

BONNIN

TWO GENERATIONS OF WORKER LEADERSHIP
THE HISTORIES AND TRADITIONS OF THE SARMCOL WORKERS

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Structural forces thrust individuals together. Into this forced relationship with each other, they bring traditions and experiences from their past. Through being in the immediate vicinity of each other they now face similar problems, structural forces and experiences. Through these common lived experiences a sense of community develops, whereby those individuals perceive themselves as a grouping, a community which has a common consciousness and way of understanding the world. For the Sarmcol workers, under discussion, their way of 'understanding the world' has put them into direct conflict and confrontation with Sarmcol management, the state and more recently Inkatha. As a result they have, while on legal strike been fired from their place of work; on numerous occasions over the last nineteen months had their township invaded by the police; and now Phineas Sibiya, chairperson of the shop stewards council and SAWCO Simon Ngubane, shop steward and cultural activist and Flomin Minikathi, daughter of a Sarmcol striker and health committee member were abducted and murdered. And so to their life-time of hardship, suffering and struggle the Sarmcol strikers can add these last experiences.

It is surely through experiences E.P. Thompson insists that objective determinations become subjective initiatives. Adding, that experience is valid and effective within determined limits. On the other hand Anderson (1980) objects to the vagueness of Thompson's definition. He identifies two different definitions: Firstly, as a mental and emotional response to similar events. This situates experience 'within' consciousness as a subjective reaction. Secondly as 'handled' to yield the responses of class and culture i.e. a process of learning occurs from such experiences. At times he argues Thompson conflates the two usages. In this way he suggests an alternative way of reading history as a whole. Anderson disagrees with the first definition, to some degree he accepts the second, but maintains that it has certain structural limits.

This debate has much to offer towards gaining an understanding of the Sarmcol strike. It is argued that their past experiences, and the traditions which these experiences have maintained and evoked, have been primary in the development of the current consciousness of the community. I would agree, with Anderson, that structural determinants are important, but, in the final analysis Thompson's argument is the more crucial to understanding the development of consciousness.

Anderson's critique relies to a large extent on examples, which he uses to illustrate the fallibility of Thompson's definition. However his arguments are developed at the level of the individual. He does not take into account that a community is undergoing the experience, that within a community there is debate, and, it is at the level of their common understanding and definition that consciousness develops. As a result of their prior experiences, and the consciousness which these have resulted in, the community decides if an experience is valid or not. During this subjective process, the experience will be

situated within the social conditions of the time.

In order to illuminate these points of discussion, one needs to turn to the experiences of the Sarmcol strikers. What will be found is that the experiences of the past have been processed, to result in a consciousness peculiar to that community. Without a knowledge of this past, it is difficult to fully understand and explain their present consciousness. In the following pages the nature of the Sarmcol labour force, the creation of one common history, the important role played by the imbongi and the memories of the past, will be examined.

THE SARMCOL WORKERS

The majority of Sarmcol strikers are between 51 and 60 years of age. Forty percent live in Mpophomeni, the others in the peri-urban area to the north-west of Pietermaritzburg. Born into families of labour tenants, they were forced off the land, coming to work at Sarmcol as full-time industrial workers. Due to the government's 'relocation programme' they were again moved, from their place of settlement in Howick (either George or Zenzele) to Mpophomeni. Most workers are the sole breadwinners, supporting families of between six and fifteen people. 67 percent of strikers have an educational level of standard 4 or less with 23 percent having no formal education at all. The majority attend the Roman Catholic Church or belong to some other mainstream religion (Bonnin, 1986).

This profile illuminates and brings to the fore aspects which must be taken into account, if one wishes to examine the processing and interpretation of experiences. Firstly, there is a very low level of literacy amongst the strikers. As a result the oral tradition of transmitting knowledge assumes the utmost of importance. The role of the imbongi is central, in the recording of events, in providing an understanding, for the community of how these events affected them, and, in being a central store of advice.

Secondly, the Sarmcol shop stewards are the visible leadership of the Sarmcol community. If one examines them as a collective we find that there is a difference between them and the majority of the Sarmcol workers. Sixty percent of the Sarmcol workers are older than forty years of age, however, most of the shop stewards are in their early thirties. The common childhood and early working experience of the Sarmcol workers is that of labour tenancy, yet, many of the shop stewards never directly experienced labour tenancy, either they were born in the 'shack areas' of Lions River or they left the farms as young children. Most of the Sarmcol workers have two experiences of unionization - SACTU and MAWU, yet for many of the shop stewards MAWU is their only experience. The majority of Sarmcol workers began working at Sarmcol in the 1950's or early 1960's. Most of the shop stewards began in the late 1960's, early 1970's.

Two generations of workers are represented here. The older generation makes up the mass of the workers, while the younger generation is the leadership. This should not be interpreted as a rejection of the older leadership. When Sarmcol retrenched large numbers of workers in the early 1980's most of them were older workers (who had memories of SACTU organization). And by coincidence they were also MAWU members. Yet the consciousness and ideology of the Sarmcol strikers reflects that of the the majority. The reality is that the shop stewards and/or younger workers do not see their histories as different. There is one common history that has developed. In the development of this one history, we find, that the imbongi has a vital role to play.

