were on strike in Durban in these months than during the whole of the 1960s: according to figures gathered by the South African Institute of Race Relations, an average of 2,000 black workers had embarked on strikes for each year of that decade.² The first two years of the 1970s had seen an increase in both the intensity and frequency of strikes: at the end of 1971, for example, 13,000 Ovambo workers had taken part in a work stoppage in South West Africa.³

It is notable, however, that these earlier strikes rarely involved more than 2,000 workers at a time; likewise, they were isolated within individual industries and did

not threaten either to combine into a general strike or invade the central spaces of the affected cities themselves. The Durban strikes, by contrast, not only involved tens of thousands of workers across all of the city's industries, but also developed from the various workplaces and compounds to spill out early in February onto the city streets. The strike wave thus became visible within the ordinary experience of the white citizens of the city. Through their unprecedented scale and the very public nature of their spread and development, the Durban strikes entered into the public sphere in a way that recent labour protests had not been able to do.

And yet the state did not consider these strikes as a form of public political protest. Instead, it described them as resulting from economic grievances and delegated the responsibility for resolving them to employers. In contrast, this chapter considers these protests as bound up in the development of public forms of protest in the 1970s. It does not aim to consider how they fit into the development of trade unionisation in the course of this decade, but focuses instead on attempting to understand both why these strikes were allowed to develop and how they were resolved. Their successes expanded the space available for public protest – and pointed to ways in which such protests could develop.

It is worth nothing at the outset that the Durban strikes are frequently mentioned in the historiography of the South African labour movement, but discussion is generally underdeveloped. Much of the literature focuses on the later 1970s and early 1980s, on the emergence of local and national coordinating organisations, and on their movement towards public political engagement.⁴ In this context, the spontaneous protests of 1973 are only interpretable either as preliminary indications of the potential that would be activated by later organisations or as catalytic events that helped lead to these organisations being formed. In neither approach are the strikes seen as interesting in themselves, and in neither approach is it asked why the workers did not become more confrontational.

Some of the detail missing from much of these accounts can be found in the small number of articles directly addressing the Durban strikes.⁵ The major account was compiled at the time of the strikes themselves under the name of the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) and published in 1974 as *The Durban Strikes 1973: Human Beings with Souls*.⁶ The IIE – centred around Rick Turner, who, being banned at the time, could not take credit for having written the book – used this publication to set out an argument for the formal recognition of African trade unions and advocated for the adoption of a specific labour policy. This may help explain why this work focuses little on the potential political conflict between the workers and their

managers, and puts its emphasis instead on the economic rationale of the strikes. This was also a source of some of the later criticism the book received, most notably from Johan Maree.⁷

This chapter concerns the quotidian details of the strikes themselves and uses the IIE's *The Durban Strikes* as a guide. The daily accounts published in Durban's two local newspapers provide a broader focus on employers' reactions, public space and confrontations. I have also been able to use the notes collected by Gerry Mare, one of the IIE's researchers, which are housed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Alan Paton Centre. The archives of the Federation of South African Trade Unions – the first major African trade union federation to emerge after the strikes – also contain records of the IIE, including additional details on the events of 1973 and their consequences.

The decade preceding the Durban strikes was marked by the apparent consolidation of the apartheid order. In political terms, the state appeared strong: the banning and repression of the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and their allies in the early 1960s seemed to have been successful. The underground operations of these movements – while exciting the imagination of politicians – rarely had an impact on the white public. Extra-parliamentary white opposition groups were also restricted. Although several groups – including the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Black Sash – sought to protest against apartheid policies, they struggled to find an audience. Meanwhile, the parliamentary opposition was weak: the United Party, the official opposition, did not challenge the fundamentals of state policy, the Liberal Party collapsed, and a white liberal opposition was largely restricted to the voice of the lone representative of the Progressive Party in parliament, Helen Suzman. Indeed, conservative Afrikaner breakaways could seem a more pressing electoral threat.

In economic terms the apartheid order seemed equally strong. The country's economy had continued to grow since the end of the Second World War; in particular, its manufacturing, commerce and finance sectors all continued to boom throughout the 1960s. (The textile industry, for example, almost doubled in size in this period – being recorded as employing 50,000 workers in 1962 and 90,000 by the mid-1970s.) The mining sector, too, grew substantially. Notably, gold production doubled between 1955 and 1970 – in time to catch the sudden wave of profit associated with the deregulation of the international gold price in 1968. Throughout this decade the country's gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of 6.2 per cent, while employment grew at an annual rate of 3.2 per cent.⁸ The South African economy expanded despite the

imposition of sanctions and trade restrictions – a fact that was noted at the time, and that influenced both public and academic debates.⁹

The country's economic strength was reflected in the significant improvements in living standards for South Africa's white citizens. According to Beinart's survey, contemporary commentators suggested that white South Africans enjoyed a standard of living comparable to that of the richest developed countries in Europe and the Americas. And although – as Beinart suggests – there may be some difficulties with this direct comparison, it is nonetheless easy to share the conclusion that in the period leading up to the early 1970s (and to the Durban strikes) 'white South Africans had never had it so good'.¹⁰

For black South Africans – and, most obviously in the context of this chapter, black South African workers – the effects of the economic boom of this period were, however, more ambiguous. The total size of the urban black labour force increased dramatically throughout this period, with the number of African employees in the manufacturing sector doubling between 1960 and 1980.¹¹ The growth in the country's manufacturing sectors also produced shifts in the types of labour demanded; Lambert notes that there was 'an *increasing* demand ... for workers who were sufficiently trained and prepared for semi-skilled operative functions'.¹² He points to the metal industry, in which the percentage of semi-skilled black employees rose from 23 per cent of the total in 1968 to 29 per cent in 1974; this expansion of the semi-skilled sector of the industry was replicated unevenly across the country.

However, African labour remained heavily regulated by the state. Influx control remained a pervasive element in workers' lives throughout this period. In addition, the ability of black workers to organise in any formal fashion was severely limited. Some unions did exist, operating at variable levels of effectiveness: the South African Congress of Trade Unions, for example, was largely moribund by the middle of the 1960s. The Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) continued to operate – in Durban, most notably through the textile industry – but was recognised to be fundamentally 'ineffectual and schizophrenic'.¹³ Generally, African workers were excluded from the unions active in Durban at the start of the 1970s; Indian and coloured textile workers were partially represented, but African workers were not, despite occasional efforts to extend the unions.¹⁴

The absence of African labour organisation was once again becoming a key political issue. In 1971 NUSAS resolved to form wages committees on each of its affiliated campuses; by the end of the next year these committees existed in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Grahamstown, Pietermaritzburg and Durban. In 1972 the South African

Students Organisation (SASO) called for the formation of the Black Workers' Project (BWP) and the eventual formation of the Black Allied Workers' Union – a general union open to all black workers. Although there is little evidence to suggest that any of these organisations played an active role in the labour disputes in Durban in 1973, nonetheless their formation signalled an increasing focus on workers by white and black activists.

The first strikes

The first of the Durban strikes began on the morning of 9 January 1973 at the Coronation Brick and Tile works. Before dawn, workers moved through the company's hostels spreading word of a strike. Instead of moving to their workplace, 2,000 black workers marched from the hostels to a nearby football field. They demanded that the company's management increase their weekly wages; but they refused to elect representatives to lead negotiations, fearing that these representatives would inevitably be victimised. The provincial Department of Labour sent a spokesperson to the field in an attempt to mediate between the company and its workers; this spokesperson was, however, unsuccessful in engaging the workers and was forced to retreat from the field to the sound of the crowd's jeers. The day ended in a stalemate, with neither the workers nor the company's managers any closer to reaching an agreement. The next morning, the paramount chief of the Zulu nation, Goodwill Zwelithini, arrived at the football field promising to negotiate on behalf of the workers. After a representative had announced his imminent arrival, he then kept the workers waiting for several hours while he consulted with the company's management; after this wait, the workers were at first reluctant to allow him to take on their cause. One worker was heard to call out during Zwelithini's speech: 'We've heard this all before!'¹⁵ It was only after they were told – by one his representatives – that in refusing to accept Zwelithini's authority they were impugning the honour of the royal house that the workers finally agreed to cede responsibility for the negotiations to the paramount chief.

A farcical sequence of events then followed, as Zwelithini was taken to task by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the KwaZulu Authority's prime minister. He insisted that the paramount chief had no authority to embark on negotiations; he also suggested that such an endeavour might negatively impact on the prestige of the paramount chief.¹⁶ Zwelithini then chose to withdraw from the negotiations, leaving the workers to finally choose to appoint their own representatives – ordinary workers, although they were in fact at first misidentified by the local press as being themselves members of the Zulu royal house.¹⁷

Meanwhile, strikes began to spread across Durban. On 10 January – the day that Zwelithini spoke at Coronation Brick – a group of workers at A. J. Keeler, a transport firm based on Durban's Point Road, downed their tools.¹⁸ Over the next week, several hundred workers at six different companies – primarily in the transport and marine sectors – initiated their own strikes and pickets.¹⁹ By Thursday, 18 January the workers at Coronation Brick had resolved their strike and returned to their workplace. In the last week of January the textile industry in Durban became the focus of the strikes. On Thursday, 25 January hundreds of workers at the Frametex factory – located in the New Germany industrial area in the southern reaches of Durban – downed their tools; on Friday this strike spread to the other four textile mills owned by the Frame Group in New Germany. At first 1,000 workers were said to be taking part in the strike; then, as the strike stretched on over the weekend and into the first days of the following week, the number of participating workers rose to between 6,000 and 7,000.²⁰ These strikes continued to grow and spread.

Thus, by the end of the month dozens of companies had experienced strikes and the police expected a transport boycott on 1 February. This boycott never occurred; nonetheless, in the following weeks the action spread. On 6 February over 6,000 municipal workers went on strike; the city's vital services were halted and newspaper images showed white volunteers distributing food and clearing refuse from the streets.²¹ Over 7,000 workers on the city's industrial periphery also embarked on a mass strike over these same days.



Despite the scale of these strikes, however – and despite the expectations of observers at the time – they were notably non-violent. Although previous governments had never hesitated to suppress labour strikes with brutal force, in 1973 the apartheid government did not do so. The National Party had not dealt with sustained and significant labour protests for many years and appeared uncertain in its response. Two aspects of the state's approach are addressed in this chapter: firstly, uncertainty as to the political identities and motives of the striking workers, and, secondly, uncertainty as to how to manage and control the strikes.

In regard to the first issue, while the national minister for labour hinted darkly that 'agitators' were manipulating the workers into protests, the local business community and media rubbished these claims. Instead, they emphasised the economic causes of the strikes and the essentialised ethnic Zulu identities of the striking workers. I suggest that both sets of claims worked to depoliticise interpretations of the protesting strikers:

if the minister was right, then the workers were naïve and manipulated – and if he was wrong, and the local elite right, then the workers were simply concerned with bread-and-butter issues. They were only able to organise themselves through the shared habits of their ethnic identity.

In addition, I suggest – with regard to the second point – that one of the reasons for the relative absence of violence (and the often-noted ‘restraint’ of the police) in this strike was the acceptance by the state of this economic interpretation. The minister of labour’s attempts to identify politicised agitators were dismissed; the prime minister instead accepted that economic need explained the workers’ actions. He therefore displaced responsibility for controlling the striking workers from the state and onto their employers.

Political identities and agency

Political discourse blaming agitators was ubiquitous at the time. On 10 January – the second day of the strike wave, before the eventual scale of the strikes was even suspected – the managing director of A. J. Keeler told the press that agitators had caused the strike: ‘it was always the same, the ringleaders had intimidated the others into taking the action they had.’²² Selwyn Lurie, financial director of the Frame Group, presented a similar argument at the end of the month. Not only did he announce to the press that ‘a small group of agitators’ had started the strike at Natal Canvas Rubber Manufacturers, but that they had ‘threatened to kill’ worker representatives on the negotiating council. The company then invited the police into its premises to break up the strike, with the result that ‘the police saw that the workers left the factory in an orderly manner.’²³ Notably, these ‘agitators’ and ‘ringleaders’ came from within the workforces themselves: they supposedly aimed at causing trouble for their employers and fellow workers rather than representing economic hardship.

Three weeks after the first strike at the Coronation Brick and Tile works the national minister for labour, Marais Viljoen, released a statement in which he too suggested that the strikes in Durban were neither spontaneous nor innocent. Viljoen attributed them to scheming political activists from outside the workforce who were following a broader, vastly more threatening, agenda: ‘the strikes in Natal follow a pattern from which it is clear that it is not merely a question of higher wages.’ This was evidenced, he said, by the fact that while ‘there were cases where existing works committee in factories hit by strikes regarded the workers’ wage demands as unreasonable and urged them to return to work’, in these cases ‘this advice was ignored by workers.’ To Viljoen, the ‘unwillingness of the workers concerned to negotiate shows undoubtedly that the

agitation for trade unions is not the solution, and is merely a smoke screen behind which other motives are hidden, notably 'to bring about disorderliness prejudicial to the order of the state'.²⁴ Looking forward, he suggested also that 'the agitators behind the strikes must ask themselves what the position of the workers will be once they lose their jobs and find themselves without any income'.²⁵ Viljoen did not need to flesh out the identity of these figures; vague allegations about agitators were a part of the period's political vocabulary. Durban's mayor also believed in agitators, but admitted that 'obviously nobody can prove this'.²⁶

In some hands ideas about agitators were linked to prejudiced stereotypes of black workers. P. R. de Jager, a member of parliament, claimed of the striking workers:

I know them and I am convinced, as regards the labour done by the Bantu in Natal and the level at which they move, they that do not have it in them to come together and agree that a thousand of them should strike. There are other influences in this strike.²⁷

This crude statement renders clear the unspoken sub-text to the assertions of agitators: how else were the strikes to be explained? The agitator hypothesis solved these problems without requiring its exponents to reconsider their assumptions about the capabilities of the workers.

It is thus particularly interesting that many Durban employers and other commentators took a different view. A spokesperson for the United Party told the press that 'once before the Government thought grievances among the black workers were artificially created by agitators. The Government did not act in time and the result was the disaster of Sharpeville'.²⁸ Viljoen was incensed, claiming that this statement was 'the height of irresponsibility' and also, perhaps more seriously, 'un-South African'.²⁹ The reference to Sharpeville – less, perhaps, a direct reference to the sequence of events than a rhetorical shorthand for the government's past embarrassment – stung the minister into a more specific response. Viljoen defended his characterisation of the strikes by naming the organisations and bodies that he believed were sponsoring the unrest. These included NUSAS, the BWP and the 'pro-Leftist Trade Union Council of South Africa'.³⁰ He made a definite link between the student protests and the strikes, and suggested that these students 'see Black unrest as the only remaining way to bring the Government to a fall'.³¹ The security police did raid SASO's Durban offices at the end of January – but allegedly no warrants were issued for this raid, and certainly no arrests

resulted from it.³² Beyond this, little effort seems to have been made by either the police or the local political authorities to discover the identity of these supposed agitators.

In fact, one of the clearest refutations of the agitator hypothesis came from Brigadier H. J. Schroeder, the divisional commander of the Port Natal police, who told the *Sunday Times* that 'there was still no definite proof that agitators were behind the stoppages'. He added that 'had there been we would have taken action'.³³ While members of the police may have believed that agitators were lurking in the shadows of the strikes, the inability of the force to obtain any evidence that might identify these figures meant that – to all intents and purposes – the police remained distanced from the minister of labour's statements.³⁴ Without any potential evidence, it was impossible for the police to address his allegations.

Durban's white newspaper editors, meanwhile, were deeply sceptical of the minister's claims, the *Daily News* being particularly so. An early February editorial dismissed the minister's 'tired old clichés about agitators and hidden forces' as the 'obligatory political noises' that he was expected to make.³⁵ Later in the month – after Viljoen had accused NUSAS, TUCSA and the BWP of agitating the workers – a further editorial referred to the minister's 'white-tinted spectacles' and hoped that if the minister ever acknowledged the humanity of the workers involved, he would be 'less disposed to regard an eight-rand a week striker as a political agitator'.³⁶ This tendency to dismiss the minister's claims ran through both local newspapers' reporting. They emphasised three aspects of the strikes instead: the economic hardships suffered by the workers, the apparent absence of political rhetoric and the apparent ethnic homogeneity of the striking workers themselves.

The newspapers frequently presented the strikes as a natural – and pre-political – response to significant increases in material hardship suffered by these workers. In an article on 12 January, the *Daily News* noted that 'to exist on R40 a month undoubtedly accelerates frustration. These workers get R8,97 a week. For those who support a family on this wage it means they are doing so with R43 a month less than the poverty datum line'. These figures were then contrasted with the profits made by Coronation Brick at the time: in 1969 – 'admittedly a boom year' – the company made a profit of R2,196,000. Since then, the company had merged with 'the giant Tongaat Group, which had a turnover of R14.5 million'.³⁷ This juxtaposition clearly showed sympathy for the workers, as did an editorial that called wages 'a pittance for existence'. The minimum wage for brick workers bore a 'relationship to increases in the cost of living' that was described as 'remote, to say the least'.³⁸

In addition to emphasising the possible economic causes of the strikes, the local press also seized on any indication that the workers were acting independently of a political programme. On the first day of the strike at Coronation Brick, for example, it was reported that – according to the striking workers – one of the immediate causes of the strike had been a pamphlet issued by the company's management. This apparently stated that the company was aware that some workers were considering a strike and that any such action could only be undertaken at the instigation of 'communist agitators'. This touched a chord among the workers: a 'workers' spokesman' was quoted as saying: 'We would not have gone on strike if this notice had not called us communists.'³⁹ The workers were regularly quoted as calling for higher wages, but never for any political cause. Even the Zulu paramount chief was treated with relative disrespect when he addressed the striking workers at Coronation Brick. The workers were portrayed as being without external organisation or order – and as being reluctant to submit their demands to any legal or illegal political authority for ratification.

The presence of the Zulu paramount chief at Coronation Brick played a role in cementing the local media image of the striking workers as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. The workers were referred to in formulaic terms as 'African workers' during the day before the paramount chief's arrival; after this, however, they were more regularly described in specifically Zulu terms – as forming an 'impi' and chanting in Zulu, '*Hobe Usuthu*' (Zulu warrior) and '*Asiyi*' (We are not going). This terminology was strengthened by the attempts of the Zulu royal house to mediate in this early strike.⁴⁰ The default assumption in the local press throughout was that the striking workers at any given firm were African and, more particularly, Zulu. A speaker at a meeting of a local employers' association claimed that in India and in other parts of Africa, such organisation was unheard of: as far as he was concerned, the strikes 'just could not have happened, except with the Zulu.'⁴¹

The demographic make-up of Durban's workforce at the time suggests that although African workers were in the majority and although workers identifying with the Zulu culture constituted the majority of those workers, there nonetheless remained very large groups of workers not included in this category. These included workers of other African backgrounds – notably from Pondoland – and, most significantly, Indian workers.⁴²

The assumption of ethnic homogeneity helped the local press to convince themselves that there was no direct political motivation behind the strikes nor a potential threat of violence against the white population and company managers. A precedent for this diversion can be found in the speech given by the Zulu paramount

chief on the second day of the strike at Coronation Brick. Among other statements, he told the gathered workers that he understood that 'they were not treated like human beings, yet another race is given respect'. Nonetheless, he told the group, he 'would not like to see a repetition of the racial incidents of 1949'.⁴³ These statements referred to workplace tensions between African labourers and Indian overseers at Coronation Brick; the monarch's statements, however, went beyond the workplace by suggesting that these tensions might result in anti-Indian violence similar to that in 1949.⁴⁴ The press took up these tensions and generalised them across the various strikes, referring to anti-Indian tensions not only at Coronation Brick, but also in the textile industry and during the municipal workers' strike. In each of these, the racial make-up of the workplaces differed from that at Coronation Brick, and other sources indicate that Indian and African labourers were protesting side by side – most notably, during the municipal workers' strike. In at least one case, the potential conflict between a white employer and a group of African workers was explicitly diverted into an account of the terror felt by Indian workers in that workplace.⁴⁵

In sum, the striking workers were portrayed as traditionalist. They bowed to traditional leadership, displayed traditional modes of military organisation and were in danger of allowing traditional antipathies to inflame their valid workplace grievances. Their protests were thus conceived as being essentially pre-political, motivated by material hardship and economic necessity and not by any intention to engage with a broader political agenda. This portrayal also allowed the press to respond critically to the agitator hypothesis. Why were the workers striking? Because of economic hardship. How were the workers organising themselves? By following age-old cultural patterns of military association.

