

Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947 (Africa Revisited: His

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Working Class Action and Informal Trade on the Durban Docks, 1930s-1950s

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In this article, I discuss the limited archival and other sources we have about three important African dock leaders in Durban between 1931 and 1949: Dick Mate, Amos Gumede, and Zulu Phungula. Scholars have described Phungula in particular as a proletarian hero. However, the actions and discourse of these leaders exhibit a distinctive combination of working class radicalism and a concern for the interests of African petty traders. Their thinking was also often characterised by economic nationalism and anti-Indian sentiments. Interviews with some of the leaders of the 1958 dock strikes demonstrate a similar mixture of working class and entrepreneurial concerns. I argue that these seemingly contradictory actions and discourses may not be inconsistent. The working class discourse was not simply an attempt by a petty bourgeoisie to appeal to African workers, as it was for some other African leaders, and Zulu nationalism was not a surrogate for repressed working class action. Instead, these different approaches to socioeconomic advancement reflected the livelihood strategies of many dock workers, who combined formal wage labour with informal commercial enterprises. Moreover, their employment on the docks made these small-scale businesses possible and these activities were thus not just two separate sources of income; they were functionally linked and integral parts of households' livelihood strategies.

Introduction

From their first strikes in the 1870s to their refusal in 2008 to handle a shipment of weapons destined for the Mugabe regime,¹ Durban's dock workers have frequently engaged in forceful industrial action. Indeed, like so many of their colleagues around the world, dockers in Durban

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¹ Maritime Union of Australia, 'Boycott: Durban dockworkers block arms to Zimbabwe', *Maritime workers journal*, July-August 2008; K. Padayachee, 'Sending arms to Zim "a recipe for conflict"', *The Mercury*, 18 April 2008.

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