

**“Mzabalazo on the Move”: Organising Workers on a  
Commuter Train in Tshwane – An Ethnographic Study of  
Mamelodi Train Sector**

**by**

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the centrality of travel geographies – with a specific focus on urban commuter railway lines between Mamelodi and central Tshwane – and their influence upon political identities of South African workers. By adopting a historical approach to our understanding of the South African working class, the thesis brings into sharper focus the relationship between the social dynamics of apartheid and how workers perceived the concept of a train. These have permeated into the new era with the formation of the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS), as an organisation dedicated to organising workers on the trains since 2001. The emergence of MTS in the era of the neoliberal labour regime and its associated assault upon labour movements present opportunities for labour revival strategies. Drawing on the data collected, I show that the train can be used as a strategic site of mobilising, particularly for those workers without workplace representation. By portraying the train as a site of worker power and political consciousness, I accord primacy to the train as a space of potential union revival. This is informed by educational sessions on labour rights and labour law that take place on the train en-route to and from work. Because during these educational sessions; workers ask workplace or problem specific questions, I suggest, such questions are informed by the need to seek out useful information that can be utilised to address specific workplace problems.

The theme ‘labour movement revival’ has gained global traction as labour scholars from both the north and south grapple with the aftermath of globalisation on organised labour. This has seen an increase in poverty, unemployment and inequalities in countries such as South Africa. Labour revitalisation theme came about because, as Beverly Silver correctly observes:

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was an almost complete consensus in the social sciences literature that labo[u]r movements were in a general and severe crisis. Declining strike activity and other overt expressions of labo[u]r militancy, failing union density and shrinking real wages and job insecurity were among the trends documented (Silver, 2003: 1).

Reacting to the reality as described by Silver (2003), labour scholars, activists and likeminded individuals set about to rescue the once militant labour movement from its

perpetual decline. Drawing on case studies from various countries, author after author sought to offer new ways in which the erstwhile flourishing trade unionism can be restored to its former glory. This ethnographic study hopes to make a contribution to this growing body of knowledge. By exploring the activities of the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS), the study attempts to show that the train can become a strategic locus of worker social power.

By historicising the role of the train, it is possible to trace various phases of the 'making of the South Africa working class' starting in 1652 (colonialism era). This was followed by the period of mineral discovery, segregation and lastly, apartheid. These historical epochs were characterised by an oppressive and racist capitalist industrialisation process, which sought, as a point of departure to turn into cheap migrants the indigenous populations of South Africa. This saw the advent of an elaborate proletarianisation process backed up a battery of oppressive legislative measures. Due to these conditions, a particular kind of trade unionism – social movement unionism (SMU) – emerged in this context as response to the abuse, exploitation and lack of industrial citizenship of the African majority both as workers and citizens of this country. As an expression of black anger, SMU was primarily concerned with liberating South African from the abuses of both the apartheid state and the racist capitalist system operational in South Africa at the time. This saw black Africans being accorded labour rights for the first time in 1979 and finally achieving democratic majority rule in 1994. A social partnership was put in place with the militant labour movement under COSATU entering into an alliance with the ruling ANC and SACP. Post-1994, the SMU of the 80s faced new challenges with the advent of the neoliberal labour regime as the ANC government adopted market friendly macro-economic policies. The corollary presented the weakening of the labour movements as capital put in place measure to counter labours organisational power.

This led to a crisis of representation as South Africa's largely industrial unionism struggled under the new work paradigm. Under the new work conditions, casualisation, externalisation and outsourcing were adopted by capital with a view to weaken labour's traditional forms of power – associational and structural power. It is this shifting terrain that required innovative ways to theorise and understand labour's attempts to ameliorate the juggernaut that became neoliberalism. Fracturing the workplace as traditionally understood severely ruptured worker solidarities. It is within

this context that this thesis seeks to understand MTS and its locus of operation – the train. The data collected shows that MTS plays a critical role in filling some of the gaps left by the weakened SMU. By organising on the train, MTS provides a space of articulation for the vulnerable sections of the workforce – those without workplace representation. Drawing from the power resource approach (PRA), the thesis makes a case for a need to expand our understanding of workers' associational power. The case of MTS demonstrate that workers' associational power need not be limited to the workplace.

Based on this, the thesis suggests that at the conceptual level, the train, due to its strategic importance to workers' daily travel, can substitute the meaning laden workplace. Drawing on Havery's concept of spatial fix, the findings demonstrate that just like capital, labour is also capable of fixes. These are demonstrated by MTS's ability to: (a) provide workers with a space for friendships and political influence, (b) provide workers with a space of solidarity and belonging and, (c) act as a knowledge hub. Herod argues that, much like capital, workers also have vested interests in how the geographies of production are produced and configured. Therefore, workers can arguably draw strength from this coach and radiate such strength outwards in order to challenge capital's spatial fixes. This, Anderson (2015) refers to as a resonant place. Observations clearly show that workers actively seek out information that can be useful in their lives. This is a form of agency that can be located at the level of the individual – scaled at the body. This form of agency, however, needs to be understood in its context – what Soja refers to as socio-spatial dialectic.

**Key words:** Space; Place; Spatial fix; Resonant place; Power; Agency; Socio-spatial dialectic; Sociological Imagination; Geographic Imagination; Geography; Apartheid; Spatiality; Shopfloor; Shopsteward; Metrorail; Mamelodi; Apartheid spatiality; Spatial entrapment; Economic landscape; Geographies of travel; Comrade coach; Associational power; Institutional power; Societal power; Symbolic leverage; Moral power; Structural power; Marketplace bargaining power; Workplace bargaining power; Legal liminality; Scale; Spatial praxis; Mzabalazo; Barekishi ba matsogo; MaCom; Comrade Mama; Workplace; Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS); Labour geography; Geography of labour; Identity politics; Solidarity; Labour regimes; Social power.

## Dedication

To the men and women who are members of Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS). To you MaCom I say Amandla! Thank you for allowing me to share with you the comrades' coach. Thanks for opening up to me. To the six participants that agreed to do one-on-one interviews, the conversations were enriching and thank you for your time.

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## Plagiarism declaration

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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### 1.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I examine the centrality of travel geographies, with a specific focus on urban commuter railway lines between Mamelodi and central Tshwane, and their influence upon political identities of South African workers. By adopting a historical approach to our understanding of the South African working class, the thesis brings into sharper focus the relationship between apartheid and how workers perceived the concept of train. These have persisted into the new era with the formation of the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) as an organisation dedicated to organising workers on the trains in 2001. The emergence of MTS in the era of the neoliberal labour regime and its associated assault upon labour movements presents opportunities for labour revival strategies. Drawing on the data collected, I show that the train can be used as a strategic site of mobilisation, particularly for those workers without workplace representation. By portraying the train as a site of identity formation and political consciousness, I accord primacy to the train as a space of potential social power. This social power is informed by educational sessions on labour rights and labour law that take place on the train en-route to and from work. During these educational sessions workers ask workplace or problem specific questions, thus the thesis suggests that such questions are informed by the need to seek out useful information that can be utilised to address specific problems (see Chapters 6 and 7).

I take, as a point of departure, the making of the 'South African working class' with an aim to ground the train and contextually explore it as a site of opportunities and constraints. It is my hope that this study will make a contribution to the literature on labour revitalisation as scholars and activists alike seek ways that could contribute to the rebirth of the once militant labour movement of the 1980s (in the case of South Africa).

At the spatial level, apartheid was designed purposefully to effect the separation of what was classified as South Africa's four main races – African, White, Coloured and Indian. For the apartheid state, this made sense in terms of shielding the 'superior race' (Whites) away from, in particular those considered at the time as 'uncivilised' and 'lazy' Africans. In Pretoria as South Africa's capital city, as in many other parts of the country, the introduction of separatist legislative measures such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 was intended to legally forbid racial intermingling (Carruthers, 2000: 24; Terreblanche, 2002: 334; Thompson, 2014: 194). According to Carruthers (2000: 24), the ideology motivating the Group Areas Act was to ensure total racial separation between groups of people. Due to this need to enforce and maintain racial separation, mostly working class Africans and other racial groupings were pushed to the peripheries and semi-peripheries of white cities and towns.

Many Africans were spatially/geographically demarcated to live in homelands or Bantustans. Because of this spatial arrangement, there arose the need among 'blacks' to commute as migrant labour into 'white South Africa' on a daily basis. In the case of Pretoria, there were large-scale forced removals from the 1950s onwards of those not classified as 'White' from places such as Lady Selborne and Garsfontein to newly established township dormitories such as Mamelodi (formerly Vlakfontein), Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal and Mabopane, often within the boundaries of Bantustans (Carruthers, 2000: 31). It is in part because of these forced removals that many Africans become impoverished and, consequently, had to sell their labour to survive (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion on the 'making of the South African working class' starting in 1652). Carruthers (2000: 25-26) points out that not only were residents of Lady Selborne allowed to own land in an urban area but that they were also politically sophisticated. However, due to the Group Areas Act, many Africans experienced downward social mobility because of the apartheid state interventions in their livelihoods. Being relocated to the abovementioned locations impacted materially and otherwise on affected African families.

In this way, mobility between 'white South Africa' and peripheral townships and homelands became a critical factor in the daily lives of the working class Africans. Metrorail trains, busses and minibus taxis emerged in this context as a response to migrant African workers' need for transportation. Public transport, therefore, became an important part of life for many migrant African workers. This is due to the fact that

many spent a considerable amount of time on the road travelling to and from work. According to Khosa (1995: 168), many African workers travelled up to 300km in a day travelling from faraway places such as the former Bantustans of Kwa-Ndebele, Bophuthatswana, and Ga-Rankuwa to their workplaces in and around Pretoria. These travel times, with a particular emphasis on the Metrorail trains, constitute particular spatial forms. Much like townships are associated with working class people, this 'middle passage' (Pirie, 1993: 714) can also be regarded as some form of worker owned spaces away from the employer and the workplace. Therefore, this study endeavours to point out the significance of *en-route to* and *from* work for workers' collective identity, both as workers and township dwellers. Olivier and Booysen (1983: 130) indicate that in 1979, the Pretoria railway station handled some 16 500 commuters during peak hours. Understood in racial and class terms within apartheid South Africa, arguably, the above numbers make rail transport an ideal meeting place for the economically and politically oppressed.

Over years of travelling on trains, specifically those between Mamelodi and Pretoria, I have observed that, besides being a mode of travel, these Pretoria-Mamelodi trains (see Chapter 6 and 7) also play an important social role by accommodating a number of social activities, amongst them religious meetings characterised largely by prayer and praise singing. For the more politically inclined, however, what has become known as 'the comrade's coach' is the preferred space. Here, issues ranging from community related matters, workplace based problems, anything to do with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and report backs from Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and its affiliated structures are discussed openly. This is the field of articulation where interpellations of both racial and class nature are brought to the fore (Pun, 2005: 27). In this space, political talk and the singing of struggle songs is the order of the day.

Generally, in the absence of any matters related to the alliance between the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP) to report and discuss, workplace issues take centre stage. These shopfloor matters are often focused on educating each other about the importance of legislation as a key protective measure against exploitation and abuse by employers. I have observed that daily proceedings in this coach are usually preceded by prayer in the form of singing the national anthem. Next, those who attended any alliance activities are given the platform to report back

on these activities. This is usually followed by discussions of workplace related matters. Meetings are chaired and moderated by formally appointed leaders (see Chapter 6). Whilst there is a rich body of literature on both workplace and community struggles in South Africa, the collective component of the 'middle passage' between home and work has remained largely unexplored in the South African labour scholarship (see Buhlungu, 2010a; Bonner, 1978; Sitas, 1985; Seidman, 1994). However, the existence of MTS is currently faced with two disruptions that are likely to have a ripple effect on the labour movement in both South Africa in general and City of Tshwane specifically. At the national scale, the emergence of a new trade union federation – the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) is likely to divide the working class. For now, the ramifications of this are difficult to predict.

At the locale scale, the existence of MTS is threatened by the arrival of the new model trains. The technological requirements of the new model train have proved to be incompatible with working class cultures in South Africa. These range from church to political activities. Hence, in addition to documenting the history of the MTS, this study took place at a time when this mode of organisation and its role as a bedrock of worker space was disrupted by the massive shift in the labour landscape, as well as the impact of the upgrading of the railway line to different coaches. At some level, these coaches are a real improvement on the older and dilapidated coaches, but at another, their layout and design are less compatible with solidarity actions such as the MTS.

## **1.2 Problem Identification and Rationale**

The South African literature on social movement trade unionism (SMU) has generally tended to locate workers' collective actions within either the workplace or township, if not both. A plethora of studies detail workers' organising strategies in various places and locations (Buhlungu, 2010a; Bonner, 1978; Sitas, 1985; Seidman, 1994; Adler, 1997, see also Chapter 4). What is missing from this literature is an attempt to factor in transport and its related influences upon the daily experiences of workers in South Africa. This study seeks to bring to the fore the importance of the train in the South African context and the extent to which it can be viewed as a strategic site of mobilising in achieving both workplace and township based struggles. With its genesis in the apartheid South Africa, not only as a mode of transportation but an instrument of control and oppression, an argument can therefore be made about how black

commuters framed their struggle locations within the apartheid spatial design. Reflecting on the role of the train in relation to the mining industry, Pirie observes that the need to understand the middle passage can be linked to the fact that:

The journey itself remains enigmatic: mostly, labour has simply been presumed to 'flow' to and from the mines, as if taken by gravity or magic carpet. The physical movement [to and from work] has attracted slight attention. As a result, the middle passage separating departure and arrival is a gaping hole... (Pirie, 1993: 713-14).

The thesis is an attempt to sociologically construct a narrative that interrogates the train's contribution to the 'making of the South African working class' beyond its mechanical role. An understanding of trains as a form of workers' space in which to form friendships and forge new identities is conspicuously absent from the South African scholarship on labour. According to Ben Scully (2012) the public turn within the South African labour scholarship brings to the fore the point that the move away from land-labour-livelihoods (LLL) has severely constrained our understanding of workers in South Africa:

In a country such as South Africa, focusing [labour] studies exclusively on wage workers and their collective actions limits scholars to only one part of workers' livelihoods (Scully, 2012: 92).

It is always advisable to reference the importance of context as a critical factor in shaping the kind of questions that researchers ask, much like Scully's (2012) push for LLL to form an integral part of labour analysis. This study, therefore, is an attempt to present transportation, particularly trains, as a missing link in attaining a holistic understanding of workers' militancy in South Africa. In light of the above, the study poses the following questions:

What is the role of transport travel in shaping worker identities, i.e.

1. To what extent are train comrade coaches, as worker spaces, engine rooms for workplace militancy?
2. Who rides to and from work in the so-called comrade coaches?
3. How can train based worker identities help us understand the current South African labour movement?



Instead of factories (Von Holdt, 2002) and mining compounds (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011), this study attempts to understand the relations between train coaches and workers' collective identities. Much like the case with Brazil and the Philippines, the South African labour movement can also more appropriately be referred to as 'social movement unionism' (Lambert & Webster, 1988; Webster, 1988; Seidman, 1994; Southhall & Webster, 2010). This can be attributed to South Africa's socio-political structure that has influenced the socio-spatial configuration of this country.

Thus, the middle passage can be regarded as integral to understanding workers in South Africa. Furthermore, over and above the apartheid's socio-spatial configuration, the informalisation process affects South Africa, like many other countries around the world, in important ways (Kenny, 2004; Theron, 2005a; Webster & Von Holdt, 2005). Informalisation of work has given rise to a situation in which many workers can no longer lay claim to a workplace as traditionally understood. This is often due to the rise of subcontracting and labour broking, also referred to as triangular employment relations (see Theron, 2005a).

According to Theron (2002: 38, 40), triangular employment relations constitute a new form of control in the labour market. This can be linked to the fact that the existence of intermediaries who procure labour to do work for a client renders meaningless the notion of a workplace (Theron, 2002: 40; 2005b: 620). The decomposition of the workplace through subcontracting impedes upon workers' organisational rights because such rights can only be exercised in a workplace controlled by the employer (Theron, 2002: 40). Triangular employment relations is exemplified by the process of externalisation in which businesses restructure operations in such a way that labour is engaged through a third party (Theron, 2005b: 619). Consequently, our engagement with the middle passage must appreciate the extent to which train coaches and other modes of transport are important spaces for workers. In the absence of workplaces as historically understood, train coaches might just be substitutes (see Chapter 3, 6 and 7) for the traditional role played by compounds and factories as spaces for collective worker mobilisation (Von Holdt, 2002; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). In their description of how the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was able to build a power base after it managed to capture the compounds, Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011: 239-40) highlight the workplace as an important site for worker solidarity and militancy:

Compounds were more than a convenient housing solution to the mining industry as the institution served as a mechanism of control. Nevertheless, from the early 1980s onwards, the NUM was able to capture this space and turn the logic of control on its head, a strategy that explains the union's success in organi[s]ing the [mining] industry (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011: 239-40).

Much like the compounds, commuter trains were also historically utilised as tools of control in apartheid South Africa. Pirie's work (Pirie, 1986: 41-2; 1987: 283-84; 1993: 714-15) demonstrates this point in two important ways: Firstly, trains allowed capital to shuttle vast numbers of labour between white South Africa and the homelands. Train travel as a form of labour control ensured that, (a) men arrived at the mines less exhausted and capable of performing productive work; and (b) trains severely limited the opportunity of desertion en-route to the mines. Secondly, commuter trains were facilitative of apartheid spatiality in which Africans were pushed to the peripheries of white towns. Thus, geography is important in understanding labour in South Africa.

A geographically embedded analysis is imperative in understanding how labour is able to scale its actions and, in the process, linking up three important spaces: townships, middle passage and the workplace. Further, much like apartheid, as Herod (2012: 335) makes clear, "capitalism is a geographically structured economic system". The topic at hand therefore requires a geographically sensitive approach. Despite the significance of apartheid spatiality in shaping both industrial relations and the character of the labour movement, space – both as an analytical tool and a concept – remains somewhat underdeveloped in South African labour scholarship. Few scholars (see for example, Bezuidenhout & Webster, 2010; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Mmadi, 2012; Mashayamombe, 2014) have made an attempt to spatially embed the character of both South African labour movement and capital. This study seeks to bring the concept of space to the centre of analysis, by drawing on the concept both as a theoretical frame and as an analytical tool.

### **1.3 Organisation of the Thesis**

The argument broached in this opening chapter is outlined and spread out through the next 7 chapters. **Chapter 2** details the historical background of South Africa. This constitutes the 'making of the South African working class'. **Chapter 3** comprises two

parts. The first part outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the study. In this chapter, I locate the key conceptual and theoretical tools that guide the direction of the study. The second part presents the history of the kinds of labour movements to emerge in South Africa as a response to the unfolding racist capitalist system. The tools of data collection – participant observation and its related methodological underpinnings and the data analysis process, is presented in **Chapter 4**

**Chapter 5** surveys the discussions around successes and failures of the South African labour movements post-apartheid. Located within neoliberal labour regimes this chapter locates the South African trade unionism within the global arena with a view to reflect on some of the trade union shortcomings as part of the global trends.

In addition, the chapter reflects on the power resource approach (PRA) and its usefulness and weaknesses are discussed. The story of MTS in relation to the findings is told in two chapters - **Chapter 6 and Chapter 7**, followed by the discussions and conclusion in **Chapter 8**. The aforementioned chapters are pulled together and condensed in the conclusions.

#### **1.4 Summary**

The introduction and background chapter provided a brief historical overview of labour (class) and race relations in South Africa. With a focus on geography, the chapter paid attention to apartheid geography and its modalities with a view to frame the importance on transportation to South African working class. The thrust of this angle is that; given the history of this country, our understanding of the South African working class is incomplete without linking the experiences of daily travel to workers identities. Subsequent to the above, the chapter presents the sociological problematique and justifies the significance of the study to the South African labour scholarship. The research question(s) in respect of the identified social problematic are formulated and placed in context.

Finally, whilst placing the train (as a site of research) in historical context, the chapter attempts to link the purpose of this sociological inquiry to the current discourse on problems and challenges facing the labour movement (see Chapter 6 and 7). The next chapter discusses the ‘making of the South African working class’ by detailing the

history of South Africa and her people starting in 1652. In this way, Chapter 2 is an extension of Chapter 1.

## Chapter 2

# Historical Background

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### 2.1 Introduction

The twin state-capital spatial configurations of South Africa makes it abundantly clear that this country cannot only be viewed and analysed in terms of racial and class relations. Over and above being a racial system, apartheid was also, fundamentally about splitting South Africa as a republic into 10 distinct Bantustan geographical locations. Because of this, geography becomes an important and a predominant feature of the South African economic landscape. Linked to the foregoing, South African scholars of various political persuasions have attempted to geographically demonstrate the links between some or all of the following, in no particular order, apartheid spatiality and community protests; working class mobilisation and state power and transport (see for example, McCarthy & Swillings, 1985; Khosa, 1995; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Pirie, 1993, 1987; Von Holdt, 2002; Adler, 1997; Murray, 1987). Others, such as Von Holdt (2002) and Adler (1997) do not necessarily couch their discussions in geography, however, due to apartheid spatiality, reference to location and how place impacts on workers' action renders spatiality central to their arguments. Therefore, understanding the South African working class requires an approach that acknowledges the intersecting nature of class, race and space. To achieve this, an analysis that is concerned with contextualising human actions in its socio-spatial dialect is required (see Chapter 3). Certain actions can only be fully explained when geographically differentiated in order to articulate spatial variations that give rise to particular social conditions. Below I pay attention to the social process(es) that shaped the South African working class. This begins in 1652 to the present conditions.

### 2.2 The Making of the South African Working Class

In combining the sociological and geographical imaginations, the thesis has sought to theoretically frame the conditions within which the South African labour emerged (see Chapter 3). Colin Bundy argues that to understand the current conjuncture in South

Africa, it is important to first have a sense of its history (Bundy, 1993: 49 cited in Terreblache, 2002: 3). To this end, Allen provides an erudite account in respect the making of the South African working class:

While the lifestyles of blacks in [S]outhern Africa were being reshaped to make it possible for white entrepreneurs to profit from the extraction of diamonds from the blue soil in the Kimberly pipes... It was always the poor with the least ability to resist who were afflicted most in this process. They suffered, however, in different ways for although the purpose of emergent capitalist activity was the same everywhere the means used to pursue it varied according to the historical and cultural conditions in every society. It mattered what resources were available; whether or not there were mineral deposits or fertile land; what the labour supply was like, from where it came from ... (Allen, 1992: 90).

Whilst the study recognises the fact that we currently live in a globalised world in which workers everywhere face almost the same economic and social pressures brought about by the market economy, concomitantly, the study seeks to emphasise the influence of geographical/spatial particularities, paying special attention to South Africa. Granted, the sweeping political changes of the 90s have improved the conditions of the South African working class significantly, (for example, the South African labour movement shifted from being the state's adversary to being a partner). However, the continued importance of the train for mobility points to a continuation of the past with the present (see Buhlungu, 2010a; Buhlungu & Tsoaedi, 2012; Beckman, Buhlungu & Sachikonye, 2010).

This chapter is a descriptive vignette of the South African working class. Arguably, the making of the South African working class can be traced back to the arrival of Jan Van Riebeck in 1652 at the Cape of Good Hope (Allen, 1992: 91). European settlement in South Africa set in motion an industrialisation process premised on racist ideologies. The interplay between race and class that characterised much of the industrialisation process has, on so many levels set the South African working class apart from the rest. According to Shell (2014: 75), almost all of the people who were desperately poor and without legal status were black, whilst all the richer people were white, thus an association between whiteness and success took root in the minds of the population.

In her comparative study comparing South Africa and Brazilian labour movements, Gay Siedman recognises this fact:

... [U]nderstanding labour movements' behavio[u]r revolves around the institutional frameworks in which unions emerge, and their past political alliances. *Worker's worldviews along with the history of labo[u]r legislation, of relations between unions and the state, and of links between unions and parties serve to explain why unions in different national settings behave differently* (Siedman, 1994: 20, emphasis added).

While not necessarily using the language of geography, it is however clear that Siedman's argument alludes to the central role of space/place. As already suggested above, the study of the South African working class is a story intricately linked to colonialism and later on, apartheid. The aforementioned historical epochs motivated a process of class formations along racial ideologies and notions of superiority and subjugation.

### **2.2.1 Arrival of European Settlers**

The South African class and race structure can be understood with reference to the year 1652. The numerical minority of white settlers in Southern Africa meant that black people had to be drawn into the unfolding industrial changes (Allen, 1992: 91). This process gave rise to 'the making of the South African working class' that can be accounted for by the following interrelated time periods, (a) the era of colonial conquest (1652-1870); (b) mineral discovery (1870-1910); (c) segregation (1910-1948) and the era of apartheid (1948-1994) (Brownnett, 1982: 10). The periodisation is simply for analytical purposes and does not seek to imply that the colonial rule ended in 1870. These historical periods are interlinked and interrelated and therefore cannot be read to represent clear-cut endings and beginnings. Below I detail an in-depth discussion of each period.

### **2.2.2 Colonial Conquest**

The decision, in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company to set-up a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope for its passing ships was to have a remarkable and a long lasting impact on South Africa and its indigenous people. The economic interests that

followed European settlers' conquest of the Cape of Good Hope meant that Europeans placed a demand upon the labour of the indigenous inhabitants (Brownnett, 1982: 11; Allen, 1992: 91; Thompson, 2014: 38; Omer-Cooper, 1994: 18, 23). However, the majority of blacks resisted being absorbed into the industrialisation process as labourers – “barekishi ba matsogo” (see Chapter 6). This is because the majority of the Southern Africa inhabitants were successful pastoralists thus, were not compelled to exchange their labour for wages (Allen, 1992: 73; Bundy, 1972: 381-2). Initially, the problem of labour shortages was solved by the introduction of slavery in the Cape. Slaves were sourced from faraway places such as Madagascar, Indonesian Islands, South India, Ceylon, Dahomey and Angola. However, De Villiers notes a geographic factor by pointing out that local slaves (indigenous Khoekhoe<sup>1</sup> who lost their lands and livestock) were preferred because they were less likely to run away (De Villiers, 2014a: 46, 54; Thompson, 2014: 36; Terreblanche, 2002: 158-9).

Cape slavery was minimal when measured against the trans-Atlantic slave trade and therefore could not adequately address the problem of labour shortages in the Cape colony (Allen, 1992: 99; Terreblanche, 2002: 158-9). To remedy the situation, many indigenous groups such as the Khoekhoe and Xhosas were forced to become workers through land dispossession. Slaves were the Cape Colony's most important source of labour (Shell, 2014: 68; De Villiers, 2014b: 89). Owing to this importance, Allen observes a concerted effort to turn the local indigenous ethnic groups into slaves:

[Khoekhoe] increasing[ly] ... entered the labour market of the colonists. By the end of the eighteenth century there were as many Kho[e]kho[e] living in areas controlled by the Europeans as there were slaves. As the Kho[e]kho[e] drifted into wage employment and were subjected to attempt by settlers to delimit their freedom, they moved close to the slaves in culture, status and in economic function (Allen, 1992: 102).

As a consequence of the above, Allen states that the Khoekhoe and the slaves merged into a single class (Allen, 1992: 103). This intermingling, combined with skin pigmentation meant that when slavery was officially abolished in 1834 there was no differentiations between the indigenous Khoekhoe and the former slaves – at least in

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<sup>1</sup> This is apparently the correct spelling of the term. Khoekhoe will hence forth replace the popularly used Khoikhoi in this thesis. The debate around this is for historians. See De Villiers, 2014.



the minds of whites (Allen, 1992: 103; Thompson, 2014: 57; Stepan, 1982: 1, cited in Terreblanche, 2002: 201). Amongst the contributory factors to this, is that over and above selling their labour power, the indigenous Khoekhoe over time lost command of their own language and way of life in order to comply with Western lifestyle and norms (De Villiers, 2014a: 50). Following wars and its related disruptions, the Pedis and Xhosas voluntarily moved into employment with the settlers in the Cape of Good Hope. These groups were subjected to the same treatment as the slaves (Allen, 1992: 104). The process of impoverishment and enslavement was facilitated by acts of slave raiding and land dispossessions through military power that later on moved into the interior of South Africa (Worden, 1995: 9).

The so-called commandos rounded up many indigenous people and bound them to a life of servitude (Morton, 1994: 1). In this way, slavery spread into the interior with the trekboers (voortrekkers) who embarked upon the famous Great Trek and along the journey supplemented slave-raiding by amongst others, fomenting conflict among Africans. Many of those captured during raids, (particularly children) were referred to by a variety of terms: inboekstelsel (apprentices) and or orphans (Morton, 1994: 168; Eldredge, 1994: 115; Terreblanche, 2002: 158).

The aforementioned terminology was chosen deliberately to emphasise 'positive' intents of bonded/indentured labour – that it was labour services that sought to make responsible men and women out of abandoned children (Morton, 1994: 168). While slave-raiding produced the required labour, land dispossessions and cattle raiding were the accompanying processes as seized land had to be stocked with animals of economic value (Eldredge, 1994: 114). The impoverishment of the African people through enslavement and dispossessions by means both legal and illegal has buttressed South Africa's spatial configurations together with class and race relations; therefore a starting point in understanding labour conditions in this country. According to Fred Morton:

...[I]nboekstelsel appears to serve for analytical purposes as a transitional form of coerced labo[u]r the history of which begins with the plantations of Stellenbosch and ends with the mining compounds of the Witwatersrand (Morton, 1994: 266).

Located within the colonial conquest period, the Great Trek is considered to have been a turning point in the history of South Africa, for it catalysed the spread of white influences throughout the entire region (Visagie, 2014: 153).

For current discussions, motivating factors for the Great Trek are not important; suffice to mention but two. These relate to labour legislation in the Cape Colony and the question of race. Caledon's Khoekhoe proclamation of 1809 and Ordinance 50 of 1828 were favourable to both khoekhoe and Coloured people in the Cape. This was followed in 1834, by the new law freeing all slaves. At the social level, the Afrikaner community, more so the white farmers, perceived themselves as being at a higher social stratum than the indigenous people. In the first instance, they regarded themselves as Christians and the black people as heathens. Secondly, they accorded skin colour and physical appearance an important marker for racial differentiation. Thirdly, they ascribed to a rigid class stratification in which white people were at the top and the indigenous people at the bottom – as subordinates and servants (Visagie, 2014: 132-33). When the British government curtailed the Afrikaners' position of dominance through legislative measures, Visagie (2014: 133) notes that, "decades later Afrikaners still harboured these grievances".

Due to the arrival of whites in the interior, South Africa went through prolonged periods of social strife and economic upheavals. According to one historian (Grobler, 2014: 155), between 1850 and 1900, South Africa experienced a dramatic transformation. In the beginning of this epoch, there were about twenty societies that lived less independently of each other in the interior. Fifty years later, the whole region was divided into only two British colonies: Cape Colony and Natal, and two Boer republics: Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the Orange Free State. The erstwhile indigenous societies had been defeated politically, economically and socially. