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Social citizenship and the transformations of wage labour in the making of Post-Apartheid South Africa, 1994-2001

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ABSTRACT

This work is an investigation of the relationships between waged labour and social citizenship during the first decade of post-apartheid democracy in South Africa. In particular, I look at the ways in which changing forms of work and employment have affected workers' access to social security, contributory benefits and non-contributory grants. The dissertation analyses two case studies (workers in the glass, paper and metal industry in the East Rand and Johannesburg municipal employees) by focusing on how rising unemployment, job losses, precariousness and casualisation impact on employees' social provisions. The research is connected to theoretical debates that, in the developed and the developing world, have emphasised the importance of the waged condition and of labour movements in expanding social security as part of the broader concept of social citizenship. In classical theorisations, from T.H. Marshall to G. Esping-Andersen, social citizenship defines a generation of rights premised on decommodification, or the provision of social goods (including pensions, unemployment benefits, housing, healthcare and municipal services) as entitlements aimed at minimising individual dependence on the labour market.

The concept of decommodification underpins this dissertation. My analysis of the relationships between wage labour and social citizenship in South Africa is ultimately an inquiry of the ways in which wage labour and working class organisations have been able to deepen and widen the decommodification of workers' livelihoods. This conceptual perspective is particularly relevant to the South African case, especially in consideration of the decisive role played by organised labour both in contributing to the downfall of apartheid and in spearheading post-apartheid democratic institutions and progressive social policies. The historical role of organised labour in the South African transition was not confined to workplace issues and unionised workers' concerns, but it also emphasised broader demands for social citizenship rights, decommodified provisions and a politics of community-based alliances. Influential scholarly works have often characterised these aspects under the heading of "social movement unionism".

In a post-apartheid scenario, social movement unionism is increasingly embattled due to rising unemployment and "atypical" employment, and to the adoption of market-orientated socio-economic policies by the post-1994 African National Congress government. Labour's ability to promote agendas for decommodification and social citizenship are concurrently facing uncomfortable realities and problematic questions. Has wage labour fulfilled its "promise" to be a vehicle to expand the social rights of the working class and the poor? In which ways are employment and labour market changes affecting organised labour's ability to expand areas of societal decommodification? Are alternative identities and social citizenship discourses emerging in response to the crisis of stable employment?

I address these questions by looking at workers' responses to the crisis of wage labour as emerging in case studies “from below”, and at the ways in which such responses are framed and elaborated within the post-1994 social policy discourse. A second component of my research, therefore, is based on interviews with policy-makers and documentary analysis on the development of social policy from 1994 to 2001, which emphasise shifting policy discourses on the wage labour-social citizenship interaction. In the final analysis, social citizenship emerges from this work not merely as a static construct, centred on programmes and institutions, but as a terrain of negotiations and a "contested field of signification", shaped by the encounter of institutional narratives and meanings defined by grassroots agency.

The result of the research confirms that concepts of "social citizenship" and "wage labour" are profoundly shaped by contradictions determined by underlying social contestation. In fact, respondents in my case studies clearly perceive the crisis of stable, dignified employment as a structural reality that requires systemic policy interventions. On the other hand, no homogenous discourse is emerging in workers’ narratives to challenge deeply entrenched views of inclusion and the social order as based on waged employment. Decommodification discourses, as for example advanced by new social movements, remain therefore substantially limited. Conversely, the policy discourse of democratic South Africa responds to the crisis, when not the actual disappearance, of

wage labour as a social reality with an aggressive reassertion of work ethic and wage discipline as vehicles of social insertion and moral virtue. The ANC government often combines these arguments with a clear rejecton of decommodification, often presented as "dependency" on welfare "handouts", which undermines individual incentives for productive jobseeking behaviours.

The contradictions between the crisis of wage labour in social practices and modes of reproduction, and the reasserted centrality of wage labour in the policy discourse as the main modality of social citizenship and inclusion opens new directions for research and interrogates changing forms of social identities, contestation and political legitimacy in the South African transition.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, work, social citizenship, welfare, decommodification.