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Fifty years ago, women led the Durban mass strikes

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ABSTRACT

The historiography of the Durban mass strikes in 1973 has tended to focus on the role of white scholars or on the competing accounts of the events by different political currents that were active at the time. The most astonishing omission in these accounts was that while it is widely acknowledged that the textile and clothing workers gave the strikes an explosive character, the role of women as prominent actors remains invisible. This article will provide evidence and analysis of the leadership role in the strikes of women in the textile and clothing industry.

KEYWORDS

Women; textiles; mass strikes; Durban; South Africa

Introduction

The most well-known strikes in South Africa, the Durban strikes, which started on 9 January 1973, played a significant role in the revival of the labour movement that would ultimately lead the struggle against apartheid capitalism. The strikes were explosive and qualitatively distinct from those in prior years. In the three months between January and March 1973 there were 160 strikes in Natal that engulfed 146 establishments and united some 61,410 workers across 'racial', gender and religious backgrounds (IRR 1973, 284). The sheer magnitude of the strikes bewildered everyone, from political parties, student organisations, trade unions and business leaders to university academics, all of them scrambling to find answers to the perplexing phenomenon of the mass strike. Indeed, few of those then commentating on the strikes fully grasped the deep, socio-historical process that was unfolding. Progressive academics had provided a limited explanation of the causes and organisational dimensions of strikes which became 'shrouded in mystery' (IIE (Institute for Industrial Education) 1977, 38).

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Disputes on the historiography of the Durban strikes have concerned the competing accounts of the role of white scholars and the different political currents that were active at the time (Buhlungu 2004, 2006; Maree 2006; Davie 2007; Legassick 2008; Sithole 2009). Friedman argued that

> because intellectuals often harbour an exaggerated sense of their own importance, it is necessary to offer some qualifications. The 1973 strikes were not organized by intellectuals. … Nevertheless, the intellectuals' influence played an important role in shaping the unionism which emerged from the Durban events. (Friedman 2014, 527)

Indeed, Ensor (2023) laments the fact that both an authoritative book on the strikes (IIE 1977) and labour scholars in South Africa have generally ignored the agency and leadership of black women in the Durban mass strikes. As Ensor (2023) so eloquently puts it, these omissions result from 'the ways in which human agency enters the historical record: who tells the stories and makes the records, and who are presented as prominent actors and who remain invisible'.

While accounts of the Durban mass strikes acknowledged that the textile and clothing strikes played a central role, that of women as prominent actors remained largely invisible. According to Ensor (2023), in the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) book where 95 workers were interviewed the gender of the interviewees was not mentioned; the male pronoun, 'he', was used, but never 'she'. The authoritative accounts of the strikes were written with a male-centric bias (Kuumba 2001), leading to an undervaluation of women's contribution in these social struggles. The descriptions of the strikes almost entirely used the gender-neutral term 'worker', which tended to obscure the role of women in labour struggles (Seidman 1993). A key limitation of the feminist scholars is that while they have made a significant contribution in illuminating the role of women in worker struggles, these have tended to focus on the role of women in trade unions (Seidman 1994; Munro 1999; Tshoaedi 2008, 2012), particularly after the 1973 Durban strikes. Where these strikes are dealt with (Du Toit 1978; Berger 1983, 1992), the contributions regarding women workers are rather slim. This left a significant gap in the literature, as the strikes of 1973 were led not by trade unions but by workers (both union members and non-union members), which was characteristic of spontaneous working-class uprisings.

Second, where feminists took account of the structural changes in the economy and particularly the textile industry in the 1960s (Pudifin and Ward 1986; Mager 1989; Berger 1992), they nevertheless did not pay attention to worker resistance and strikes in this period. It was likely that they bought into the incorrect and dominant notion at the time, that the 1960s was a period of labour acquiescence (Henson 1978; Hirson 1979; Bonner 1987; Friedman 1987; Maree 1987; Baskin 1991). Without a past connecting the struggles of workers from one period to the next, these scholars could not adequately explain the mystery of the explosion of the mass strikes in 1973. It is only by examining the struggle of workers in different industries in the 1960s that the prominence of the textiles and clothing sectors in the Durban strikes and the leading role of women can be explained. Furthermore, while feminists (Mager 1989, 52; Berger 1992, 266) noted the impact of automation and changes to the labour process with the feminisation drive in the 1960s in the textiles sector, they nevertheless did not link these structural changes to the strike dynamic. Without considering the clustering of technological innovation and generalised cost-cutting in the labour process across industry, existing scholarship could not adequately explain the magnitude of the Durban mass strikes. Because of the predominant use of the gender-neutral

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term 'worker' in reporting on the Durban strikes, it is generally not possible to provide an account of incidents where individual leaders or a collective of women led the strikes. Leadership here is used to indicate the role that women played in influencing and guiding collectives of workers into industrial action, thereby initiating the cycle of class struggle and giving the Durban strikes its mass character.

The error of labour acquiescence

The notion that the 1960s was a period of labour acquiescence was a view commonly held by scholars associated with the *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB). They argued that, due to repression by the apartheid state in the early 1960s, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) had basically collapsed and that 'strikes receded almost totally in South Africa' or, more explicitly, that the 1960s was a 'long period of acquiescence' (Bonner 1987, 55; Maree 1987, 2). Webster (1991, 50) argued that the Durban strikes had the effect of 'breaking a decade of industrial acquiescence'. This mistaken reading of the struggles of labour in the 1960s had far-reaching implications, as scholars chose to ignore the study of how workers resisted their exploitation and oppression, of the organisational forms of worker resistance and of the leaders of these struggles. This article is limited in scope and does not set out to address all these issues, but it is hoped that this effort can stimulate research in that direction.

The dismissal of worker resistance in the 1960s as a result of the demise of SACTU and the banning of political opposition to apartheid meant that no serious undertaking was made to examine even those strikes that had occurred. The IIE (1977) had made uncritical use of official statistics, highlighting a low average figure of 2,000 strikers per year in the 1960s, which confirmed the notion of acquiescence. The IIE cited as notable events the 1971 Ovambo worker strikes in South West Africa (now Namibia) and the strike by over 2,000 stevedores in the Durban docks in 1972. Yet it failed to mention the 23,000-strong strike in 1971 by the female-led Garment Industrial Union of Natal, which occurred just before the Durban strikes (*Rand Daily Mail* 1971). A key problem with strike data at the time was that a large percentage of strikes were not reported by employers to the state, resulting in unreliable and inaccurate figures (Levy 1985). In this article the use of newspaper archives as primary sources and statistical reports by independent institutions are important in augmenting strike data. They provide a different picture from that of labour acquiescence in the 1960s; the *Rand Daily Mail* and the annual survey reports of the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR) provided critical information on strikes in this period.

Revised and improved strike data reveal a different picture from that of labour scholars at the time. The average annual number of strikes increased from 66 for the 1950s to 74 in the 1960s (**Figure 1**). Similarly, the average number of days lost to production increased from 11,160 during the 1950s to 13,299 for the 1960s. While the decrease in the average number of strikers from 6,788 in the 1950s to 4,225 during the 1960s may seem surprising given the increase in the number of strikes, there is a plausible explanation. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the banning of political opposition, workers took to the streets, resulting in peaks of days lost to production in 1961 and 1964 that were bigger than any time during the 1950s. The combined effects of increasing protests in the