THE IMBONGI OF THE SARMCOL WORKERS

Lawrence Zondi is the imbongi of the Sarmcol workers. His life straddles two generations of struggle. Active during the 1950's he is now a MAWU shop steward. As an imbongi he is the carrier of the history of the Sarmcol workers, his responsibility is not only to record their struggles and experiences but also to interpret the significance of these experiences. In his orations he calls on the past to explain the present and give advice for the future.

Zondi comes from the line of Bambatha. The leader of the 1906 poll tax rebellion, transformed through popular culture to represent one of the pinnacles of resistance in Natal. Zondi himself picks up his story.

"My father was one of the sons of Chief Mzimba. He was taken, when my grandfather was shot, as a small boy, to Underberg. My father grew up and married at Underberg. He was working on a farm, for a long time. When my mother was passed away I have to come down here to Gezibuso. It was my uncle that was there. He was bringing us to stay here - Gezibuso. When my father got sick he came back here to Gezibuso. I was a small boy when I moved to Gezibuso, twelve years. I couldn't manage to go to school because the father that was here, he got many childs and couldn't take us to school. I went to night school. I got standard two. There was an african teacher but that house was a church house. When I was moving to Maritzburg I couldn't find a school. There was no night school. I started work working in a kitchen. I worked there a couple of years. After I left there I go work in Maritzburg. In Maritzburg I was working in the garden for a couple of years. I left there and was working in a road. Road department. While I was there I got married. I worked there a few months and that job was finished. I get

a job in Hilton Road there was a man he got a horse. I wasn't doing a lot of job. I was cleaning the horse and clearing the place where the horse was staying and taking it for walk-rides now. That was my job. Then I left there and started at Sarmcol. It was 1951 when I started at Sarmcol. By the time I was starting at Sarmcol I was married. My wife was staying at Gezibuso. I was sleeping at Howick West, there was a place to rent, an Indian place there I was staying and go home on weekends. Then the people was moved and I went to stay at the compound at Sarmcol. When I started at Sarmcol I was employed to work in mixing. But not for too long. Where I have been working long is in mechanical I, right till now."

These experiences form the material for Zondi's poetry. His style of oration is spontaneous, an event or a word unleashes him. Grabbing a stick, he strides up and down, words pouring out. He calls up images of zulu culture, past experiences and struggles of the Sarmcol workers, but also of other struggles against oppression, his style a mixture of the traditional imbongi and the lay preacher. In this mode he is usually providing inspiration to the workers to move forward and overcome the obstacles of the present. But at other times his role is more educational, explaining and telling the stories of past struggle - of previous times of resistance and unionization. But even in this role he draws links between the past and present.

During his years at Howick he has absorbed the local history, which he combines with wider experiences of oppression and exploitation (Green, 1986). But Zondi was not alone, his experiences were shared by other men who came to work at Sarmcol. He has taken these experiences and through his poetry welded them together to unite old and young around one common history.

THE HISTORIES OF OLD MEN

Eventhough people experience their life solitarily, as a result of structural determinants these experiences have shared themes. I would like to introduce you to three men. These men are from Zondi's peer group. They are also a community reference group. One of them is also a carrier of the history of the Sarmcol workers. However his role is different to Zondi's. He is not so much the interpreter of the past for the future, but the recorder of the past, the oral history book and its reference library. The other two are representative of the ordinary Sarmcol worker. They have no high political profile in the community. They are the strikers who sit at the back of the hall, miss meetings and slip out for a smoke break. Yet their life experiences are no different to that of the imbongi or the worker leader. In an

informal way they ensure the survival of the traditions. They ratify the experiences which are talked about on the public platform. They interact and pass on, to the new workers, these experiences; both the private and the public.

Ntombela is an old man. At the time of the massive retrenchments in 1982, he was retired from Sarmcol. He is not a central part of the present day struggle, however his importance lies in his age and experience. Interviewing Sarmcol workers, questioning them about the past - the 1950's, the ICU, often elicits the response,

"have you spoken to Ntombela, the old man from Impendle, he can tell you about that."

Ntombela was born in 1918 in the location of Impendle. "My fathers moved from Lionskop to Impendle and that's where I was born. They moved from the farms this side - farms owned by black people and moved to Impendle. People did own farms there, because they bought those places, early days, I don't know how. But people bought those places. They still owning them up till now. When my fathers moved to Impendle they were working on the roads department. They were making a road from Elandskop to Impendle, past Impendle and to Bulwer and all those places. And they were getting 25c a month.

I first started at school and I left at Class I, I couldn't further my education because my father was late. So I went to the farms to get a job in order to help my mother bring us up with other children. It was Mr Brook's farm, just by Impendle, I used to sleep there. There were no families staying on the farm. People were just coming from Impendle to work there. We didn't use that 6 month system. People worked all the time long. Then when you are tired of working on the farm then you just leave the job and go seek a job elsewhere. We used to plough with the cattle and I used to hold the rope. I was paid R1.50 per month. I worked on the farm for three years. I didn't like working on the farm. The conditions were very poor and bad but just because we were suffering we had to work.

At the age of twenty, I was employed by Sarmcol. We were very few at that time. When I first started I was working in footwear, trimming soles and heels. I left halfway and went to Joburg. Then I came back to work at Sarmcol. When I came to work I

was renting at George. It was very tough. After they broke down those houses, we were moved here to Mpophomeni. My wife came to stay awhile but then she went back to Impendle. Now I am pensioned I have moved back to Impendle."

Godfrey Tabazana is one of the faces in the crowd at union meetings. When Baba Zondi or other workers stand up, and draw on the past to explain the present, he has an empathy with their experience because their past is his past as well. He comes from a reserve in the area of Bergville.

"I was just looking after my fathers' cattle. There was in fact a big Tobazana family, not one family but Tobazane by surname and their cattle and goats. There were actually no possessors of those goats and cattle. So from there I had an opportunity to go and attend school. It wasn't that hard a life because at that time we were not aware of all these delicious foods. We used to live on maas and puto and there were somehow plenty goats some stage, without any celebration we had to slaughter a goat and we had meat. Our people were Sarmcol workers - both neighbours and also people among our family. So I completed my Form I and my father was somehow unable to let me continue with my education so I had to do some other things. And I then straight came to be an employee of Sarmcol. 9 March 1953 I was employed as a Sarmcol worker. We started with 2 pounds 65 shillings a week. I was renting at George. When they moved us, I came to stay at the Compound, the one at Mpophomeni. My wife was staying at Bergville."

The life of Simon Ntombela is the most statistically representative of the Sarmcol workers (Bonnin, 1986).

"I was born on a farm in Dargle. My mother and father were also from there. It was a big farm, many other families were living there. The limit of cattle for us was five. This was set by the farmer. I, my brother and my sister, we were three who were responsible for that farm. We tend to the fields, see to the roads which are done right and then also during the harvest we go and work. Initially the order was that we had to work six months outside. Some would go to other farms and some would go here and work at Sarmcol. My father was at Sarmcol. But finally it got to that position where he (the farmer) was saying no to that system. We had to leave because his rules were getting more

tough. We went to another farm. This one did not allow cattle. It was much worse. I was the one responsible for working on that farm. It was so hard that I ran away. I got arrested, my father came to fetch me, and I had to work on that farm for nine years. Then I got my leave and we left and went to live at Zenzele. I was in Zenzele for two years or so before I found work at Sarmcol. That was 1960. We were earning R6. Then the City Council said we must leave Zenzele and we came here to Mpophomeni."

At this point, where they and other Sarmcol workers, were to meet, already they had had experiences of a similar nature. Most were from rural backgrounds, with access to land and cattle. Their families and/or neighbours had a tradition of working at Sarmcol. These are the experiences that absorbed when he came to Sarmcol; the reserves, labour tenancy, migrancy, and exploitation. Now in the turbulent decade of the 1950's their lives were to intersect.

The 1950's were characterised by widespread political action. On the one hand the African National Congress (ANC) mobilized on the political front while the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and its affiliates were organizing amongst the working class. These efforts resulted in mass mobilization on all fronts. The state responded to the various campaigns of the 1950's with severe repression, resulting in the banning of the ANC in the early 1960's. Many activists and trade union leaders were arrested and detained causing organization to collapse, SACTU was forced into exile and workers were left unorganized and leaderless for more than a decade.

Howick did not escape the turmoil which engulfed the rest of South Africa. It was a small close-knit community with most of its residents employed at Sarmcol. They were also caught in the general political upheaval. Its residents joined political organization and participated in political campaigns. For most people, however, their experience of organization during the 1950's was linked to their working lives at Sarmcol. It was through SACTU organization that the Congress tradition left its mark in Howick. Yet, union organization and veteran unionist Harry Gwala were active at Sarmcol long before the mass campaigns of the 1950's.

Ntombela had met Gwala when he first came to work at Sarmcol. He describes his early memories of Gwala and the union,

"There was a union but it wasn't inside because Harry Gwala was still organising at that time. He was still trying to find members. He was not doing his job properly because he was afraid of the police at that time. We just heard that it was a union but we didn't know the name of that union. When

I left in 1935 Gwala was already organising.
And when I went to Joburg I also met this
union."

After working in Johannesburg Ntombela returned to Sarmcol and
once more encountered Gwala and the union.

GWALA'S UNION

Harry Gwala is an elusive figure of the Natal midlands. He is
remembered by most, however, few will talk either about him or
about his activities. He left his mark securely on organizational
history in the Natal Midlands/Pietermaritzburg area, yet, his
activities are documented in no history book. And his
contemporaries are either imprisoned or dead while he is serving
a life sentence on Robben Island.

At this point dates are hazy. For the Sarmcol workers they are
meaningless. Ntombela claims that Gwala was already organizing
Sarmcol workers in the 1930's, however, other sources point to
the 1940's. He was a member of the communist party and influenced
his contemporaries to join. He also worked closely with Moses
Mabhida (Lodge, 1986). According to Luckhardt and Wall
(1980:77),

"H.T. Gwala began trade union organization
work amongst Africans in the distributive
trade, chemical building and brick and tile
industries in the mid-1940's."

They also report that the Sarmcol workers had been organized into
different trade unions since the war. It is noted that in 1955 a
delegate, M. Pillay, of the Howick Rubber Workers Union,
representing 750 workers, attended the Inaugural Conference of
SACTU. However by 1962 the union was called the Rubber and Cable
Workers' Union and the membership had increased to 1500. To the
workers the name was unimportant. It was 'Gwala's Union'. Gwala
was without doubt a charismatic leader.