This approach was not confined to the press. The Durban Chamber of Commerce subscribed to a similar understanding of the strikes, outlined in a confidential memorandum circulated to its members on 9 February.⁴⁶ The strike wave was growing at this point, as the municipal workers' strike brought workers out onto the city streets for the first time. This memo was thus intended in part as a reflection on the first series of strikes, at the same time as preparing its readers for the possibility of further action. The second part of the memo addressed this concern with a list suggesting ways of preventing further strikes.

Three prime causes were listed: firstly, the low wages that the workers had been receiving – 'in many cases without review or appreciable revision for a number of years'; secondly, a substantial rise of as much as 11 per cent in the cost of living in the past year; and, thirdly, 'the recent 16% increase in rail fares'. The memo argued that an

average 'Bantu family of 5' would need 'in terms of absolute minimum categories of expenditure' an income of R85.15 per month. Assuming that the main (male) earner contributed two-thirds of the family's income, then his weekly wage would have to be at least R14.74.⁴⁷ The average striking worker at Coronation Brick was earning R8.97 a week before the strike; after the successful negotiations, this was raised to R11.50 a week – a figure closer to but still below the national poverty datum line.⁴⁸

The Chamber of Commerce hesitated to expand its explanation for the strikes in Durban far beyond the obvious economic rationale for local labour discontent.⁴⁹ The memo was reluctant to support the minister of labour's statement widely publicised in the press a week earlier. In the place of the agitator hypothesis, the memo offered tentative indications of an alternate explanation. It emphasised that 'the local Bantu labour force is drawn predominantly from Zulu and is, in this way, more ethnically homogeneous than the labour force on the Reef'. And it suggested that 'the large and better skilled Indian community has also served to limit wage and job opportunities' for African workers.⁵⁰ This document does not discuss the organisational strategies of the striking workers. The similarity of these explanations to those offered in the local press is obvious: both assume the ethnic homogeneity of the striking workers and exclude non-Zulu and Indian workers from their analyses.

The workers themselves did not agree with this ethnic explanation for their strikes. Academics and students affiliated with the IIE conducted interviews in Durban in the aftermath of the strikes and recorded the responses of several workers. None of these interviews contains any declaration of ethnic solidarity and – in at least one case – the suggestion that traditional Zulu authorities played any role in inciting or organising the strikes was rejected, as a worker argued that '[t]hese people who say that it was Gatsha Buthelezi or the Paramount Chief who encouraged people to strike are still encouraging more trouble because I do not think two people can decide for so many people to do what they have done'.⁵¹

This same worker went on to suggest that 'these two men have nothing to do with the strikes but it was our empty stomachs'. This was a common note in these interviews, suggesting an unlikely agreement between workers and the Chamber of Commerce. Another worker expressed his belief that 'African workers have decided to strike because of the working conditions and because of a very low wage'. A third expressed himself in poetic rhetoric, explaining that the strikes had occurred because 'the child that does not cry dies' and, therefore, 'we should cry for ourselves for working hungry'.⁵² The economic causes of the strikes were thus eloquently expressed in terms of material deprivation and poor pay.

These workers explicitly rejected the idea that outsiders were behind the strikes. One dismissed the minister's notion that student groups – such as SASO and NUSAS – had incited the strikes, saying: 'It is not true that university students encouraged African people to strike because first of all we do not know them.'⁵³ Most workers quoted in the press and interviewed by the IIE appear to have rejected any suggestion of explicit political influence or intention. They articulated an interpretation that shared some of the assumptions apparent in the press coverage, notably that the principal cause of the strikes was economic. There seems to have been little need to discuss how they organised themselves – perhaps because, unlike the minister of labour, the white press or their employers, the workers themselves were not surprised by their ability to act rationally and in unison.

On the same day that the Durban Chamber of Commerce released its memo, the prime minister, John Vorster, made a lengthy speech in which he distanced himself from his minister's allegations. He did not mention the word 'agitator' in his speech. Instead, he said:

in the past there have unfortunately been too many employers who saw only the mote in the Government's eye and failed completely to see the beam in their own. Now I am looking past all party affiliations and past all employers, and experience tells me this, that employers, whoever they may be, should not only see in their workers a unit for producing for them so many hours of service a day; they should also see them as human beings with souls.⁵⁴

Vorster emphasised the autonomy and agency of the employers and distanced his government from both the causes of and possible solutions to the strikes. It was not political agitation that had caused the strikes, but economic hardships; therefore, it was not political solutions that would resolve the strikes, but economic ones. These were now the responsibility of employers. Vorster thus adopted a position that supported that of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and white press and not that of his minister of labour.

It is notable, however, that in neither of these positions were the striking workers themselves conceived of as political agents. For many contemporary commentators it was impossible to imagine African labourers as possessing political consciousness, let alone agency. Even for those who were sceptical about the agitator theory did not suggest that the workers had chosen to strike out of political discontent: rather, they believed workers were driven by economic necessity and hardship. Even the workers

themselves denied acting out of political considerations. And thus, for Vorster, the workers themselves could be understood as essentially apolitical – or pre-political – men: ‘human beings with souls’.

This idea that the striking workers were not politically aware shaped how both employers and the police in Durban responded to the strikes and the workers. If the workers were politically innocent, then any improvement in their conditions depended on those with consciences. By de-emphasising the political possibilities of the strike wave the government was delegating responsibility for the strikes to employers, who were conceiving the protests as soluble within the current political context of South Africa.

This had several different implications. For example, the IIE took Vorster’s quote for the title of the study it published soon after the end of the strike wave.⁵⁵ The quote played an unambiguous role in its argument, marshalling the prime minister in support of its primary contention – that the presence of ‘agitators’ was not necessary to explain these strikes. It too agreed that material hardship had driven workers to strike, and alleviation of their economic position – and the legalisation of protest and trade unions for African workers – would help prevent further unrest. The study was criticised for focusing too heavily on disproving the presence of agitators and thus sidelining possible explanations of worker organisation and activism.⁵⁶ Neither that study nor its critics, however, remarked on this partial consensus of views on the strike. Nor did they consider how this consensus on the non-political natures of the striking workers might have affected the local responses to the strikes. Instead, the IIE wrote its account of the businessmen’s responses to the strikes from within very much the same political paradigm.

Managing the strikes

When the researchers affiliated to the IIE came to prepare their initial analyses of the Durban strikes, they turned to a central theoretical text: Gouldner’s 1955 sociological study, *Wildcat Strike*.⁵⁷ This provided an insight into how the management of a strike-struck company in the United States had responded to its workers’ non-union strike. In this book, Gouldner describes how – in the case of spontaneous ‘wildcat’ strikes – managers ‘tended to conceive of the strike as a *struggle for control*’ between the workers and the company management itself. Understanding the strike in this way encouraged company managers to concentrate on the efficient administration of the progress of the strike – negotiations, offers and counter-offers – rather than on addressing the fundamental causes of the strike. The IIE suggested, then, that

this approach described the ways in which various company managers in Durban attempted to control and contain their striking work forces; it is also possible to extend this description beyond the IIE's initial remit and include in it the actions of the South African police and local magistracy as well.

The Durban Chamber of Commerce memo was remarkable because its final pages acknowledged that the ability to resolve the strikes lay in the hands of employers.⁵⁸ It presumed that, in the average case, employers not only had the ability to resolve these strikes through increasing inadequate wages, but also had the responsibility to do so. The list of suggested actions that closed the chamber's memorandum all follow from this: after a perfunctory instruction to 'notify' the Department of Labour, all further suggestions presumed the autonomous action of a company manager. This manager was instructed to first attempt to control the strikes by warning the workers that they would not be paid for the time that they were on strike and by advising them that their demands would only be considered 'on the condition that they return to work'. At this point, it was up to the manager himself to decide whether or not his current rates of pay were 'fully justifiable':

5. If you feel an increase in minimum wage is necessary, determine this increase and tell them of your decision. Thereafter stand by your decision.
6. Do not attempt to bargain as this will only encourage the Bantu to escalate his demands. Action must be positive, definite and final.⁵⁹

The manager should not surrender initiative, but could choose to recognise the validity of workers' claims. This approach thus allowed employers to bypass 'the ethical facet of the conflict' and to do 'whatever is necessary in order to "handle" or control the situation'. This approach, Gouldner suggested, was 'peculiarly useful to those who require some escape from a moral crisis' and bolstered a public defence of technical and managerial solutions to the strike.⁶⁰ Local business in Durban was determined to take the strikes – and their own responses to the strikes – out of the political realm and into their own control.

In reality, however, employers were often unable to reclaim the initiative from their striking workers. Many managers were unsurprisingly unable to project a firm façade of authority when faced with several thousand striking workers: the city engineer, for example, was forced to retreat when he sought to address striking municipal workers.⁶¹ Likewise, employers and managers were forced into negotiations with their workers in several cases; in many others, they were faced with large crowds of workers chanting

demands for R10, R20 or R30 a week. Nonetheless, this scenario provides an insight into how local management sought to control and contain the impact of the strikes on their companies: they saw the strikes as unfortunate but unavoidable events that must be managed and not as calamities that had to be immediately suppressed.

The autonomy of employers and company managers was also emphasised in the Chamber of Commerce's approach to the policing of the strikes. Labour stoppages and strikes by African workers were illegal at the time, and an employer in Durban would thus have been more than justified in calling the police to the scene of a strike. In theory, at least, all the strikers could have been arrested for contravening the law. Police action could be used to break strikes – the dockworkers' strikes in Durban and Cape Town in 1972 provided a recent example of police intervention.⁶² Nonetheless, the chamber advised its members to call the police only after the employers had done 'everything possible to avoid violence.'⁶³

Employers were reminded that 'stoppages to date have been mainly good natured' and that it was 'tactful police action' that had 'contributed greatly to this'. The relative peacefulness of the strikes, despite large crowds of armed and unhappy workers, was seen as a significant factor supporting the managerial approach to the strikes. (This was in implied contrast, perhaps, to the dockworkers' strikes of some months before.) The employers and company managers in charge of negotiations – and in charge of deciding whether to call in the police or not – were sternly advised by the Chamber of Commerce to acknowledge this relative peacefulness and to '[m]ake every effort to keep it this way'.⁶⁴

The reluctance of employers to see the striking workers as political agents also contributed to their general reluctance to see the strikes as needing forcible suppression. Very few employers did in fact call the police onto their properties – the notable exception here being the Frame Group's textile mills.⁶⁵ No charges appear to have been laid against workers as a result of their striking. Neither do charges appear to have resulted from the workers' own – sometimes threatening – behaviour while within their actual workplaces.

Indeed, this suggests that a particular pattern can be discerned in the policing of these workplace-based strikes. The police would gather in force outside the site of a strike; but they would remain on the periphery of the site, only rarely entering into the spaces occupied by the workers, and even then, only on the explicit invitation of employers. They would not interfere with the progress of the strike and would allow the workers to enter and to leave the site of their strikes individually and disperse

without interference. The workers would, however, be discouraged from leaving their workplaces en masse.

In the IIE's brief analysis of the policing of the strikes, it noted that 'apparently acting on higher authority, the police acted with restraint in the situation'. Thus, although noting that 'from the worker's perspective' the very presence of 'armed police, often with dogs, could only have been seen as a form of intimidation', this analysis emphasised again the absence of violence in the actual conduct of the police.⁶⁶ This characterisation of police action as 'restrained' found echoes in newspaper reports and editorials: in the *Daily News*, for example, the police were described as 'exemplary' due to the 'presence, the diplomacy and the quiet efficiency' that they had displayed 'in their true role as the protector of the innocent'. Even this praise, however, was tempered with the recognition on the part of the writers that, in the past, criticism of the police's brutality, 'sometimes justifiably', was common. Nonetheless, they noted, at present the police had not yet 'lost their cool'.⁶⁷

A consideration of the tension between the apparent 'restraint' and 'diplomacy' of the police and the recognition of their potential for brutal violence may provide an interpretation of the police's actual actions that was neither made at the time nor appeared in the literature that followed. The display of police force seems to have been central to the practice of policing these strikes and closely connected to the police's apparent reluctance to engage the strikers directly. At one level, this connection is simple: the display of potential force may act as a powerful preventative. The presence of 'truck-loads' of policemen accompanied by dogs and armed with batons, automatic rifles and tear gas would certainly have caused workers to reconsider the wisdom of acting violently. Even the workers at the Frame Group's mills in the most violent of the early strikes did no more than jeer at the nearby policemen.⁶⁸

But at another level, the spatial relations between the striking workers and watching policemen assume prominence: rather than focus, as observers at the time did, on the police force's positioning of its men away from the workers, it is useful to focus instead on the resultant positioning of the striking workers themselves. Workers were gathered in clearly demarcated spaces – a football stadium in one case, and the factories and compounds in which they lived and worked in most other cases. These spaces were demarcated both by their ordinary boundaries of fences, walls and gates and also by the cordons of patrolling policemen. The strikes were thus contained within the physically delimited spaces of factory grounds and compounds. While the participating workers went unmolested within these spaces, they were not permitted to breach their boundaries. The police stood by at the entrances and exits, allowing

marching workers to enter, but ensuring that they remained within these spaces. Workers were only permitted to leave these grounds at the end of the day in small groups or individually when finally dispersing homeward.

Early in February, before the municipal workers went on strike, a spokesperson told the press that the police would only act if the striking workers committed one of the following four offences: 'striking; holding a public meeting without a permit; carrying dangerous weapons; and creating a disturbance'.⁶⁹ Of these four, the first and the third were clearly the most significant; nonetheless, when the group of over 100 striking workers were arrested on Umgeni Road after a police baton charge, they were not charged with these offences, despite being in contravention of both. Instead, they were charged with and convicted of 'causing a public disturbance' – a charge that carried a sentence of either 30 days imprisonment or a fine of R30. The presiding magistrate, however, suspended either 25 of the 30 days, or R25 of the R30 for those convicted on the condition that they did not commit another offence involving violence 'to persons or property' in the following 12 months.⁷⁰ Judicial restraint was analogous to police action. It is not so much the conviction, but the lenience of sentence that is extraordinary. The workers were not prosecuted for the serious offences of striking or carrying dangerous weapons, despite the availability of such charges: instead, they were given light (largely suspended) sentences and instructed not to strike again.

Whether explicitly agreed or not, the actions of the police and judiciary operated within a shared field to ensure the preservation of local public order. By containing the striking workers within the physical spaces of their factories in the majority of the strikes, the police not only acted to ensure that the strikes could be controlled and resolved, but also to ensure that the communities outside of these factories would be insulated from disruption and potential violence. When in the case of the rumoured transport boycott the police protected the train stations against expected protesters, they acted also to insulate the central city and its working areas from potential disorder. When in the course of the municipal workers' strike the police disarmed and shepherded workers through the town, they were acting to minimise both the actual disruption caused by those striking workers and to reduce their potential for violence. Police practice therefore emphasised control and constraint, containment rather than engagement and disarmament rather than confrontation. It was neither philanthropic nor accidental, but in a context of some uncertainty of interpretation and strategy by the state, which was confronting a mass withdrawal of labour for the first time in many years, it was designed to maintain public order.

It is important to note, however, that this pattern of police restraint and disengagement was occasionally broken in the course of the strikes. In the case of the municipal workers' strike, for example, the spatial containment that marked the earlier attempts to police the strikes broke down. Unlike the workers in the earlier strikes, the municipal workers were not used to spending their days within a demarcated workspace: the first groups of striking workers were street cleaners, refuse collectors and other labourers employed by the City Engineer's Department.⁷¹ Their workplaces were not factory floors, but the city's streets. When they marched in protest, they did not congregate in one central space and the police could not contain them. This spatial freedom was sometimes connected to an increased public awareness of their violent potential. On 6 February, the first day of their strike, a large group of workers congregated outside the offices of the City Engineer's Department and demanded that the African clerks still working inside the building leave their desks. If they did not, the striking workers were alleged to have threatened that they would burn down the building.⁷² The same day, a group of African refuse workers were reported to have been 'chased several blocks by the strikers who brandished knobkerries'.⁷³ And on the following day, another group of striking workers invaded a local golf course, crossed its greens, and confronted its white secretary and his staff.⁷⁴

These encounters took place in notably public settings: in the city streets and outside the municipality's offices among others. The police concentrated on disarming the strikers and then on ensuring that they caused the minimum possible disruption while progressing through the city itself. Rather than try to break strikes, they set out to shepherd strikers. Most workers complied with police demands: they neither protested against nor resisted the instruction to break into smaller groups, nor did they resist the police as they were disarmed. Some of this compliance may have been associated with the police's superior force. Not only were the police fully armed with riot control gear, including rifles and tear gas, but two army helicopters were also patrolling the skies above Durban.⁷⁵ When one group of strikers moving down Alice Street refused to follow these instructions, they were assaulted by the police, arrested and charged with disturbing the public peace.⁷⁶ But clearly the majority of strikers were content to restrict their engagement to orderly marches.

Conclusion

The decision to treat these strikes, despite their illegality and scale, as essentially ordinary labour disputes that could be resolved through standard managerial techniques emphasised the agency and ability of individual employers and their

managers. It also emphasised their autonomy. In one of the rare cases in which a representative from the provincial Department of Labour was called in to assist in resolving a strike, he was humiliated by the gathered workers. The eventual resolution of the strike at Coronation Brick was then effected without the department's aid. This example would have given little encouragement to the idea that provincial or national structures set up to resolve and contain such labour disputes would be effective. Employers preferred, instead, to trust their own ability to manage the strikes and to communicate with the workers, contain their protests and resolve their grievances.

One consequence of this approach was that in the rush to resolve strikes before they became entrenched, most of the strikes resulted in an increase in wages. Out of approximately 160 strikes and work stoppages, 70 lasted for a day or less. A further 24 went on into a second day before being resolved, meaning that the majority of the strikes in Durban were resolved in under two days. The remaining 70 strikes lasted for more than two days, but less than seven days; no individual strike lasted for more than a week. Of these 160 short-lived strikes and stoppages, 118, or over 70 per cent, resulted in a wage increase for the workers involved. These increases were not overly generous (and fell far short of the sums being called for by the workers), but nonetheless represented a significant addition to the average worker's weekly wage. The majority of these increases ranged between R1 and R2 per week – which represented an increase of between 10 and 20 per cent on the average weekly wage at Coronation Brick and Tile, for example.⁷⁷

Employers were thus largely convinced that economic grievances lay at the root of the strike and acceded in part to workers' demands. The apparent economic strength of the country at the time – as well as the increasing need for semi-skilled black labour – may have also made these small wage increases seem commercially justifiable. Vorster's utilitarian approach to the strikes was thus confirmed and the state did not seek to suppress the strikes.

The Durban strikes and these responses to them helped set the framework for labour relations in subsequent years. Some opposition commentators saw in the strikes the rebirth of mass opposition to the apartheid regime. Although I cannot analyse labour activism here, it is clear that many of those engaged in the resurgence of trade unionism had broader political aims, and many would come to experience personal retribution from the state. But the pattern of the labour disputes in 1973 enabled them to be seen – at least at first – as largely non-political. The workers themselves were largely seen to be lacking political identity and agency. This view facilitated, as Friedman and Lodge demonstrate,⁷⁸ a relatively flexible approach that culminated in

the Wiehahn Commission of 1979 and the rebirth of legal labour organisation and unionisation among black workers in South Africa.

The government thus inadvertently created an ambiguously non-political space within which further activism could take place. The immediate result of the Durban strikes was the increasing scale and recognition of black labour mobilisation. This helped to open up a space not only for economic protests, but also for the organisation of unions and, post-Soweto, associated civic movements. Tracy Carson's chapter – immediately following this one – illustrates the scale of such mobilisation in Cape Town in the late 1970s. The Durban strikes were by no means the only example of popular protest in the early 1970s, but as the largest strike wave in the course of the decade, they helped shape the contours of an emerging political map, detailing the relations between sometimes-protesting workers, employers and the state.