

From Workshop to Wasteland: De-industrialization and Fragmentation of the Black Working Class on the East Rand (South Africa), 1990–1999

FRANCO BARCHIESI AND BRIDGET KENNY

INTRODUCTION

In 1999 the South African government passed the Municipal Structures Act which established the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Council and merged the East Rand towns of Alberton, Germiston, Brakpan, Benoni, Kempton Park, Springs, and Nigel under a common municipal authority. The new demarcation created a unified administrative structure for this region of approximately 2.5 million people living east of Johannesburg. It gave formal expression to long-standing processes of socioeconomic development that have defined the East Rand as a highly specific geographical entity. Between the 1950s and the 1970s the East Rand mapped itself on to South Africa's economic terrain as its industrial "workshop", as manufacturing replaced mining as the major contributor to GDP. The administrative unification of the East Rand has taken place, however, at a moment when established patterns of economic and social integration based on manufacturing are undermined by the impact of restructuring encouraged by domestic and global forces.

Important social processes operate within this transformation to question the position of the East Rand's black working class as a factor of social integration based on industrial wage labour and strong traditions of unionization and militancy. Ironically, these challenges are emerging at a moment when the role of organized labour in establishing post-apartheid democracy has gained institutional recognition and influence. While central to policy processes for reconstruction, unions have had to face the detrimental impact of the new government's adoption of neoliberal macro-economics.

This paper examines worker attitudes and responses to the dynamics of de-industrialization on the East Rand in this context. This includes the ways in which unionized labour has experienced manufacturing decline, how this restructuring has affected forms of solidarity and subjectivity, how it has related to alternative conceptualizations of life strategies, and how the expansion of low-wage, vulnerable service employment has

further reconfigured collective responses.¹ Issues relevant to determinants of worker identification, in particular the relations between class and race motifs, are addressed.²

Evidence presented here shows that the decline of large-scale manufacturing on the East Rand mirrors a generalized crisis of the sector both in terms of contribution to growth and in levels of employment. At the same time, a transformation is apparently underway in neighbouring Johannesburg. Innovative industries and finance-driven new economy enclaves are expanding around the growth poles of Johannesburg's northern suburbs and Midrand, stretching to Pretoria. The East Rand, conversely, supports no new-growth industries to compete with this "high-tech" region, now delineated distinctly by new municipal borders that include it in Greater Johannesburg. Economically and symbolically, these boundaries exclude the older industrial hub from hopes of participation in the "new economy". The resulting industrial crisis detaches workers from historically entrenched forms of collective identity. Their demands are therefore increasingly diversified to challenge union representivity and strategy.

DE-INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE CHANGING TEXTURE OF PRODUCTION ON THE EAST RAND

International literature on the concept of de-industrialization provides various pointers useful to contextualize the decline of East-Rand manufacturing beyond a mere measurement of the sector's contribution to growth and employment. Early debates on the concept³ probably overemphasized the role of managerial rationality and corporate decision-making in analyses of "downsizing". At the same time, however, these contributions usefully emphasized that the concept of "de-industrialization" signalled not simply a trend towards the disappearance of

1. B. Kenny, "From Insurrectionary to Flexible Worker: Fragmentation and Reconfigured Social Networks of Retail Sector Workers on South Africa's East Rand", paper presented at Class, Space, and Community Workshop Conference, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Durham, 6–8 April 2001.

2. The discussion of the engineering industry's workers' experiences is based on semi-structured interviews with union organizers and fifty workers employed in three companies in the engineering sector located in the former Brakpan, Alberton, and Nigel municipalities conducted by Franco Barchiesi in 1999. The experiences of the retail sector workers are based on sixty life-history interviews with shopworkers from one of three supermarkets in Kempton Park, Boksburg, and Benoni, and who reside in East Rand (black) townships. Retail sector interviews were conducted by Bridget Kenny between 1998 and 2000. Interviews cited by number below apply to two different data sets: engineering and retail workers.

3. B. Bluestone, and B. Harrison, *The Deindustrialisation of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York, 1982); B. Harrison, *Lean and Mean: The Changing Landscape of Corporate Power in the Age of Flexibility* (New York, 1994); D. Gordon, *Fat and Mean: The Corporate Squeeze of Working Americans and the Myth of Managerial "Downsizing"* (New York, 1996).

manufacturing industry but, perhaps more insidiously, its transformation within new forms of low-wage economy, casualization of employment, and rising social exclusion. These accounts, therefore, directly focus on social polarization and challenges facing organized labour as the representative of general interests and citizenship projects.

Paradigms inspired by “network” concepts⁴ emphasize changes in patterns of capital accumulation to explain shifts from an “old” manufacturing-based economy to a “new economy”, characterized by increasing mobility of financial flows and informational content of production. This process is usually coupled with changing forms of labour-market stratification. This perspective also underlines the dynamics of spatial restructuring and urban inequalities linked to shifts between industrial and service activities.⁵ In South Africa, this refers to economic globalization and trade liberalization, the management of regional dynamics, and the role of local and provincial government in advancing notions of urban space in the integration of municipalities defined as “unicities” as a strategy geared toward comparative advantage and investor confidence.

However interested in labour-market segmentation and processes of informalization, these authors spend less effort examining the dynamics of resistance that contribute to structure spatial accumulation patterns.⁶ The analysis advanced by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri⁷ closely relates strategies of “dematerialization” of production processes in an information-based networked financial capitalism to capitalist responses to worker insurgencies located at the level of “Fordist” manufacturing. In this way the mass representation of worker interests is dispensed with in a process that simultaneously emphasizes flexibility and self-entrepreneurship as new forms of access to rights and powers.

In the South African context, debates on de-industrialization have recently been revived by analyses of the geographical restructuring of capital in a context marked by the decline of the previous industrial structure. Fine and Rustomjee⁸ define this as a “mineral-energy” complex, centred on raw material extraction and the production of consumer goods. They argue that in the context of apartheid’s import-substitution industrialization, this led to imbalances and valorization problems. In particular, the low-cost input that the mining and energy sectors have

4. M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford, 1996).

5. S. Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalisation* (New York, 1996); P. Marcuse and R. van Kempen, “A New Spatial Order in Cities?”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41 (1997), pp. 285–299.

6. See as a notable exception, the work of Neil Smith, for example N. Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London [etc.], 1996).

7. M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

8. B. Fine and Z. Rustomjee, *The Political Economy of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1996).

provided to a nascent manufacturing industry was coupled to a racially limited, predominantly “white” consumer market. This prevented the development of Fordist mass production on a full scale and facilitated high levels of dependence on imported capital. At the same time, little incentive has existed to develop a local intermediate goods sector.

The crisis of this model of accumulation in the context of rapid unionization and working-class militancy after the 1970s has led to the search for new avenues with the re-insertion of the country into international markets. At the same time, the abandonment of import-substitution industrialization, the adoption of a liberalized, export-orientated approach to growth, and large scale privatization have tended to shift resources towards foreign investment, the financial sector, urban speculation, and activities related to information and communication technology. In this light, the manufacturing decline of the East Rand is also a product of the dynamics of “uneven development”⁹ that followed the end of apartheid-era policies of protectionism and massive investment in state-owned companies such as Sasol (chemicals), Eskom (energy), and Iscor (steel). This, at the same time, implied a transnationalization of these companies and a loosening of linkages with their previous manufacturing base, as in the case of the East Rand. Mirroring similar processes that have affected other countries that experienced shifts from import-substitution priorities, and most developing countries in Southern Africa, South Africa has undergone a generalized de-industrialization process in the past fifteen years. This has seen manufacturing contribution to total output growth reduced by more than 40 per cent since 1985 (one of the highest rates of decline in the semi-industrialized world) while contribution to employment growth has declined by 35 per cent.¹⁰

It is, however, important not to read these developments as the mere product of financial capitalist planning rationality without considering the decisive role played by black working-class militancy in the area. Understanding worker responses to this scenario, which displaces not only their work but also the centrality of their “selves” to economic development, implies looking at the consequences of restructuring not only in terms of shifting workplace power relations and rising unemployment, but also of broader impacts on community life, relationships between production and reproduction, and the definition of alternative worker strategies in a postwaged employment context.

Emerging as a cluster of mining towns linked by rail to Johannesburg

9. P. Bond, *Cities of Gold, Townships of Coal: Essays on South Africa's New Urban Crisis* (Trenton, NJ, 2000); cf. N. Smith, *Uneven Development* (Oxford, 1984).

10. U. Pieper, “Openness and Structural Dynamics of Productivity and Employment in Developing Countries: A Case of De-industrialization?”, *ILO Employment and Training Papers*, 14 (Geneva, 1998).

and the West Rand, between the 1950s and the 1970s East Rand towns experienced a tumultuous growth in manufacturing activities that saw the share of the workforce employed in the sector rise from 27 per cent in 1950 to 52 per cent in 1970, while the sector overtook mining to become the most important contributor to the GGP.¹¹ By the 1980s, the former Transvaal province came to provide 66 per cent of the country's metalworking (40 per cent of manufacturing output) with the East Rand accounting for the largest proportion of this.¹² The availability of cheap land, and linkages with apartheid's massive infrastructural and heavy-industry projects (Eskom, Sasol, railways) facilitated a move of large companies to the East Rand from neighbouring areas. Small engineering companies, foundries, and jobbing firms in precision tools persisted nonetheless due to limited-scale economies.¹³ Germiston rose to particular prominence, contributing the absolute majority of manufacturing output in the sector, particularly concentrated in the metal and chemical industries.

However, the manufacturing crisis of the 1980s, linked to intensified worker struggles and the economic recession of the apartheid regime, affected largely the smaller establishments. Government protection sustained large conglomerates in a process that led to further capital intensity, concentration of ownership, and labour-saving restructuring. These characteristics proved a decisive impediment in the more competitive and liberalized environment that followed the 1990s democratic transition. High costs and tougher market conditions, in particular, led to negative growth between 1991 and 1997, in a context marked by the contextual decline of mining, rising job losses, and the relocation of many heavy industries to the coast or overseas to take advantage of more competitive locations.¹⁴

More recently, areas westward have been designated new growth points for investment. The area of the Midrand in particular has attracted a large

11. P. Cockhead, "The East Rand: A Geographical Analysis of the Transition of the Economic Base of the Region from Gold Mining to Manufacturing, and its Effects Upon Future Economic and Spatial Development", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1970; M. Drake, "The Iron and Steel, Metal and Engineering Industry in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging Region", unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1971.

12. A. Sitas, "African Worker Responses on the East Rand to Changes in the Metal Industry, 1960-1980", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1983, pp. 4-5.

13. Sitas, "African Worker Responses"; E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg, 1985).

14. G. Smith and M. Futter, "Revitalisation: Changing Roles and Economies in the Germiston-Daveyton Activity Corridor", paper presented at the International "Urban Futures" Conference, Johannesburg, 7-14 July 2000.

number of multinational corporations and activities in rapidly growing financial, information, and communication sectors. The phenomenal growth of Midrand is reflected by a 224 per cent increase in industrial planning activity between 1995 and 2000, with office-space demand that has risen 33 per cent between 1997 and 2000.¹⁵

While industry was declining on the East Rand, trade and services, particularly in towns such as Boksburg, Benoni, Kempton Park, and Germiston, have grown throughout the 1990s. In 1998 trade contributed, with 16 per cent, the second largest percentage after manufacturing to regional GGP, followed by government services (12.1 per cent) and business and financial services (10.7 per cent).¹⁶ This was also reflected by developments in retail space, particularly in shopping areas and more recently in mega-shopping/entertainment complexes focused around casinos. The East Rand is home to some of the “largest shopping centres in Southern Africa”.¹⁷

The rise of the tertiary sector has brought with it low-waged and insecure employment in the form of casual and subcontracted labour. Retail trade in food, beverages, and tobacco in specialized stores account for the highest percentage of trade (20 per cent) and of employment in trade (13 per cent) in the region.¹⁸ Research at three large food retailers on the East Rand indicates that very little new permanent employment is available; instead, casual and contract jobs bring workers into tenuous employment.¹⁹ Also there is speculation that large retailing developments are saturated, and retail property analysts support moves to smaller convenience centres, which suggests even more tenuous conditions and security for workers.

The transformation of the East Rand’s economy from a strong manufacturing centre has not heralded a healthy, diversified economy. Rather, the growth of services has introduced further casualized, low-wage employment to the region’s already fragmenting industrial base. This changing economic context has had a profound effect on workers’ organization and subjectivities. In particular the East Rand’s history of militant worker organizations linked to community activism has been affected by the changing economic situation.

15. Johannesburg Housing Investment [hereafter JHI], “The Midrand Miracle”, unpublished report, 2000.

16. Urban-Econ, *Eastern Gauteng Services Council: Volume 1: Economic Development Perspective* (Germiston, 1999), p. 86.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

19. B. Kenny, “Selling Selves: Control, Resistance and Detachment on South African Supermarket Shopfloors”, paper presented at the 19th Annual International Labour Process Conference, School of Management, Royal Holloway College, University of London, 26–28 March 2001.

A WORKING-CLASS VANGUARD: LABOUR ORGANIZATION ON THE EAST RAND

The East Rand became one of the main sites of militant trade-union activities after the 1973 Durban strikes, which marked the resumption of working-class struggles following a decade of harsh repression. The first organizing networks in the area were started with the help of student activists, black consciousness-aligned structures, “dissidents” from established “white” unions, and unions operating in the Durban area (especially the Metal and Allied Workers’ Unions and the Chemical Workers’ Industrial Union). It has been argued that unionization in this region responded to specific methods, strategies, and cultural dynamics. In particular, the role of trade-union grassroots structures challenged symbolic and discursive patterns of authority on the shopfloor and in the segregated “compound”. In a context marked by coercive labour migration practices, unions managed to advance worker organization as an alternative to ethnic and linguistic hierarchies.²⁰ Black migrant workers constituted a decisive support base for union activities and provided the most militant sections of the area’s working class. The presence of large factories in the metal, chemical, and food sectors facilitated organizing and the diffusion of strike actions, which could be strategically focused on companies that assumed a particularly relevant role in the definition of employer policies, or multinational companies.

A further important issue emphasized by black trade unions in the region concerned the dynamics of territorial organizing. After the initial repression of the post-1973 resurgent unions, new factory organizations arose, coordinated across the East Rand. In particular, the 1981 and 1982 strike waves were articulated by structures such as the Germiston shop-steward council.²¹ These processes, although largely related to workplace issues such as union recognition, unfair dismissals, and the improvement of wages and working conditions, also allowed broader exchanges between different workplaces, sectors, and segregated black townships. These interactions focused on the brutality of racist management and at the same time heightened workers’ sensitivity to the denial of political and social rights.

Indeed, escalating insurgency in the townships targeted the redesign of apartheid urban policy, which recognized the need for a greater stabilization of sections of the black manufacturing working class, while restating the discriminatory nature of access to residence and property. This was translated into mass movements for the boycotts of rents and transport fees and against the demolition of informal settlements.

20. Sitas, “African Worker Responses”.

21. J. Baskin, “Growth of a New Worker Organ: The Germiston Shop Stewards’ Council”, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 7 (1982), pp. 42–53; Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*.

Township struggles sparked a lively debate inside trade unions on whether to take part in the activities of rising civic organizations. In fact, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) had maintained a strong workplace orientation that made its leaders suspicious of the motives of student, church, and residents' groups where allegedly "petty bourgeois" elements such as shop owners and taxi entrepreneurs had gained influential positions.

The territorial structure of trade-union organization facilitated political interactions that defined shop-steward councils as areas of community and political engagement beyond workplace issues.²² Indeed, leadership of local structures helped to form civic organizations, such as the East Rand People's Organization (ERAPO), and supported township protests.²³ This process led to confrontations inside trade unions, and the role played by "white intellectuals" in leading FOSATU was stigmatized from the grassroots, not so much as an issue of racial polarization but as a form of critique towards leaders that in pursuing a narrow production-orientated agenda were preventing these broader patterns of solidarity developing between workplaces and community.²⁴ As Swilling (1984) convincingly argued, rank-and-file union members engaging in these forms of joint mobilization retained a sense of the peculiarity of trade-union organizations and of their organizing methods. The trajectory of union-community activism in the East Rand, and of the divisions and conflicts inside the unions that this generated, has been for a long time analysed from a dominant "workerist" perspective²⁵ as a the product of "spontaneist", "Jacobin" grassroots pressures that ultimately resulted in the "ungovernability" of union structures. When viewed in hindsight, however, the links between union and community organizing forged an alternative collective order grounded in an expansive notion of citizenship rights that brought together the struggle against racism with an organized claim for socioeconomic equality.²⁶

Arguments based on an alleged incompatibility between worker consciousness and popular uprisings have recently resurfaced from different angles. Like previous ones, these analyses are largely concerned with stigmatizing "ungovernability". They deny the relevance of class

22. K. Von Holdt, *Trade Unions, Community Organisations and Politics: A Local Case Study on the East Rand*, Sociology of Work Programme, Labour Studies Research Report 3 (Johannesburg, 1987); M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 248–249; P. Bonner and N. Nieftagodien, *Katorus: A History* (Johannesburg, 2001).

23. Von Holdt, *Trade Unions*.

24. G. Ruiters, *South African Liberation Politics: A Case Study of Collective Action and Leadership in Katorus, 1980–1989* (n.p., 1995); Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 241.

25. M. Swilling, "Workers Divided: A Critical Assessment of the Split in MAWU on the East Rand", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 10 (1984), pp. 99–123.

26. See also Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Ruiters, *South African Liberation Politics*.

dynamics in township insurgency by arguing that the racialized identities of marginal groups were rather at the core of “millenarian” revolutionary expectations in the anti-apartheid struggle.²⁷ Such a reading tends to oppose “orderly” political processes of articulation of collective interests in a politics of “responsible” opposition – allegedly represented by trade unions among others – to the chaotic, magmatic community insurrectionism of the “deviants”. This latter is seen as largely driven by pre-political forces and characterized by the impossibility of institutional mediation. However, this analysis suffers from a fundamental flaw, deriving from its imposition of normative priorities (in the form of a concern with order and governability), which leads to unproven assumptions. In particular, it reifies the cultural and symbolic expressions of revolt that are univocally assumed as indicators of deep sociopsychological disruptive predispositions. This method of analysis sacrifices the need for a grassroots-orientated research agenda that focuses on processes of subjectivity formation that creatively reshape and articulate diverse motifs and appellations (of class, community-based, and racialized kinds). These define political strategies that link the immediate, visible causes of oppression to more systemic socioeconomic and political determinants. By expelling community activism to the margins of the political this approach arbitrarily excludes the relevance of daily strategies of survival and resistance, social movements, and even “millennial” visions in defining political identities and programmes. Robin Kelley’s suggestion²⁸ is therefore particularly useful in this regard:

Writing “history from below” that emphasizes the infrapolitics of the black working class requires that we substantially redefine politics. Too often politics is defined by *how* people participate rather than *why* [...]. By shifting our focus to what motivated disenfranchised black working people to struggle and what strategies they developed, we may discover that their participation in “mainstream” politics [...] grew out of the very circumstances, experiences, and memories that impelled many to steal from their employer, join a mutual benefit association, or spit in a bus driver’s face. In other words, I am rejecting the tendency to dichotomize people’s lives, to assume that clear-cut “political” motivations exist separately from issues of economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life [own emphasis].

From this point of view, we argue that processes of subjectivity formation on the East Rand, nurtured in the encounter of working-class and community activism, defined a new discourse of social citizenship. The

27. B. Bozzoli, “Why Were the 1980s ‘Millenarian’? Style, Repertoire, Space and Authority in South Africa’s Black Cities”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 13 (2000), pp. 78–110.

28. R. Kelley, “Writing Black Working-Class History from Way, Way Below”, in R. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994), p. 9.

demand for social citizenship as a goal to be achieved in a future democratic society was expressed in acts of seeming ungovernability, as in the case of boycotts and attacks on city councillors. It brought together issues of worker rights and powers with the insistence on decommodified social services practised through rents and services nonpayment. Far from expressing polarized categories, discourses of race and class could largely coexist to articulate different levels of opposition to the apartheid state and the capitalist social order. Working-class organization has, therefore, to be analysed in terms of its contribution to shaping this articulation of meanings, as rights and powers won inside the workplace provided content to the specific demands of rising social citizenship discourses.

Our critique also stands vis-à-vis recent work suggesting the increasing relevance of class identities over race in defining black experience.²⁹ Authors that support this view cite the widening gap in intraracial income distribution,³⁰ and claim a deepening social divide within black townships between a “core working class” and a largely unskilled, unemployed “underclass”.³¹ This leads to suggestions that social inclusion follows from mere access to waged employment, even in unskilled and casual jobs.³² While post-apartheid policies and practices certainly uplifted a stratum of “black bourgeoisie” into full citizenship rights, while breeching the working poor, we, however, argue that the class reductionism involved in this kind of argument conflates income or occupational categories to workers’ experiences in ways that seriously oversimplify the analysis of the latter.

On the contrary, this paper contends that looking for forms of consciousness, either race- or class-based, as inherently “pure” or more authentic is a fruitless exercise in the South African case. More productive would be to explore the formation of collective subjectivities in the mutable interplay of diverse and largely overlapping forms of identification as they emerge in the dynamics of solidarity and struggle. To invert Roediger’s emphasis, “to reduce race to class is damaging”, and “[t]o set race within social formations is absolutely necessary”.³³ In the sections that follow, we show the structural changes in the East Rand’s labour market and their impact on black workers’ sense of themselves and the parameters of possible social citizenship.

29. O. Crankshaw, *Race, Class, and the Changing Division of Labour Under Apartheid* (London [etc.], 1997), pp. 199–121; N. Nattrass and J. Seekings, *From Race to Class: Inequality, Unemployment and the Social Structure in South Africa* (Oxford, forthcoming).

30. Crankshaw, *Race, Class, and the Changing Division*.

31. J. Seekings, “Is There an Underclass in South Africa?”, paper presented at the annual conference of the South African Sociological Association, University of the Western Cape, July 2000.

32. *Ibid.*

33. D.R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London [etc.], 1991), p. 8.

RECENT TRENDS IN MANUFACTURING IN THE EAST RAND: AN EXPANDING RUSTBELT

The past two decades have witnessed a marked and constant decline of manufacturing industry on the East Rand, in a context of sluggish economic growth during the 1980s (see Table 1). In fact, only Benoni, Brakpan, and Kempton Park show significant growth performances, while the “far East Rand” area shows signs of a dramatic decline. The case of Kempton Park (whose growth rates become negative, in any case, at the beginning of the 1990s) is peculiar, given that this city is more closely connected than others in the area to the Johannesburg–Midrand–Pretoria corridor of rapid expansion.³⁴ The first half of the 1990s is characterized by a stabilization, where the most acute decline trends of the previous decade seem to be levelling out, while the relatively successful experiences enter a phase of relative stagnation. The Tress Index of all the towns indicates a high degree of specialization (with the possible exceptions of Nigel and Heidelberg) around manufacturing as the dominant activity. However, specialization tends to be reduced between 1981 and 1991, with the exception of Germiston and Springs, the two most important manufacturing towns, where it remains unchanged. Therefore, on the one hand, the region retains a strong manufacturing-based profile, notwithstanding the general economic difficulties. In fact, it has to be noticed that the positive results by Benoni and Brakpan in terms of “mixed contribution effect” indicate that manufacturing output is still closely correlated to overall growth in these cities. Conversely, the negative trend of this indicator in Kempton Park shows that this is the only area of the region where growth seems to depend on economic diversification, which confirms the already noticed peculiarity of Kempton Park in the context of Gauteng’s nascent “new economy”.

On the other hand, however, developments in the direction of a greater diversification seem to follow two broad directions. There are, in fact, situations (such as Nigel) where the relative loss of importance of the manufacturing industry has not defined other relevant growth sectors. In other cases (Brakpan and Alberton) there are signs of a more successful diversification of economic activities. These figures seem to underline the rise of intraregional economic disparities inside the territory currently under the jurisdiction of the East Rand metropolitan authority.³⁵ Behind the uniform image of an area characterized by traditional manufacturing industries, therefore, there are signs of long-term trends towards a new socioeconomic stratification based on differences in terms of diversification and change of economic structures.

34. P. Kok, *South Africa’s Magnifying Glass: A Profile of Gauteng* (Pretoria, 1998), p. 195.

35. Cf. C.M. Rogerson and J.M. Rogerson, “Industrial Change in a Developing Metropolis: The Witwatersrand, 1980–1994”, *Geoforum*, 30 (1999), pp. 85–99.

Table 1. *Growth and manufacturing indicators for East Rand towns, 1981–1991*

	Alberton	Benoni	Boksburg	Brakpan	Germiston	Heidelberg	Kempton Park	Nigel	Springs
Manufacturing % share on GGP	46.2	44.1	47.9	31.6	47.5	31.3	45.7	23.9	54.7
GGP % growth rate 1981–1991	0.5	1.1	−0.3	1.0	−1.3	−2.3	1.1	−4.0	−1.6
GGP growth rate 1981–1991 (as % of 1981)	4.7	11.2	−2.7	10.0	−12.6	−21.1	11.6	−33.3	−15.2
GGP % growth rate 1991–1993	−0.4	11	−0.3	1.0	−0.7	−1.7	−0.6	0.0	−1.0
Tress Index 1981	0.76	0.71	0.69	0.59	0.69	0.58	0.74	0.58	0.73
Tress Index 1991	0.70	0.70	0.66	0.51	0.69	0.56	0.73	0.47	0.73
Mixed effect contribution 1981–1991 as % of 1981	−2.3	2.9	−12.5	4.2	−4.8	−0.0	−1.7	−0.7	−3.6

Tress Index of specialization: 0 = perfect diversity (same size for all sectors); 1 = perfect specialization (only one sector).
Mixed effect contribution: growth rate that would have been achieved in Gauteng if manufacturing in the town had grown at the provincial manufacturing rate. Positive values indicate the town is over-represented in manufacturing growth.

Source: Kok, *South Africa's Magnifying Glass*.

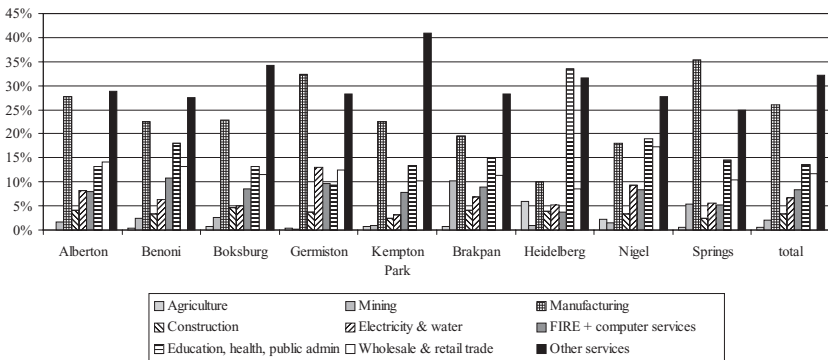


Figure 1. Sectoral contribution to GGP, 1999.

Source: Wharton Econometric Forecasting Associates [hereafter WEFA].

It is, however, in the following decade that the decline in the economic relevance of manufacturing industry becomes spectacular (Figure 1). In fact, during this period the sector loses its predominance in all the towns of the region, with particularly apparent downturns in the manufacturing strongholds of Germiston (from 47.5 per cent in 1991 to 31 per cent contribution to GGP in 1999) and Springs (from 54.7 per cent in 1991 to 36 per cent in 1999) (Table 1 and Figure 1). In terms of contribution to the GGP, however, this shift does not imply a re-evaluation of FIRE (finance–insurance–real estate) or information-technology activities comparable to developments in the nearby Johannesburg–Pretoria corridor. In fact, in 1999 these two sectors combined contributed only 8.4 per cent to the GGP, with relatively limited variations between towns. Notwithstanding national policies of public-sector spending containment, especially after the introduction of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Policy in 1996, the sphere of education, health, and public administration retains a significant contribution to the GGP (13.5 per cent), as does retail and wholesale trade (11.8 per cent). These data seems to confirm an impression of deepening economic stagnation accompanying manufacturing decline, and an uncertain, to say the least, restructuring towards “new-economy” activities.

These conclusions are supported by employment indicators (Figure 2) which still confirm the relative predominance of manufacturing industry in 1999, but also indicate signs of a rising tertiarization of the economy in an overall employment share of 44.3 per cent in the combination of FIRE and computer services (3.6 per cent), public administration, health and education (16.2 per cent), and wholesale and retail trade (14 per cent).

The dynamics of total manufacturing employment in the region (Figure 3) show that the decline of manufacturing industry has been constant over

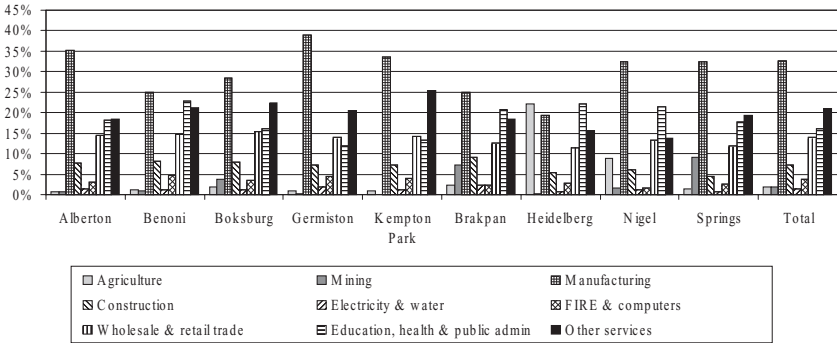


Figure 2. Employment by sector, 1999.

Source: WEFA, 1999

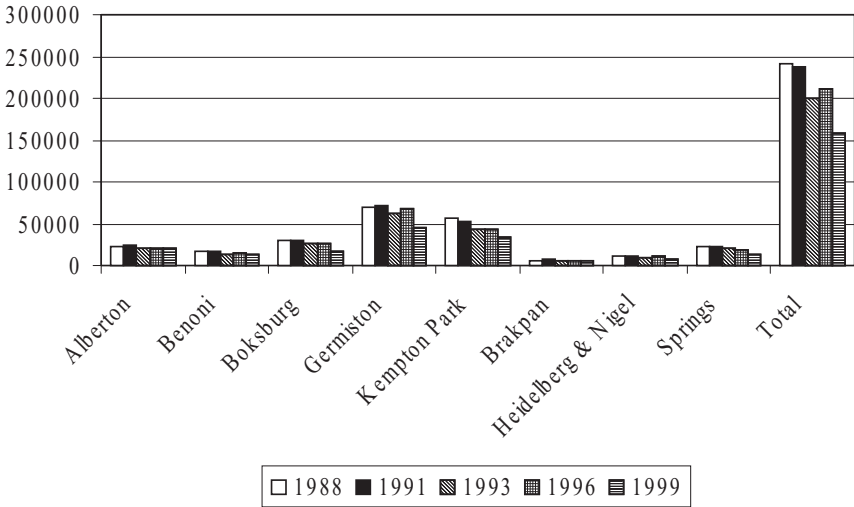


Figure 3. Total manufacturing employment East Rand 1988–1999.

Sources: 1988–1993: Bureau of Market Research, *Spatial Dynamics of the Manufacturing Sector of South Africa, 1988–1993*, UNISA, Research Report 256 (Pretoria, 1998); 1996: Statistics South Africa, *Census of Manufacturing, 1996*; *Principal Statistics on a Regional Basis: Gauteng* (Pretoria, 2001); 1999: WEFA, 1999.

the 1988–1999 period, with a partial recovery in the 1993–1996 period and an accelerated downturn in the post-1996 period, coinciding with the introduction of GEAR and the full embrace by the South African government of a liberalized trade regime. This graph shows that job losses in manufacturing in the East Rand in this period amount to approximately 80,000 units.

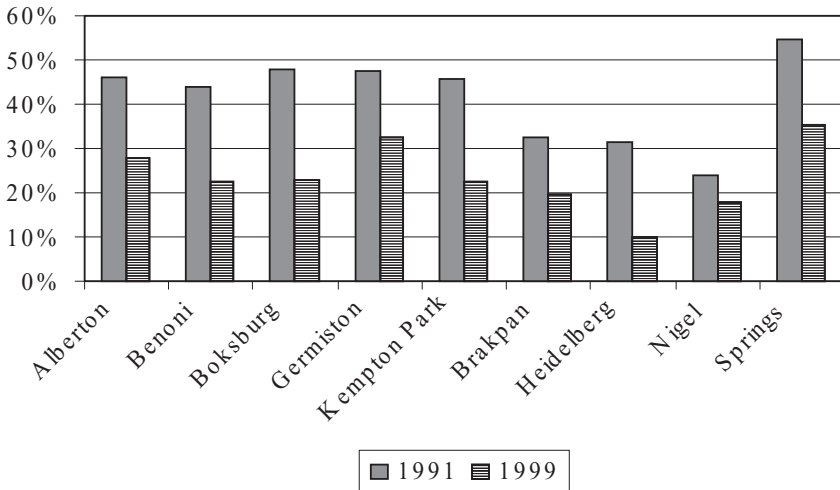


Figure 4. Contribution of manufacturing to GDP, East Rand towns, 1991, 1999.
 Source: 1991: Kok, *South Africa's Magnifying Glass*; 1999: WEFA, 1999.

Disaggregated data by town show that the contribution of manufacturing to the GDP of many centres has been reduced in 1999 by as much as half its size in 1991, with losses of 18 and 20 percentage points respectively in the two most important areas of Germiston and Springs. Kempton Park is confirmed as the most rapidly de-industrializing area; however, in this town as well the role of “new-economy” sectors (6.2 per cent of GDP) remains limited in providing a growth alternative (see Figure 4).

Finally, parallel to the decline of the sector in the area, a reduction in the average size of enterprises can be noticed (Figure 5), which is particularly marked in those areas (such as Kempton Park) that previously had the highest concentration of employees in relation to the number of establishments. This can be a reflection of job losses in the sector, but it is also probably related to processes of restructuring that are facilitating the emergence of smaller companies and contractors and subcontractors³⁶ or even, as in Brakpan, Benoni, and Germiston (where there are solid traditions in this sector) a strengthening of an SME-type industrial texture.

In conclusion, the 1990s have seen a process of decline of the East Rand's manufacturing industry in what has been for the past sixty years the core of the sector in South Africa, as it is apparent from both output and employment statistics. This process has greatly accelerated a trend started in the previous decade, conferring on it a depth and a breadth dramatic in

36. Cf. Rogerson and Rogerson, “Industrial Change in a Developing Metropolis”, p. 92.

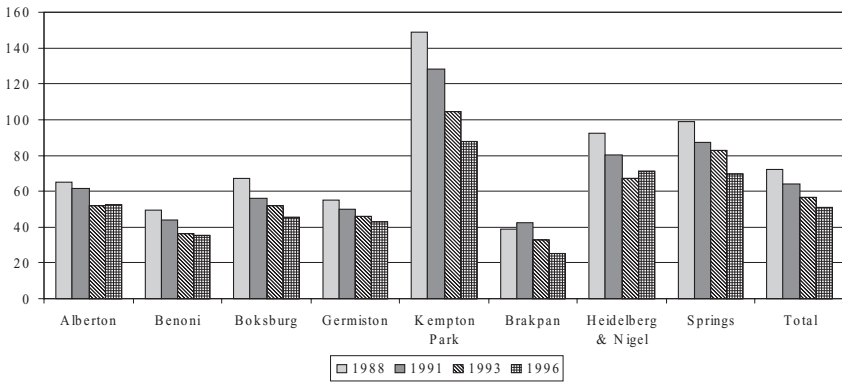


Figure 5. Number of employees per establishment, East Rand, 1988–1996.

Sources: 1988: Bureau of Market Research, *Spatial Dynamics*; 1988, 1991, 1993: Statistics South Africa, *Census of Manufacturing*.

the economic history of the country. On the other hand, while signals of divergent paths and different kinds of de-specialization seemed to emerge in the 1980s, these have not led to the establishment of new sectors capable of driving regional growth in the 1990s. In particular, the “new economy” remains an elusive concept for the area, which seems to be left behind in this respect by the neighbouring Pretoria–Midrand–Johannesburg corridor, while services and public administration, themselves targeted by fiscal constraints, remain a crucial source of employment.

The lack of viable economic alternatives is reflected in worker attitudes and responses to the manufacturing crisis of the area. The next section looks at how workers in the engineering industry have elaborated this socioeconomic transition in terms of subjectivities and organization.

WORKING-CLASS RESPONSES AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS: THE CASE OF THE ENGINEERING INDUSTRY

The Wits East region of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) includes the locals of Alrode, Germiston, Wadeville, Benoni, Springs, and Nigel. At the beginning of 2000 the region had a membership of approximately 28,600,³⁷ which represents a 26 per cent decline on the 1996 membership levels.³⁸ This massive downturn can partly be explained by the already noticed general manufacturing decline

37. Figures provided by locals, April 2000. Franco Barchiesi acknowledges the help of Meshack Robertson (Wits East regional organizer) in gathering the information.

38. National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa [hereafter, NUMSA], *Minutes of the 5th National Congress*, 25–27 September 1996 (n.p., 1996).

after 1996 (and engineering remains the most important industrial sector in the area), but it also reflects difficulties facing union organizing as a result of the dynamics of restructuring in production and employment that accompany those shifts.

Liberalization of trade following South Africa's accession to GATT has led to intensifying competitive pressure on the metal-engineering industry.³⁹ On the other hand, policies of export promotion facilitated by GEAR and by a declining exchange rate have led to uneven restructuring strategies. In particular, intensified technological innovation, strategies for specialization and differentiation of the product cycle have generally not been accompanied by renewed investment in training and human-resource development.⁴⁰ This has facilitated downsizing and retrenchments, which have been particularly intense in larger workplaces that have also provided historical strongholds for the East Rand black unionized working class. According to union organizers, this process has been countered by the rise in small-medium manufacturing, which confirms the data previously provided, often started by managers retrenched by bigger concerns. Rather than starting networks of an "industrial-district" model, however, SMEs in the area tend to enter competitive market relations, enabled by their more specialized and focused approach, which further undermines the market opportunities of larger firms. In this context, market difficulties and the search for competitiveness, rather than the dynamics of outsourcing, seem to be the most relevant dynamics of restructuring.

The crisis of union organizing in the context of large-scale manufacturing is particularly evident in the most important NUMSA locals, as in the case of Springs. Here, a steady membership decline in larger workplaces over the past five years has been counteracted only through renewed organizational efforts in dispersed, small-size, previously unorganized workplaces (generally with less than fifty employees).⁴¹ From this point of view, small companies that have emerged out of the restructuring of bigger ones provide new grounds for recruiting. However, this approach presents obvious disadvantages. First, it stretches the resources of the union, instead of concentrating them into a few major companies, as union strategies on the East Rand have always preferred. Second, the geographical dispersal of small, non-unionized productive sites allows the recruitment of the most vulnerable sections of the workforce, and often the very workers retrenched by large companies, under "atypical" contracts of employment,

39. Z. Rustomjee, "An Industrial Strategy for the Engineering Sector", unpublished report, Cape Town, 1993.

40. A. Kesper, "Small and Medium-Sized Metalworking Companies in the Witwatersrand: Facing the Global Challenge", paper presented at the TIPS 1999 Annual Forum (Johannesburg, 1999).

41. Interview with George Magaseng, NUMSA Springs organizer, 11 November 1999.

usually casual, three to six months contracts, and labour broking. Albeit these usually provide wages, benefits, and working conditions of a lower level than that of unionized workers, the precariousness of employment and job insecurity act as deterrents against unionization. As one union organizer recalls:

One night I just went to the township. I sat in a house, of course I knew what I was looking for. I bought a beer, and there were people busy doing Marconi's [a communication appliances company, formerly TEMSA] job. Because it's a manual job, very, very easy. They assemble small pieces of rubber and so on, then the company comes and collects, paying them very poorly. They're taking advantage of the social situation of the workers. These people, due to poverty situation, are compelled to accept that kind of conditions.⁴²

On the other hand, NUMSA, which generally does not organize casual and temporary employees, recognizes that the overwhelming majority of jobs created in the industry is under these contractual forms. The dispersed production and employment geography imply new difficulties in organizing, and representing the demands of already organized workers. In other words, the union is now facing a three-pronged challenge that raises important questions for its continued existence in what once was its historical core and the breeding ground for a highly organized and conscious working-class vanguard. First, retrenchments and factory closures are facing NUMSA with new worker demands to devise strategies to deal with restructuring. This is an inherently defensive battle for the union, which requires in-depth knowledge and the capacity to elaborate on operational requirements, liquidation procedures, and financial information. Moreover, the existing legislative framework, and in particular the 1995 Labour Relations Act, does not enforce any negotiating role for organized labour in this regard. Second, the fragmentation of production implies an increasing spread of the unions' human and financial resources across expanding areas and a plurality of workplaces. Third, the fragmentation in forms of employment, and the rise of "atypical" forms often imply a diversification of worker needs and a greater emphasis on extra-workplace dynamics of survival, evidenced by inadequate wages and poor working conditions in relation to household expenses. These need to be addressed by the union as part of meaningful organizing strategies, which are, on the other hand, hampered by the vulnerability inherent in these contractual arrangements.

The companies analysed for this paper reflect a spectrum of situations that well represent these interlinked challenges. At the same time, worker perceptions of, and attitudes towards, changes related to de-industrialization articulate this scenario from inside the union's rank-and-file. The first

42. *Ibid.*

company, Kelvinator South Africa, an electric-appliance producer in Alrode, was liquidated and closed at the end of 1999, leaving 1,200 workers unemployed,⁴³ following expansion plans that were frustrated by limited demand and the requirements of financial investment. The second company, Union Carriage and Wagon (UCW), in Nigel, is a subsidiary of Murray and Roberts that manufactures and repairs railway carriages. Following the expiration of important contracts and the lack of new markets (also due to Spoornet's restructuring and drastic cuts in the number of carriages, consequent to the collapse of rail travel in South Africa) the company has embarked on a series of retrenchments that has reduced the number of workers from 600 to 250 between 1997 and 1999. The third company, Baldwins Steel (Brakpan) is a structural steel trading and cutting firm owned by another giant conglomerate in the sector, Dorbyl. After having been relatively untouched by the first waves of restructuring in the area, rumours of retrenchments started circulating on the shopfloor while this research was in progress. This followed market uncertainties consequent to intensified international competition and the decline of the East Rand's construction industry, in itself a result of the general economic crisis in the area.

The link between employment uncertainty and the loss of rights and power is reflected by worker narratives of the crisis in all these situations. In particular, the experience of casualization, independently from whether it is faced personally, is a decisive factor questioning established and deeply engrained life strategies. This is accompanied by the feeling that not only the union is inadequate in this regard, but that being a union member constitutes a specific target for management's unfettered authority:

They retrench today and they hire tomorrow. Today they retrench twenty, tomorrow they hire five on contract. Since 1982 I have been retrenched and called back four times. NUMSA has tried many times to talk with them, but at the end of the day they are still retrenching people. [...] Workers are no longer coming to union meetings, maybe they are afraid of being retrenched. Now they have started firing also white supervisors, but otherwise NUMSA members are still those most likely to be retrenched.⁴⁴

At the same time, workers' perceptions of vulnerability are heightened by the permanence of historically unaddressed forms of disadvantage linked to racist managerial styles, unfair discrimination in career prospects, workplace authoritarianism, and lack of recognition of informal skills:

Whites are moved from this position to that position for reasons that are suitable to them. But we blacks cannot move at all. Talking of myself, I've been stuck in one area for twenty years. Only names change, but the job is always the same. I

43. F. Barchiesi, "Kelvinator: Restructuring, Collapse and Struggle", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 23 (1999) 6, pp. 65–70.

44. Interview 20, (12 September 1999).

made applications for promotion and I've been interviewed, but they always find some reasons to put you aside. I improved many white boys they brought here, and now they are sales managers, directors. When they came here they all came through me, I showed them the job. They were boys, I mean, boys. I'm not undermining them, just reflecting on their age. Today they are senior guys, and I haven't moved an inch, not even an inch from where I was. I'm supposed to be multiskilled here. I don't know what to answer to my children when they ask me what job I am doing, I have to be at the workshop and I have to be at the office. I have to solve problems at the phone. It's a skill, not a skill you can get at technical school, but it's a skill. Instead white boys that have done a three-week course of marketing are immediately promoted to sales manager. I've done that also, but I'm stuck.⁴⁵

The codification of social antagonisms in racialized terms still provides an important cognitive device to understand challenges and support a moral claim for a greater power at the point of production. However, this pattern of discourse finds a limitation precisely in many references to "affirmative action" as failing to provide new shared opportunities and forms of collective identity between black workers and black managers: "Black managers in human resources don't have any power, they just send instructions to the shopfloor. Affirmative action is implemented only on their side of the coin, but not for us workers, this side is not receiving it. You have to be a big shot to be promoted."⁴⁶ These limitations of a racialized imagery as a form of emancipatory discourse reveal deep continuities with established ideological patterns on the shopfloor. The identification of "whites" as counterparts, in other words, seems to be specifically functional to reinforcing an image of the radical "otherness" of the managerial authority, rather than in identifying the company as a more democratic space enabled by political and legislative changes. This is, at the same time, reflected in strong references to workers' self-worth and demands for recognition as a more effective empowering strategy:

In my view, instead of training the workers they would prefer to train them in lousy jobs. And at the same time they say they're raising the awareness of the workers on the conditions of the company and the economy to tell them that they have to work more diligently. But they don't train us to do more difficult stuff because they say this would cost company's money. We don't have an opportunity of scrambling our own eggs, of fixing things when they break down.⁴⁷

It would be impossible, on the other hand, to separate workplace discourses of race from this broader perception of devaluation of workers' specific contribution, arising from their daily interaction with a produc-

45. Interview 11, (15 July 1999).

46. Interview 15, (20 July 1999).

47. *Ibid.*

tion process that is shaped by their own inner knowledge of problems and forms of interaction. The denial of these cognitive mechanisms is, in the final analysis, the most damaging aspect of restructuring, since it undermines the forms of worker subjectivity that constitute the basis for worker demands for better wages and working conditions, but also for a more dignified life. It is inside this contestation for worker subjectivity that the existence of racialized forms of authority is manifested through oppositional discourses.

Restructuring trends and the associated job losses are generally received by workers with a sense of uncertainty that articulates a perceived threat to long-established forms of citizenship and social insertion, linked to waged labour and relative employment security. While this stability had facilitated in the past forms of collective consciousness, organization and militancy, the undermining of their very foundations is defining a new sense of powerlessness accompanied by a growing sense of inadequacy of traditional radicalism on workplace issues:

A: Management is reducing employees' numbers, they say workers must be expandable, by which they mean you must be able to do many jobs. Employees lost are never replaced. This is one of those tricks the company uses to its employees. Maybe the next time you'll come back only not to find me. You never know, these days anything is possible. Today I'm here, tomorrow I'm not, after sixteen years [...].

Q: Well, they can't fire people just like that [...].

A: They can't, but they have many means you can lose your job: frustrate you, make you run around, make you feel lost, many things.⁴⁸

On the other hand, the existence of a "government of the black people", as one worker puts it, is not enabling a recodification in racial or nationalist terms of patterns of solidarity and expectations of social promotions. Rather, the fact that a government representing the majority of the population is in power inside a formal alliance with the union movement, while enforcing spending constraints and disciplining socio-economic expectations, contributes to workers' disorientation and lack of direction. In fact, these developments sanction the continuity between workplace-based and community demands that had provided a fundamental contribution to the definition of black working-class identities in the East Rand:

This government, we don't trust it any more. They say they are going to make changes, but workers don't know nothing about the changes. It's only us who are feeling who are going to be suffering. We say we are going back. We voted for our government, and we thought things would be better, but our government is making us suffer.⁴⁹

48. Interview 12, (16 July 1999).

49. Interview 38, (12 October 1999).

Discourses of government delivery remain, however, in arguments that, while not identifying the government as an ally in immediate socio-economic concerns, try to focus on the reasons of its disappointing performance in the continuing domination by elements linked to the “previous white government”. They are accused of mistrusting the democratic government and undermining transformation:

You complain to the manager and he tells you: “Go to Mandela to give you money and to give you a job”. Now, I asked the white guy that comes here for deliveries: “How’s the business in your company?” And he says, “I don’t know man, we don’t know Thabo Mbeki, we don’t trust that man”. That is why business is like this.⁵⁰

But it is, however, in workers’ criticisms of the government’s ability, or even willingness, to deal with the broad social impacts of restructuring that the limitations of a racialized-cum-nationalist worker imagery appear most evident. A consequence of the rising proportion of “atypical” employees is that lower wages and benefits increase the burden of reproduction in working-class households. This is particularly evident in the fact that a rising proportion of workers’ wages (up to 50 to 60 per cent in the case of workers interviewed) is directed towards the payment of municipal services (mainly rents and fees for housing, electricity, and water). The price of these necessities has generally increased as a result of “cost recovery” policies introduced by municipalities to restore levels of payments eroded by apartheid-era boycotts and as a condition to upgrade infrastructures. This also creates renewed antagonisms between residents and local councillors or ANC leaders identified as enforcing these policies. In this case, worker demands seem to indicate the need for organizational strategies and alliances that are more sensitive to community demands and forms of social protection (in many cases this is witnessed by workers’ participation in boycotts of rates and tariffs for municipal services):

If you are not working the government should send 50 to 100 bucks. You have children, families, and if no-one is working there’s lots of problems. The government can do that and it’s not. Since when I’ve been working for [labour broker] I’ve been short of money for food every week.⁵¹

The majority of workers interviewed argue that the government has abdicated its fundamental functions in the sphere of job creation, which remains an important source of expectations. However, in many answers there is a surfacing feeling of a decreased centrality of waged employment in personal strategies of citizenship and social insertion. This is reflected in the relatively high number of respondents (fifteen out of fifty) who have a second occupation in the form of informal activities, to which are added

50. Interview 3, (12 July 1999).

51. Interview 20, (12 September 1999).

twenty respondents who argue that they would engage in such activities if they had the necessary access to financial capital and social relations. These results underline a specific feature of the current restructuring phase as increasingly blurring the divides between formal and informal economy. At the same time, the redefinition of life strategies as a consequence of a possible exit from formal waged employment is conducive to workers' re-evaluation of prospects of self-entrepreneurship. While affirmative action remains a significant factor in workplace-based demands in relation to the government, this seems relatively less significant for workers who are planning individual competitive strategies outside the workplace. Here the equalization of conditions for market competition seems to rise to a greater prominence: "Government can bring in education that can help employees to develop themselves. That should be compulsory, so that once they are retrenched workers can form cooperatives. Because jobs are there, even in the townships."⁵² While opinions concerning government's role and responsibilities in the current situation are highly diversified, they seem to be unified by autobiographical narratives and diverse life strategies that are increasingly internalizing a decreasing significance of waged labour as a source of worker power and citizenship rights. This common element in a context that sees worker responses becoming increasingly fragmented, raises important questions for the union as the historical locale of collective worker strategies of empowerment. In particular, the possibility of workplace-based militant action seems to be weakened by the economic scale of processes facing individual workplaces. Therefore, views demanding a fighting union "because we are their bosses", are often accompanied by arguments that codify the "fight" increasingly in terms of technical crisis management or deployment of expertise which redefines union allegiances in markedly instrumentalist forms. This is particularly apparent in a context most directly affected by the crisis, such as Kelvinator:

The union has got a great deal to do, and I don't think they haven't done much upon this issue. If management brings its statements here, do we have qualified chartered accountants that can read financial statements, or qualified lawyers? Unions are like our lawyers. They need to gather information from government on what is happening in the industry. We don't want to find ourselves in a situation where they make a follow-up after actions have been taken. Then they can help us, now they are coming after, after everything is done. They don't take a sense of urgency when they deal with these issues. They know that at the end of the month the debit order money is coming in, but they can't use our money even to save our jobs.⁵³

The union is therefore caught in a problematic situation defined by a

52. Interview 41, (20 October 1999).

53. Interview 37, (12 October 1999).

double inadequacy. On one hand, the scale and depth of economic processes at play undermine its role as negotiating industrial change on the basis of deep-seated grassroots militancy. This outcome had represented the organizational crystallization of historical process through which a stabilized urban proletariat on the East Rand had come to define itself as an actor in the political dynamics of citizenship and grassroots power. On the other hand, this transition leaves the union unprepared to deploy services and expertise that are demanded to support the two “exit” options that East Rand workers identify. These refer to, first a “collective” option of community mobilization and alliances aimed at regaining, at least partially, in the sphere of reproduction what has been sacrificed in production through job losses and casualization. Second, an “individualist” response to the crisis prefers options of market-driven and entrepreneurship-based strategies of social promotion, where informality retains a strong appeal.

NUMSA is invested by the rise of a new distribution of economic power in the Gauteng area, which privileges new axes of accumulation around financial and information-based activities to the detriment of established manufacturing areas on the East Rand. In this context the union finds itself in the uncomfortable position of devoting most resources to dealing with occupational and restructuring crisis management, while trying to unionize a highly vulnerable workforce to replace its lost historical strongholds. As a result, and related to the uncertain significance of nationalist politics to this purpose, the definition of political and organizational forms that can express diffuse strategies responding to the crisis of large-scale manufacturing employment in the region remains a largely open question. However, if we examine the workplace experiences of food retail workers, representative of many contingent, low-wage jobs replacing manufacturing in the region, we get a bleak picture, indeed, of further constrained mobilization and increased fragmentation.

WHAT'S IN STORE: RETAIL-SECTOR WORKERS DETACHED

The decline of a unionized manufacturing working class is paralleled by the growth of casualized and vulnerable employment linked to the tertiarization of the East Rand's economy. Research shows that while young women occupy the majority of temporary and part-time jobs, the process has also affected male workers through subcontracting of previously permanent retail employment.⁵⁴ In addition, many older male subcontracted merchandizers previously held jobs in East Rand manufacturing firms. Their displacement from that work not only reduced job stability and wages, but also served to disconnect them from collective workplace solidarity:

54. Kenny, “Selling Selves”.

I used to work for a chemical firm in Benoni. We would work together. Next to each other, right next to each other. OK, it was hard work, but we would sing songs all day long. I was nice. We'd sing loud. When the company closed, I found this contract [job]. But sometimes I remember that [singing]. Now we can't do that. [*laughs*] You can't sing songs with customers all around. Sometimes I sing to myself while working, but it doesn't feel the same. Now I just get on with what I have to do for the day.⁵⁵

Metaphorically through song, this worker remembers the camaraderie of work on the factory floor compared to individualized work in the store. While NUMSA members struggle with the erosion of workplace rights, and reformulate solutions based in technicist attempts to stall greater incursions, the life strategies of many East Rand food-retailing workers suggest an even greater detachment from former collective responses centred around broad social citizenship rights. Casual food-retail workers' expectations have been curtailed from hope of workplace training and advancement to weak calls for more hours or at best permanent jobs:

I wish to get another job for the days that I do not use for [working in the store]. I should think that will make life better because it is tough with especially with us single mothers [...]. Things are worse within this life even if you die you need to pay for your death by paying for the grave more than anything else. Death is everywhere and it is possible that one can die even after this meeting, then if you die or one of your family dies where will you get the money for the burial because with the money you get from one day's work it is impossible to save something. If maybe, if I can be permanent I will try to save R50 a month to be able to look to that and other things.⁵⁶

These comments from a forty-year-old female casual till packer who has worked in the same job for six years show that engrained survival strategies target gaining access to more days of work to earn a meagre few Rands. While women have predominated in front-line retailing jobs historically, this worker would have been more likely to have worked in a permanent, full-time position fifteen years ago.⁵⁷ Combined with the loss of male full-time manufacturing jobs, the relative importance of casualized employment held by women has increased. This worker's role in maintaining her household and her explicit identification with "single mothers" underlines the terms of her vulnerability. Indeed, her concern with death and the costs of death hint at the unpredictability of contingency costs.

While the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) has attempted to deal with the gendered character of employment through a long-term gender education campaign, it still faces deep challenges to organizing collective responses to gendered insecurity

55. Interview 11, (31 August 2000), Daveyton.

56. Interview 5, (27 May 1999).

57. Kenny, "Selling Selves".

tied to processes of casualization. As the case of NUMSA has shown, these processes have militated against the construction of sustained worker solidarity and have reinforced defensive workplace struggles.

For instance, the casual quoted above evokes a sense of herself as better off than many rather than deriving radical demands for herself and her children from her actual conditions:

However, it is also better with us because at the end of the week I am able to get money for bread, there are people who sleep and wake up with nothing to eat and some sleep on the streets. It is better with me because I have a house, a temporary job and my kids can be able to eat and go to school because with others are worse.⁵⁸

Casual employment engenders uncertainty and insecurity, on the one hand, but also reminds workers of their closeness to real poverty. If you have money for bread and a house, you are better than many. This employment, then, shifts workers from memories of militant demands for greater participation and full social citizenship that NUMSA members recall in frustration to their present. There is in the narratives of many retail-sector workers a thorough sense of loss of rights and power.

At the same time, this worker was one of few casuals attending union meetings. She cultivated an awareness that the meeting should provide a base of solidarity from which to make demands:

You know our problem is that we are divided as casuals. You'll find that only five attend the meeting. I always tell them to attend meetings and make them aware of the importance of unity as casuals. What they tell you is that "We have come to work for our kids". As much as that is important, our rights are also important for us to fight for [...]. Things only get fixed if people are united and act as a collective.⁵⁹

Compared to NUMSA rank-and-file members, however, her articulation of what those rights were and of what her and other casuals demands should be, seemed particularly limited. They wanted to be made, if not permanent, than at least "permanent casuals". In other words, their fight was for a marginal degree of security. Asserting a right to (relatively) secure employment articulated claims to a limited social citizenship.

The codification of social antagonisms occurred through racialized views of management prerogative, similar to the engineering workers' experiences, but they also came through division on the shopfloor among workers by employment category. While workers still spoke of white racist management like the engineering workers, much of these comments occurred within discussions about the lack of opportunities for job promotion. Otherness was not only defined in terms of white manage-

58. Interview 5, (27 May 1999).

59. *Ibid.*

ment, or white casuals who were quickly promoted to supervisory positions, but also in terms of their fellow workers, sometimes fellow union members:⁶⁰ “It’s like they are the permanent staff of the [store], we are the merchandisers. It’s like they just separate themselves and if they say, OK we’re going to strike, they *tell* us, they don’t ask us.”⁶¹ The authority and privilege, which casuals and subcontracted merchandizers often portrayed permanent workers having, divided workers, undermining solidarity that East-Rand retail sector workers had in unions organized against racist management and poor conditions and wages under apartheid. This translated into reformulations of rights to limited participation, such as when casuals fought to be able to wear store uniforms worn by permanents – and hence symbolically become recognized as fellow employees – rather than the black-and-white street clothes which marked them as casuals, which surfaced as one of the more emotional demands during 1998 interviews conducted.

While retail sector workers also felt frustrated with the anaemic attempts by the ANC government to better the conditions of “the people”, most of their anger was taken out on “sell-out” local councillors who left the township for the posh (former white) suburbs: “It’s a very, very big problem, they stay far away. They are no longer with us”.⁶² One worker vocalized the distance felt between themselves and former comrades, local anti-apartheid activists turned councillors: “How can you drive through once every few weeks in your new E-class [Mercedes Benz], and know what our problems are”.⁶³ The disillusionment with local (black) councillors and quick wealth seen to be obtained by them served to reproduce a sense of township resident oppositional character.

On the other hand, conditioned by greater insecurity of the East Rand’s changing labour market and the vulnerability of their insecure part-time jobs, casual retail sector workers belied the increasing fragmentation of black working-class subjectivity. This process of subjectivity formation, we argue, is not about a simple growing economic division between a labour aristocracy and a growing underclass, as Seekings⁶⁴ might imply, but about the production of contradictory subjectivities marking the destruction of former solidarities on the East Rand while meanings of race and class become bound together in new formulations significantly reducing workers capacity to project social citizenship rights into a future alternative order. As one young (twenty-two-year-old) casual said of the next generation: “If you haven’t worked before, you really are scared to join any organization because you don’t want to lose your job. Especially

60. Kenny, “Selling Selves”.

61. Interview 10, (31 August 2000), Daveyton.

62. Interview 42, (7 September 2000), Daveyton.

63. Interview 11, (31 August 2000), Daveyton.

64. Seekings, “Is There an Underclass in South Africa?”.

these days where there are many [more] retrenchments than getting a job".⁶⁵ While manufacturing workers battle to reconstitute new life strategies in a context of declining workplace power, the tertiarization of the East Rand's economy only exacerbates this reality.

CONCLUSION

The black working class of the East Rand has been affected in the past decade by a contradictory process that is not simply questioning the material basis of its existence and reproduction. Most importantly, what is at stake here is the erosion of a whole world view built on specific practices of solidarity and organization that had sustained under apartheid an image of social integration based on worker and citizenship rights in a democratic South Africa deeply linked to waged labour positions. Not only has the prospect of stable, quality manufacturing employment been undermined by socioeconomic dynamics of industrial restructuring, but alternative job prospects, for instance in casual retail jobs, leave little room to reconstruct collective orders asserting rights to full social citizenship.

The contradictory nature of this process is, in fact, particularly expressed by the fact that these forms of uncertainty and disorientation among workers have been ushered in precisely through policies adopted by a new democratic government that had previously driven broad expectations for a fundamental social change. The resulting impact in forms of identity, strategies and organization is particularly apparent in images of the new government. This is portrayed often as still kept hostage by the forces of reaction, but also as an actor increasingly unable to affect in significant ways workers' demand for either employment protection or support in alternative "post-manufacturing" life strategies. The limited appeal of nationalist ideologies can be read as a result of these approaches.

This also explains how a discourse of race as part of a broader inventory of responses remains confined to strategies of workplace-based self-empowerment and defence against racist and authoritarian management styles, without on the other hand a convinced, wholehearted adhesion to affirmative-action programmes or forms of common identification with black managers and supervisors. This pattern, which is inscribed in a strong continuity with practices proper to the "apartheid workplace regime"⁶⁶ underlines the relevance of race, paradoxically, in those particular areas where it reinforces the identification of the adversary or the counterpart in the structures of capitalist management. This, at the

65. Interview 24, (7 August 1999), Daveyton.

66. K. von Holdt, "From Resistance to Reconstruction: a Case Study of Trade Unionism in the Workplace and the Community (1980-1996)", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, 2000).

same time, does not necessarily suggest that “class” identities have been left unchanged by these processes. Rather, the diversification of responses and strategies emerged out of the crisis of large-scale manufacturing indicates that a far more nuanced picture is emerging out of the hollowing out of previous forms of solidarity, socialization, everyday construction of meanings and sense. The demand for social citizenship rights in this context has probably retained a subversive character, heightened by current levels of exclusion, fiscal discipline, and the marketization of basic social necessities. However the style, strategies, and discourse of this “character”, and the ways in which working-class identities are reconfigured inside it probably require a detachment from polarized debates over the primacy of “class” and “non-class” *identities* and a closer look at *processes* of oppositional subjectivity formation,⁶⁷ whose urgency is barely signalled by this paper.

67. F. Barchiesi, “Restructuring, Flexibility and the Politics of Workplace Subjectivity: A Worker Inquiry in the South African Car Industry”, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10 (1998), pp. 105–133; Kenny, “Selling Selves”.