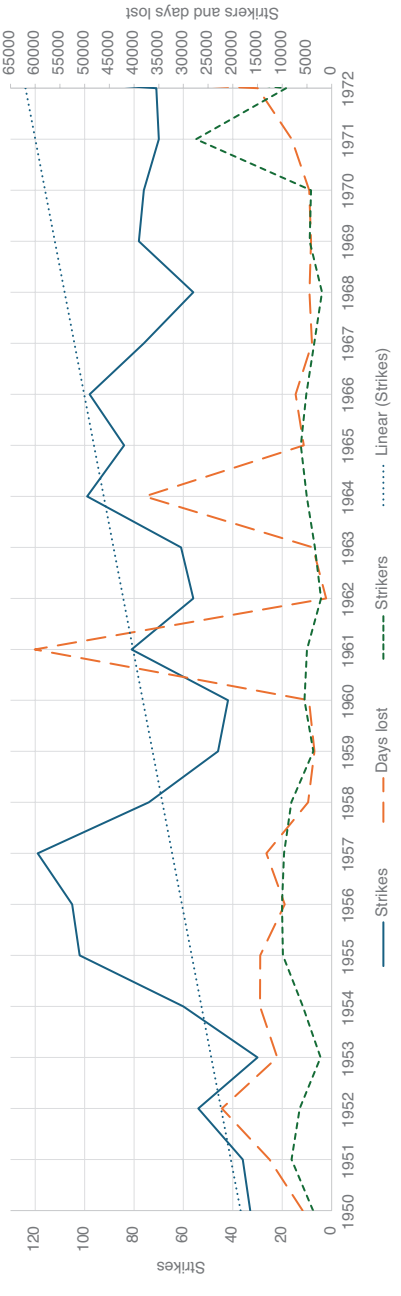

Figure 1. Strikes, strikers and days lost, 1950–72.
Source: Author's calculations.

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country and international condemnation led to fears that a wider strike movement could cause significant damage to the economy and the profitability of enterprise. In response to the strike action, government rapidly intervened and implemented 18 wage board agreements to increase the wages of unskilled workers, and Native Labour Officers made timeous intervention to quell strike action (Pursell 1968). Therefore, the period of the 1960s was a period of increasing militancy rather than a period of acquiescence.

Female-dominated industries prepare the upsurge

Owing to problems of lack of data, and reliability and consistency of data available in prior years (Posel and Todes 1995, 225), I have made use of articles that cite figures from the 1979 manufacturing census. According to this, most garment workers (82%) in Durban were women, of whom 86% were Indian (Labour Study Group 1985, 35). The clothing factories had employed over 112,744 workers in over 1,220 factories (Gool 1985, 51). Furthermore, a study conducted by Black Sash (1978) indicated that up to 80% of employees in the textile factories were women around the Pinetown industrial complex, an area which was at the epicentre of the upsurge in strikes in 1973.

However, as industry overall was male dominated, in general male strikers outnumbered females by a ratio of 10:1 (Shane and Farnham 1985). Shane and Farnham's strike statistics are also limited as they left out the 23,000 female strikers in 1971. Despite this the strike data reveal (**Figure 2**) that peaks in female strike action in female-dominated

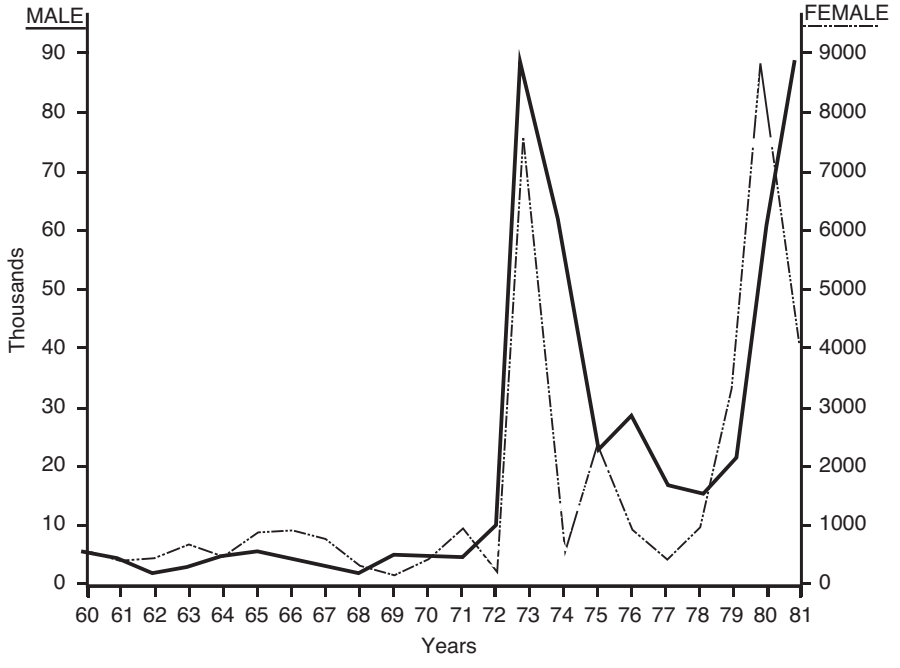

Figure 2. Numbers of male and female strikers, 1960–81.
Source: Author's superimposition of Shane and Farnham (1985), Graphs 16 and 17.

industries preceded those of peaks in male strike activity. This held true particularly for the years 1962–63, 1965–67 and 1970–71, when notable strikes in female-dominated industries took place. According to Berger (1983, 53), the strikes occurred 'especially among migrant workers in the expanding low-wage textile industry'. Strikes in male-dominated industries peaked in 1965, 1969 and 1972, while both female and male striker numbers peaked in 1973. What the data tell us is that female-dominated industries were at the forefront of strike action during the 1960s. I will show that this was a prelude to the mass strike of 1973. A key problem is that there are only scattered reports from which a picture can be patched together of the relative strength of women's bargaining power in the booming South African economy of the 1960s. Between 1961 and 1970 the economy grew by an annual rate of 8.8% (Jones 1990, 42). In a boom, workers' bargaining power tends to increase, as employers in conditions of high profitability are reluctant to have production interrupted and are more likely to make concessions to workers. For this reason, the tendency exists for strikes to be of shorter duration during a capitalist boom (Lenin 1913; Hansen 1921).

Women's participation in industrial action was predominantly in the textile and clothing industries, the two areas of the economy with the highest concentration of female workers (Berger 1983). As most reports on the strikes did not refer to the gender of the strikers, it is assumed in this article that where the word 'workers' is used, it means that the majority of the workers were women. There were few strikes in the textile industry during the 1960s, but these were notable.

In 1963 the Garment Workers' Union (Natal), a registered 'mixed-race' union, had mobilised 55,000 garment workers to raise R750,000 for a planned overtime strike of some 13,000 (mostly Indian women) workers in 140 factories in Natal. While it is unclear what the outcome of this planned strike was, it is more than likely that the Natal Clothing Manufacturers' Association caved into worker demands because of the levels of unity achieved, which significantly increased the garment workers' workplace power (*Rand Daily Mail* 1963). Such power increases either when there is unity across occupations or when a section of workers who are indispensable to the production process (such as semi-skilled workers) embark on a strike, thereby bringing production to a halt.

There were two significant textile strikes in 1964, one at the Consolidated Lancashire Cotton Corporation in New Germany and another at a textiles factory in Benoni where 500 of the workers were dismissed, but most of them subsequently reinstated. Workers were challenging wage levels and a new 11-hour shift (*Rand Daily Mail* 1964; Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman 1966). In 1971, about 150 workers who embarked on a strike at a Benoni textile factory were dismissed. Their grievance was also related to the new 11-hour shifts that replaced the regular shifts (Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman 1972). The largest strike since the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, just before the outbreak of the Durban strikes, was the 23,000-strong garment workers' offensive strike (when the workers demanded improvements in wages and working conditions) by Indian women at Curries Fountain in Durban. Led by Harriet Bolton, general secretary of the well-organised Garment Workers' Industrial Union, the successful two-day strike ended on 24 February 1971 with significant concessions from management. The outcome of the first regional garment strike was a three-year agreement for a 20% increase in wages, overtime pay for Saturday afternoons and an increase in paid annual leave from 12 to 14 days (*Rand Daily Mail* 1971). The impact of the strike in Natal was powerful and distinct from prior years.

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The sheer size of the regional garment strike in terms of striker numbers was unparalleled since the African mineworkers' strike of 1946 and marked an initial turning point in the tempo of the class struggle. The regional garment workers' strike can be described as an event which 'functions as a trigger or spark that sets off a wave of strikes – a strike wave that ultimately results in structural changes' (Cottle 2020, 5), initiating a cycle of class struggle that intensifies and leads to increased levels of labour mobilisation and changes in industrial relations (*ibid.*).

As the evidence shows, the level of mobilisation reached in 1971 continued into 1972, when a series of significant strikes broke out, now led by unions in male-dominated industries (see **Figure 2**). The number of days lost almost doubled from the previous year, indicating that workers were even more determined to win their demands. The prominent strikes that year included the PUTCO bus strike in Johannesburg, the stevedores' strike in Cape Town harbour, a weavers' and spinners' strike in Benoni, and the 1,500-strong night watchman strike at the end of December that year, where a settlement was finally reached on 1 January 1973 (*Black Review 1973*;[1] *Rand Daily Mail* 1973a). The popularly cited (Friedman 1987), male-dominated Coronation Brick and Tile strike on 9 January 1973 outside Durban was thus a continuum of the intensification of the class struggle over the previous two years and was not the initiator of the cycle of class struggle.

We have now established that the period of the 1960s was a period not of labour acquiescence but one in which strikes in a female-dominated industry peaked several times (**Figure 2**) before culminating in the initial turning point of the 23,000-strong garment workers' regional strike in 1971. Henceforth, year after year the tempo of the class struggle intensified, with the textile and clothing industry playing the lead role in the Durban mass strikes. The suggestion by Davie (2007, 418) that it was the dockworker strikes supported by white scholar-activists whose 'pamphlets influenced dockworkers (and some foundry workers)' in 1972 that 'pertain directly to our understanding of the timing and magnitude of the 1973 Durban strikes' is thus ahistorical and gender blind, as it failed to acknowledge and explain the leading role of the textile and clothing industry in the Durban strikes. How do we explain the leadership of textile and clothing industry in the Durban mass strikes beyond vague explanations of 'spontaneity' and how do we explain the magnitude of the strike across all sectors of the economy?

Technological change and changes to the labour process

Sam Mhlongo was the first to write a comprehensive analysis of the causes of the Durban mass strikes. He wrote:

> The massive outbreak of working-class resistance which hit South Africa and South West Africa in 1972 and 1973 was a reflection of structural changes which had been taking place in the settler economies and which have altered the context of the opposition movement. (Mhlongo 1974, 41)

Mhlongo argued that key to understanding the structural changes was that by the mid 1960s investment in the manufacturing sector had overtaken that in mining, and by 1968

about 31% of foreign direct investment went into the manufacturing sector. The fast-paced growth of manufacturing and the needs of capital had provided the material basis for challenging the apartheid-based employment legislation which preserved semi-skilled and skilled positions for white workers. Nevertheless, the apartheid system, with its racially based preferential labour policy, had ensured an increased rate of exploitation of black labour as black workers were employed at lower wage rates than white workers in semi-skilled and skilled positions doing the same work. For Mhlongo it was the increased size of the black proletariat, combined with the inflationary pressure of 8%, the impact of which was felt directly via the low wages which gave rise to the strike waves that commenced in 1972 and continued as a 'greater wave of proletarian disruption' in early 1973 (Mhlongo 1974, 47).

The economic growth of Durban was more rapid than the rest of the country and the textile sector was at the centre of this growth during the 1960s and early 1970s (Sambureni 1997, 22). By 1976 the Natal clothing and textile sector would make up the largest proportion (33.7%) of all employment in the manufacturing sector (Pudifin and Ward 1986, 147). By the mid 1960s, in an effort to increase productivity, research and development increased rapidly in the mining, manufacturing and agriculture sectors (Freund 1991). The aim was to arrest a decline in the rate of profit, which had reached its peak in the mid 1960s and begun to fall (Malikane 2017). A key means to arrest the decline in profitability was through accelerating the feminisation of the labour force. As Mager observed,

> The drive to replace men with women workers was furthered by the increasing automation in the textile industry. The new labour process required an enormous capacity for tedious, repetitive work but little technical skill. The idea that women had a greater capacity for drudgery than men and so were better suited to the new labour process, was imported with the new technology. (Mager 1989, 52)

The geographical spread of the textile industry had created a link between the urban and rural black workers. While the textile industry had its highest concentration around Durban, it was also scattered around the low-paying border areas and 'homelands'. Feminisation of the textile industry relied heavily on cheaper female migrant labour, which was housed in dormitories and which thus provided a natural space for organising collective action (Berger 1992, 279). The textile industry, furthermore, had the lowest number of unskilled workers and accounted for the highest percentage of skilled workers across industry, attesting to the high rate of automation reached by that stage (Crankshaw 1997, 155–157). Efforts since the mid 1960s to increase productivity through technological change and cost-cutting across industry had also become generalised in the early 1970s. The distinguishing factor was that the textile and clothing industry was the leader in introducing radical cost-cutting measures that increased after 1964, allowing for a continuum of resistance and thus explaining the prominence of textiles workers in the Durban strikes.

Women take the lead

Reports that provide a chronological order and description of the strikes in 1973 (IRR 1973; IIE 1977) rarely mention the gender of the participants. The exception is the *Black*

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Review of 1973, which was published in April 1974 and provided an account of the role of women in the strikes.[2]

While the empirical evidence (**Figure 2**) shows both female and male strikers at their highest number, it was only after the ninth strike in January 1973 that a trickle turned into a mass of strikes. This was when the textile and clothing workers became the centre of the strike movement. In the first three months, the textile and clothing industry strikes had spread to 27 establishments, closely followed by the iron, steel, engineering and metallurgical industries (22 establishments), transport (10 establishments), cement (6 establishments) and construction (5 establishments) (IRR 1973). It is important to note that while the mass strikes in 1973 centred around Durban they were nevertheless a national phenomenon. The statistics above do not provide the full extent of female-dominated industries on strike. From the end of March until April the clothing industry in Johannesburg was struck by a wave of 21 strikes over a three-week period (Berger 1983) at a time when strikes were receding in other industrial sectors across the country. Below is a description of a few of the strikes that female-dominated industries led.

The textile strikes by approximately 1,000 workers had first started on 19 January at the Consolidated Fine Spinners and Weavers in East London before moving to Frame Group mills at New Germany on the outskirts of Durban on 25 January (IRR 1973). According to *Black Review 1973* (Gwala 1974), four Frame mills were involved. These were Frametex, Saltex, Nortex and Natal Knitting Mills, all of which ground to a halt. The impetus of the mill strikes came from Frametex, where stick-wielding female and male strikers marched from factory to factory, eventually swelling the ranks of strikers to 2,500. After four days on strike, wage increases were granted to 7,000 workers at the consolidated Frame Cotton corporation in New Germany.

On 29 January about 300 Indian and African women at Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mill clocked in at work and demanded a pay increase. They were sent home but a few days later were awarded an increase in wages. About 2,600 striking African and Indian workers were also locked out of the Frame Group's Consolidated Textile Mill in Jacobs on 31 January after refusing to elect a committee to represent their grievances. In East London more than 1,000 workers walked out on 3 February, forcing the manager to close one section of the factory. Workers were demanding a wage increase for women from R3.80 to R5.50, and for men from R6.50 to R7.50. On 7 February a series of textile and clothing strikes broke out in Hammarsdale. Workers at the Glayzier clothing factory, which employed mainly women, refused to work, and the strikers stood at the factory gates with their wage demands. The women chanted and marched in the streets to converge with Progress Clothing, where there were mostly women, and Supreme Knitting factory, where there were also men. The latter two factories shared common premises and the workers in turn marched across the road to Neckelmann, a textile factory which came out on strike by 12 pm. The visible demonstrations also triggered strikes in other textile factories in the industrial complex, such as Durban Knitting, Hebox, Linofra, Gelvenor and Natal Thread. Eventually the Rainbow Chicken workers, who were in negotiations, joined the strike. By the end of the day other textile and clothing factories, such as Shield Overalls, Reindeer Products and Dano Mills, had joined in a general strike in the area (Gwala 1974, in *Black Review 1973*).

On 27 February more than 200 African women packers went on strike at the ZFP food canning factory in Empangeni, Zululand, and they were joined by 50 men a few hours later. The strike had occurred even before the workers had put their demands to management.

The men had followed the lead of the women to demand a wage increase. As the men exited the factory gates, they had to run a gauntlet of chanting women who welcomed their participation in the strike (*ibid.*).

More than 2000 workers at the Sappi Tugela paper mill in Mandini downed tools on 11 March, stayed away from work and were joined the next day by border industries.[3] The African women and men who had stopped work had undertaken a militant course of action, stoning vehicles and smashing bus windows, as police had set up a roadblock at the main entrance of Sundumbile Township near the Sappi Tugela mill. On 14 March, at a meeting with the workers, Mr Dladla, a KwaZulu executive councillor of community affairs, conveyed a wage offer from management; this was met with resounding applause from the workers, and they returned to work (*ibid.*).

In Charlestown, on the rural outskirts of Durban, the Veka and Trump clothing factories came out on strike on 22 March. These workers earned substantially lower wages than their urban counterparts. A curfew was established by the police in the nearby township and meetings of more than five people were prohibited (Berger 1983). About half of the 1,000 Veka strikers had returned to work on the third day of their strike when they received news that the management had not conceded to wage demands. However, once the 700 strikers at the neighbouring Trump factory came out in solidarity, the Veka workers streamed out of their factory once more. The workers were mainly machinists, cutters and pressers. By 30 March a settlement was reached in respect of wage increases, and the strikes had ended with a new wage agreement (Gwala 1974, in *Black Review 1973*).

In the industrial areas around Johannesburg several clothing factories came out on strike between 4 and 11 April. These included about 1,070 African and coloured workers (mainly women) at Brookfield Knitwear, Jardine Des Modes, New York clothing, Kels Lingerie, Rhine Fashions, Italian Knitting and Berkshire International. The National Union of Clothing Workers assisted in negotiating wages for workers (*ibid.*). A few days later 350 women in East London, at Regent Neckwear and Castellano-Beltrame, ended a successful strike (*Rand Daily Mail* 1973b).

The evidence provided shows that the strikes in the textiles and clothing industries had the highest count in terms of the number of establishments affected. The clustering of large-scale industry and in this case textile and clothing factories within industrial complexes allowed the pre-organisation of workers in large numbers and provided the locational elasticity for the rapid spread of the strikes. Although there was no direct call made by trade unions to strike, the strikes denoted, albeit unevenly, a sophisticated level of organisation and execution. At a sitting of Parliament in February 1973, the Minister of Labour explained that there was a qualitative difference in the change in pattern of resolving grievances. In the past, workers gave notice of grievances to employers, while in these strikes workers struck first before entering into negotiations with employers (Horrell and Horner 1974). While the mass strikes were characterised as 'spontaneous', as they were not planned by a political centre or trade union, there was informal organisation and leadership that developed through engagement among groupings at the point of production (IIE 1977; Henson 1978). Although the extent is unclear, there are those who provide the credible argument that former members of SACTU, in a semi-clandestine organisation which was strongest in the Natal province, had played a leadership role in the strikes as SACTU had been concentrated in the textiles, clothing and food industries (Webster 1985, 151; Bonnin 1987, 167; Sithole and Ndlovu 2006, 198–209). However, the question of the leadership role of members of the textile and clothing

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unions – the Garment Industrial Union of Natal and National Union of Clothing Workers – who went on strike without trade union approval remains an outstanding area of research.