"Just call the people outside the Sarmcol
grounds. Just tell them he is having a
meeting, what he should want, what they
should fight. And we was follow."

Gwala was never allowed access to Sarmcol premises. The members
had to devise other means of meeting,

"Harry Gwala used to come to us during our
lunch breaks, call us together outside of the
factory gates and explain to us what a union
was, how we can be members."

The most well known meeting place was under the tree, across the
road, by the bridge.

"Gwala used to call the people under a tree,
the people would sit down there and discuss
their problems, ... we would sing songs about
worker struggle, ... he told us that we had
to fight for a higher wage and conditions at
work ..."

At the meetings, Gwala's most important organizational message to the workers was that of unity. This is the message that the workers remember, the message that has traversed generations of Sarmcol workers,

"He tell everybody that you must be one. Because if you are one then everything will come alright. He say if you talk something, if you see something bad, you must go all together and tell the boss that you want that and that."

All activities associated with the union faced constant police harassment. Worker's implicated Sarmcol management in the speedy arrival of the police whenever Gwala's presence was noted.

"The police used to approach them while they were just sitting under the tree, ... police used to come and ask Gwala what we were doing. He did not appear scared of them, especially Afrikaner police. He would tell them what they want - a living wage and healthy and safe working conditions."

Sarmcol management refused to meet with or recognize the union. Thus alternative methods of pushing their demands forward had to be found.

"Management was not prepared to meet with Gwala but he has to force the matter to go through till he meets them. ... So we used to be behind him at our lunchtime and say we must do this and give us instructions then we will listen to that instruction over lunchtime and proceed to meet the management. ... So that when we were holding our meeting we had a letter drafted and then we proceeded with that letter to management. He remembers some stage where people couldn't go for lunch, they were all around the lawn by the offices and the management at that time was Sage, he came out and asked what was happened. And the guy with the letter, Macqudo took the letter and gave it. ... It was the workers who were given instructions or told how to do it."

At other times workers used other strategies,

"There was also a time when workers wore stickers which had 'rubber burns' written on them. It was a way in which workers show management that they are misusing their power and the rubber in fact does burn. So people were mobilizing on that issue so that they could get their benefits."

Seminars were organized and through their union they had contact with other organized workers. Workers who were "experienced in the union" used to attend the meetings. Ntombela described his

experience,

"We used to attend those meetings in Durban. Hire cars in Howick. But we used to hold those meetings at night for fear of the police. We were just taught how to organize unions, what is the help of the unions, how will the union help us. We used to have such meetings. We were also told that whites in overseas fought for their rights through the union and we fight for our rights too we will also come right. How we used to hold meetings and sometimes were frightened and don't hold meetings at all in fear of police. We were not free at all organizing those meetings."

Sarmcol workers were also visited by other ANC and SACTU officials,

"Moses Mabhida came. He used to explain to us that it is helpful joining the union, because the union will help us, no other people will help us in our problems in the company except ourselves. If we are not organized there's nobody to help us. The company cannot do us favours either, they will oppress us."

"I remember Oliver Tambo but he only came once and I did not see him after that. There were quite a lot of people at the meeting but it was just a usual meeting. He's not important with us, he went away and left us alone."

Gwala and the presence of the union meant more for the Sarmcol workers than a few meetings 'under the tree'.

"We actually improved some of the things as far as wages were concerned being an organised people."

It is to these campaigns and the events of the 1950's that we now turn.

OVERALLS

Sarmcol management (Rosenthal, 1981) claim that when a directive was issued from the Labour Department to supply workers with overalls, this was followed. However the workers have a different version of events. Workers claim that overalls were only issued to workers in the mixing department, it was acknowledged that those people were working in a dirty area. The rest of the workforce were required to work in their own clothes. The account of how the rest of the workforce won the demand for overalls is somewhat muddled. Simon Ngubane, who was a shop steward under MAWU, recounted the story as told to him by his father,

"Father saying Gwala is a very strong man. Gwala out of the gate, jump on car, call the people, 'come here, come here, join the union, the union is the power of the workers. Gwala is saying power power. Call the police. After that ... management is afraid, give out overalls."

Workers at the time expanded the story,

"We used to work with our own clothes. The union demanded that the company give us overalls. They refused and we went into the factory but we refused to work. We waited until they gave us overalls. ... New personnel manager arrived after the strike and promised that all the workers would be issued with overalls. So we were given short-sleeve overalls. Given these overalls after the strike, therefore the short-sleeve overalls issued was the compromise after the strike."

However some workers, employed during the 1950's denied that a strike had ever taken place over the issue of overalls. Whatever the exact version is, we do know that the issuing of overalls to the workforce was a grievance, using their organized force (in whatever) way they won the demand for overalls. This struggle has survived in popular memory, to illustrate to workers the advantages of organization.

POTATOE BOYCOTT

The potatoe boycott was a campaign which straddled the divide between the reproductive and productive spheres. The boycott was called by the ANC in response to the horrific conditions found on the potatoe farms in the Bethal district. The campaign was taken up by SACTU and by all accounts was extremely successful (Luckhardt and Wall, 1980).

"I heard the rumours at one time, it was said that people who were arrested or sentenced used to plant the potatoes. They were beaten there to the extent that they would die and even be buried in the same place as the potatoes were planted. ... I heard that the workers in the Transvaal are digging potatoes by hand. ... That was the anger that arose among the people to boycott the potatoes. ... 'Cause when you cutting the potatoes, when you see the water what was coming to the potatoes they say it was the blood of the people, ... So there were papers issued out. Some were put to the telephone or to the post and some were put on the bridge. Wherever one could see. ... You were finding the posters down on the floor. Sometimes you

will find it on the wall like that. Without any signature of who bought it. ... People in the community were all behind the potatoe boycott. ... People from Impendle were the people who were against the boycott - they used to buy pototoes, they used to say want to buy potatoes go to Impendle. They were complaining that we are starving. We was tell them that we are also starving."

This campaign linked their exploitation to that of other workers. It enabled them to see their struggles in the light of a national perspective. Exploitation and suffering was something all workers suffered.

ANTI-PASS CAMPAIGNS

One of the most prominent campaigns of the 1950's was the anti-pass campaigns. The Sarmcol workers, the majority of them having come from the families of labour tenants, had experienced the full brunt of the pass-laws. They knew the difficulty of getting urban employment, if you were from the countryside. They had also learnt ways of getting around the laws (Bonnin, 1986). And because of this they also refused to carry passes.

"Pass-books were introduced, and they restricted people's movements therefore people could not move to other areas to find work. People were annoyed even though they were not that clear about passes/politics and things. ... an instruction, a command that people must carry their reference book wherever, from morning until they go back from work. Lunchtime you must carry it in your overall. So that has created a problem - if it falls down you have to pay money again and if you are caught not having your reference book then again you are arrested. So people met, came all together. So they took a decision that we must get rid of it. ... There are quite a lot of people who burn their pass and since then they haven't taken another one. They don't even bother with their pension because you cannot get pension if you haven't got a reference book. They say they don't care, they will not carry a reference book because our power has been misused.

BUS BOYCOTT

During the 1950's the workers initiated a boycott of the bus service.

"So the issue was firstly we used to pay 6d from Riversdale to Sarmcol and then the owner put up the price by 3d and we said 'no we won't use your buses now, because you didn't even think of 1d just 3d one time'. So all

the people boycotted the bus, the price went down to 7d. ... This happened when Gwala was still there. So it started from our meeting and we discussed the issue. 'The man has put 3d and made it 9d.' So we took the decision that no-one should ride the bus, we pass the message to our children, to our wives."

Workers took up this issue using their factory organization. This was the forum at which it was discussed and the decision made there, was passed onto the community.

1959 NATAL DISTURBANCES

Between June and August 1959 Natal was shaken by a series of events which became known by a variety of names: Natal Disturbances, Natal Riots or Womens' Protests. Resistance began in Cato Manor in June. Women angered by continued police raids on brewing and shebeens marched to the municipal beer-halls, chased out the customers and destroyed the beer. News of the demonstrations spread and other women followed suit. At first the disturbances were confined to the urban areas, but by late July, early August the rural areas were afire (Natal Witness, June - August 1959; Walker, 1982; Yawitch, 1978).

Howick did not remain aloof from these events. The Sarmcol workers even though they were not directly involved, these campaigns being directed by the women, were aware of the happenings and in some cases even took credit.

The first news report of the Pietermaritzburg area being affected appeared on the 15 August 1959 (Natal Witness). The previous day women had attacked the municipal beer hall in Retief Street. As a result all beer halls would be closed until the position was discussed. There had also been disturbances in Edendale, where thirty women had been arrested, they were subsequently joined by women from New Hanover and Durban. By this stage the New Hanover women had already destroyed dipping tanks in their area. Incidents of this nature continued to be reported until August 27, the day after Chief Luthuli issued his peace message, when women once more stoned the beerhall in Rietief Street (Natal Witness).

The Department of Bantu Administration started an inquiry into the causes of the 'Natal Riots'. They reported that the actions of some white officials helped set off the explosion. While dipping inspectors forced african women to fill tanks without payment. In order to speed up their work inspectors forced cattle through quickly, the dip mixture was made so weak that it did not kill the ticks although it nearly killed the weakened cattle (Natal Witness).

BEER HALL BOYCOTT

The Sarmcol workers were never directly involved in the boycott of the beerhalls,

"Here in Howick it wasn't like Pietermaritzburg or Durban. There it was hot. ... So in fact they were against the white zulu beer. At George they didn't interfere with those people because they were brewing their own beer, they were not buying from town or the beerhall."

This does not mean that they were not fully aware of the situation,

"Yes I do remember the call that people shouldn't handle ever those beer containers and there were a lot of fight, people hitting those people who used to go for beer and the police used to intervene. When the police are away we used to continue hitting those people. ... Women were hitting men to stop them from buying beer ... the men were wasting money that's why the women were fighting. ... It was mainly the women who were leader of that campaign because they were not arrested, somehow they could just take out their doek and then hold by hand. ... At the time of the boycott some of the men were wearing dresses like women, fighting with those men who were buying beer. ... There was no women's section of Congress organizing here at George, we men used to organize our wives because we were the believer of Congress. ... We were told if we were to offer we would simply be arrested, so we rather be behind all the scene and we used to see the police chasing the wives 'hey you wives go away' and being arrested."

CATTLE DIPS

While the men were aware of the beerhall boycotts, it did not affect them directly. They heard the stories, claimed it was the men who were organizing it, but none of them were directly involved, neither did any activity take place in George. With the destruction of the cattle dips it was a little different. Dips were destroyed in the rural areas. The majority of Sarmcol workers had come from rural areas. During the 1950's many of them still had wives and family living in these areas. The Natal Witness notes that 11 dipping tanks in the New Hanover Magisterial District had been destroyed. There was and still is today a large number of Sarmcol workers who come from this area. Their explanation for the anger co-incides with the official source.

"There was problem with the cattle. The black's cattle is dying but not the farmers. The women is come out on strike against dipping. ... with the dipping there were crowd of women coming with stones and putting inside the dips because they said no cattle must be dipped. It was happening from Lions

River, Howick down to Pietermaritzburg, ... Swamde the dips were closed, ... the police were guarding the dip to stop the women from closing them. The men can go to prison easily then women, thats why women were doing the job."

Workers reported that Dips were attacked in areas as far off as Bergville,

"It was well known because although there were no papers or pamphlets but as soon as we would arrive we would inform the people, 'such action is on'."

One area which seemed to escape unscathed was that of Impendle.

From the activity of 1959 it is possible to draw out three points:

1. These activities were ANC rather than SACTU linked and as such did not directly involve the Sarmcol workers.
2. Even though it was the women who took up the campaigns, they still believed that men were behind them.
3. As during the potatoe boycott, the people of Impendle did not take part in these campaigns.

POUND A DAY CAMPAIGN

The campaign for a pound a day vibrated throughout the Howick area. Present day Sarmcol workers, who were working on white farms during the 1950's reported that they had heard rumours of what was happening at Sarmcol,

"I hear the rumours that the organizers of that union was Harry Gwala. But I hear - only hear, never see Gwala help the people at Sarmcol by giving them a pound a day."

"At first Gwala approached the management for negotiations over on pound a day and the company refused at first. So we waited for a year. Gwala was still trying to negotiate with the management. They refused. After a year Gwala said we must go onto a strike. ... we must be paid R2 per day. We strike for R2 per day. ... We stayed at home until we get response. We did stay three days. Monday, Tuesday we only started work on Thursday then. I don't recall anyone being arrested or fired from work. But what I actually know is that there was a lot of intimidation of people happening, that they shouldn't talk about this, they were 'told' to stay neutral. ... They agreed to the demands of the workers because they gave us overalls and agreed to one pound a day. After we had received a pound a day, again we came back again, Harry said we must demand another one pound a day on top of this one now. There

was a lot of argument amongst management itself but people didn't strike. But after some weeks or so we got the second one pound. And after that they started deducting again, deductions and we didn't know what these deductions were for. And we just kept on working, we couldn't do anything."

From information available in Luckhardt and Wall it seems as if this campaign took place in 1961. Soon after this Gwala was arrested and organization at the factory started to crumble.

1961 STAY AT HOME

This was the last general strike called by the Congress Alliance. Its aim was to protest the celebrations around the declaration of the South African Republic. The ANC was calling for a National Convention of all political leaders to work out alternatives. The organization of the stayaway centered around SACTU organized factories (Luckhardt & Wall, 1980). The Sarmcol workers participated in this stayaway and according to Luckhardt and Wall (1980) they brought the factory to a complete standstill, with all 1500 workers out on strike.

"That time was making the Republic, Republic Day. Was a strike that Day to stand up to the Republic, Congress wasn't like, was never vote for it. We stay away for three days, after three days we come back to work. The police and army are there ... areoplanes, police and army everywhere round here trying to make people go back to work. People are running down to the dam and hiding. But it never happened. We was told that time we strike Friday, Monday, Tuesday was three days."

Soon after this Gwala was arrested. By 1962 the Pietermaritzburg SACTU Local Committee had ceased to exist as a result of Gwala's banning and restriction of movement (Luckhardt & Wall, 1980). This also resulted in a decline in organization at Sarmcol.

"He wrote us a letter saying he can't hold any meetings with us, he is banned for life from holding meetings with us. He left nobody inside, but there was one guy Felix Ngcobo who also tried to organize but he failed. He was a worker in the factory. He didn't have the right education or information to feed us because he was afraid of the police to contact those people in Pietermaritzburg. ... The organization continued for a few months and then we find that it dropping, there was no leader. ... People from outside did come for a few periods and then they left. They were just scared, with stories that Gwala's been

arrested and they will be the next to be arrested. The one from inside was Baba Zondi. The police did come to him at the hostel and there was a lot of intimidation, harassment. But they couldn't arrest him because they had no grounds."

And so the organization and gains which the Sarmcol workers had built up and made during the 1950's was broken and destroyed. But the lessons were not forgotten.

The most important ideological lesson of this period was worker unity. It was something which Gwala preached about, but he did not only talk about it, they also experienced its benefits. It was through unity that they won their demands for overalls and a pound a day. They also learnt about the improvements which come with a Union. Without a union it is difficult for the workers to maintain unity. Management soon pushes back the frontier of control and workers loose the gains they have made. SACTU also taught them solidarity with other workers and oppressed people. For the Sarmcol workers there were no structural links between factories. However, through the different campaigns they took up united action, eg the potatoe boycott, the 1961 stay-away. But also they felt themselves to be part and parcel of a broader dispossed black population. The ANC itself was not strong in Howick. Most organization occured through the SACTU presence. Workers used their factory based links with each other to discuss community issues.

THE SECOND GENERATION

The 1960's witnessed not only the banning of the ANC and the movement underground of SACTU but also an influx of new workers to Sarmcol. 15.1 percent began to work between 1965 and 1970 (the workers employed since 1966 make up 43 percent of the current strikers). Some of these were older men, labour tenants evicted from white farms and forced into factory work. While others were seeking their first job at the factory which had employed their fathers and their neighbours (Bonnin, 1986). From this grouping of men are to be found a large number of today's shop stewards.

Simon Ngubane started working at Sarmcol in 1973. He had completed Standard 5 and was 18 years old. His parents had both been born on the same white farm, yet before his birth they had moved to Tweedie, an informal semi-urban settlement on the other side of Midmar Dam. Here they kept chickens and goats and had access to about 200 meters of land on which they grew a variety of vegetables. His father worked at Sarmcol, and it was from him that Simon learnt about the struggles. His father told him about Harry Gwala, the police and the union. In fact Simon could tell you as much about the 1950's as can the older workers who lived through that era. The family was removed from Tweedie and with the establishment of Mpophomeni moved there in 1969.

Moses Madalala was born on a white farm in the Howick area. His family left the farm when he was still very young, moving to another farm. However, by 1956 they were living in the reserve area of Inchanga. He found his first job at Hilton College. His older brother was employed at Sarmcol, not only did he eventually find him a job at Sarmcol, but he also told him about Gwala and the union.

By the 1970's Sarmcol employed 2000 workers (Labour Monitoring Group, 1985). This was made up of workers who had lived through the turbulent period of the 1950's. They had experienced the power of a united workforce, they knew what a union could achieve for its members but they had also experienced the disillusionment of the 1960's. They had seen what happens when the leadership gets arrested, they had watched their organization collapse and the gains they had won being taken from them. However, there were also the 'new' workers. In many cases the children of the old workers. They had also heard about the 1950's, but in most cases they only knew of the victories, the charismatic Harry Gwala, the fiery speeches and the spurning of the police.

Gwala's sentence ran its course and he returned to Pietermaritzburg and Howick in the early 1970's. It seems coincidental that he arrived at the birth of today's independent trade unions. The new Sarmcol workers did not recognize him and did not know that he was around. However, the older men, those active during the 1950's met up with him again. Many people were afraid and avoided contact with him, while others met and talked to him. Gwala still gave the workers the same message of unity and organization. To these workers it was prophetic when shortly after Gwala's appearance two 'white girls' arrived, handing out pamphlets and urging workers to join a union.

Baba Zondi was one of the first to join MAWU. The first attempts at union organization were smashed. They had to start again. But once more the state reacted and organizer Moses Ndlova was banned. However, the union continued to recruit members and explain to the workers the purpose and necessity of a trade union. Management set up a Liason Committee, which the union used in an attempt to push workers' demands. Baba Zondi was a member of the Liason Committee.

"Management as choosing those people who was standing for workers, when he was choosing you to stand for those people, that time I being elect for works liason committee and then the management was appoint me. 'Cause I got train for trade union I told the workers what the management was discussing and I have to go down to the office and tell them what management say, what decision, what management was taking. And the minute what we was giving to the works-liason committee was taking those minutes to give it to Jeff and organizer to see that and he was teaching us how we must operate that meeting. What to

put to management, what the workers they want. But you won't get that thing now. ... When a thing is supporting a management they bring it quick when, that thing is workers they want something, they don't bring it quick, it take time."

The workers realized that the liason committee could not achieve their demands. The only way to get rid of it was to organize the workers into the trade union. Baba Zondi explained how it was done, using the example of Simon Ngubane,

"... using a lecture, that time small group, it grew, grew, grew, teaching them what a trade union want, what we should need, and what we should ask. Must see the management are supposed to give us this. And the people was join the trade union now, like Simon Ngubane, he was one of the men working on Hose I. When we talking with him, give him a small book. Now the people was like him, he was always teaching the people, the trade union was growing up inside the Sarmcol. Now the people was like, when he got sometimes case, come to Ngubane and ask him, now we give him idea to go to that case, win that case. Now the people is come, now they see the trade union is working alright."

It was the retrenchments of the early 1980's that gave the union the opportunity to recruit many more members as well as to sign a preliminary recognition agreement with Sarmcol.

"After management was retrenching their workers inside the Sarmcol. Now the people's see more then is not a trade union, is not safe. Now they starting all inside the company to join the trade union. Was late because a lot of people was retrenched. Those that was a member of trade union, the trade union was trying to push to the management when the people was retrenched. Must tell the workers why you retrench, why they must retrench they say they short of job. Must discuss when you say you got a short of job and you must have a proposal how many people you got to retrench, for what reason, why, you got no job, when you got no job you must take a man to another department. And discussing about that. Some of those people that was retrenched, there was a case what the trade union was putting, get money."

An out of court settlement was reached between MAWU and Sarmcol. The retrenched workers would receive some sort of settlement and the union and Sarmcol would sign a preliminary recognition agreement; giving the union stop order facilities and access.

Among the workers retrenched at this time were many old SACTU activists including Ntombela from Impendle.

The union and Sarmcol negotiated over the recognition agreement for two years. In 1985, their patience exhausted the union took a strike ballot. All but four workers voted in favour. On the 30 April 1985 the workers went out on strike. Three days later the company fired them.

The Sarmcol workers have, at the time of writing, been on strike for 22 months. During this time they have engaged in a series of innovative actions (SALB, 1985, 11(2)) in order to protest their dismissal and secure their reinstatement. They have established the Sarmcol Workers' Co-operative (SAWCO). This provides the community with some means of subsistence to sustain them during the strike, as well as being a possible alternative to employment at Sarmcol. At present the workers are awaiting the outcome of the industrial court case. Their present solidarity is unthinkable without their history. (Bonnin and Sitas, forthcoming).

CONCLUSION

The past experiences of the Sarmcol workers have now been recounted. The lives of the older workers, the importance of the imbongi, the struggles of the 1950's and the push to get MAWU inside the factory. It has been argued above that these experiences have shaped the particular consciousness of these workers. An important precondition and part of this consciousness was the moulding of one history for all Sarmcol workers.

In the creation of a single community history Zondi has played a vital role. However there have been other influences. Firstly, for many of the workers, within their extended families, there is a tradition of working at Sarmcol. Their fathers or brothers came home with the stories of struggle. These stories were not only recounted but their relevance, the workers' interpretations and values were also passed on. Secondly, there was the return of Harry Gwala in the early 1970's. He came back to Sarmcol, and recalled to the fore of their memories the old days of struggle and victory. He also brought them messages of worker organization and unity. When MAWU appeared soon after, it seemed to the workers as if the two were linked. Thirdly, many of the younger union members were recruited into MAWU by old workers who had been unionized in the 1950's. Zondi in particular played a vital organizing role. In the organizing process lessons from the past were utilized. Fourthly, there is important role played by the imbongi. Zondi educates the workers about past struggles. And at the same time offers interpretations of how the past can affect the present. The final point is that these experiences which Zondi recalls are ratified by the majority of the Sarmcol workers. They agree, he is also talking about their lives. This enhances his stature and lends weight to his words. From this

common perception, a consciousness emerged. It is to an examination of the consciousness of this grouping that we now turn.

The Sarmcol workers are strongly aware of their oppression and exploitation. They are aware that the land around Howick used to belong to their chiefs, and that it is the home of their ancestors. Its expropriation is explained in terms of economics and race.

"the whites came here, they saw it was green and fertile and so they took our land and pushed us to Impendle, the place of hills and rocks."

This is the first in the line of removals which have ended at Mpophomeni. The labour tenant who lost all access to land and was forced to become an urban worker. This oppression has been further enhanced by the harshness of working life at Sarmcol. They have experienced the full brunt of both apartheid and capitalism. It is this experience of exploitation which has blunted the development of a purely national consciousness.

SACTU's legacy remained in popular memory. It affected MAWU's organizational drive in two ways. On the one hand some people were more receptive to MAWU (they remembered the achievements of a union), while on the other hand workers were scared to be involved. But ultimately the experience of SACTU illustrated to workers that life in the factory was easier when they had an organization to protect them. They could improve conditions and were not as vulnerable to management's arbitrary discipline. Organization under SACTU also gave them a national perspective. They did not regard themselves as one small factory, but saw themselves as part of a national movement. The leaders of the 1950's were people they knew. They are regarded as comrades in struggle. However, for those workers it is MAWU and COSATU which is their organization and will represent their interests as workers, both in the present and the future.

The Sarmcol workers are dependent on the oral transmission of knowledge. The imbongi is central to this process. Zondi uses imagery, phraseology and concepts peculiar to zulu culture. He also draws on zulu history. However, this is fused with other influences. At times his style of oration is reminiscent of the etheopan preacher. While his style is a mixture of the traditional imbongi and the lay preacher, the content utilizes a wide range of subjects. It might at times be centered in the struggles of the Sarmcol workers or their common ancestors, but at no time is it narrowly ethnic. This has resulted in a consciousness which sees itself as zulu but is also national in the final analysis. He has left no room for narrow ethnicity. Their freedom is linked to the freedom of all workers and oppressed people in South Africa.

In this paper the following argument has been presented, that the experiences of the Sarmcol workers have been welded together, through a variety of forces to present one common history. This

process plus their experiences have resulted in the development of a common understanding of the world. As a result their perception of themselves as exploited workers has been tempered by the experience of apartheid. While many of their cultural expressions might be 'zulu' as such, this is not expressed in an ethnic way. Their experiences of national struggle have resulted in a broader expression of african nationalism. The crucial point is that this consciousness is a mass expression of the strikers consciousness. The question is if this unity is broken what will happen to this consciousness? Will these traditions, history and cultural expression also be lost?

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