Shane and Farnham's (1985) study shows that the issues in most of the strikes between 1960 and 1971, ranked from highest to lowest, were working conditions, wages, payments and dismissals. Here the struggles against increases in the number and hours of shifts and against the lengthening of the working week and of overtime featured prominently in the 1960s and early 1970s. The cause of the strikes was therefore rooted in changes in the labour process. These changes since the mid 1960s gave rise to long-standing grievances which coalesced across the different industries. As we can observe, the nature of workers' grievances which were long standing align well with these structural changes in the workplace. In such circumstances the trigger for major proletarian disruption was to be found in the economic upswing of 1972–74 which, as noted earlier, increased the bargaining power of black workers, explaining why most strikes were of short duration and were largely successful. An important factor which confronted employers was that black workers' skills were scarce and not easily replaceable, and a confrontation with textile and clothing workers in a context of increased structural power would be largely futile. Out of the 160 strikes up to March 1973, 118 strikes were successful (IRR 1973, 2). Thus, it was a combination of the economic upswing, the implementation of labour-saving technologies and changes to the labour process that had become generalised by 1971 that in turn set off resistance on the shop floor and explains the magnitude or greater wave of proletarian disruption of the Durban 1973 mass strikes. The leading role of women in the textile and clothing industry as initiator of a new cycle of class struggle was so profound that the reverberations paved the way for the apartheid state finally to give legal recognition in 1979 to the establishment of an independent black trade union movement in South Africa.

Conclusion

Although the textile and clothing industry had been recognised as playing a prominent role in the Durban mass strikes of 1973, the role of women as the leaders of the strikes was rendered invisible. The evidence provided in this article showed that the period of the 1960s was not a period of labour acquiescence, the implication of which was that scholars ignored the study of how and where workers resisted, how they organised and who the workers' leaders were. In effect, the dismissal of labour resistance to apartheid capitalism in the 1960s had rendered an entire black working class at the point of production invisible, and more so the leading role played by women in the textile and clothing industries. Notably, works covering the history of the revitalisation of the labour movement in the 1970s make no mention of the 23,000-strong Garment Industrial Union of Natal strike, the largest and most successful one to occur just before the Durban mass strikes. As I have shown, the garment workers' strike was the initiator of a cycle of struggle that had its roots in the intensification of the class struggle at the point of production in the 1960s as a response to the major structural changes in the South African economy. Several peaks of resistance were registered by female-dominated industry ahead of the male-dominated industries in the 1960s. These incidences of worker resistance were responses to the implementation of radical cost-cutting technological innovations and changes to the labour process implemented by industry as a response to the decline in the rate of profit. While the new division of labour

increased the profitability of enterprises, it at the same time increased the structural power of the black working class at the point of production. Class formation in Durban, Natal, cannot by itself explain waves of proletarian disruption, and nor can inflation or interventions by scholars, as the temporality of such an explosion would still have to be explained. I explain this because of a clustering of radical, cost-cutting technological changes and changes to the labour process which became generalised by 1971, the trigger of which was the economic upswing culminating in the greater wave of proletarian disruption in Durban. The structural effects of the Durban mass strikes of 1973 would finally result in the legal recognition of an independent black trade union movement in South Africa.

Notes

1. *Black Review* was published by Durban-based Black Community Programmes, a major organisation within the Black Consciousness movement. It was intended to be a survey of contemporary events and trends in the black community: see Khoapa (1973), *Black Review 1972*.
2. Unless other sources are cited, the information is derived from Gwala (1974), *Black Review 1973*. Some accounts have more detail than others on women's participation.
3. During apartheid, 'border industries' meant the location of industry in specified white towns adjacent to the former black homelands.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

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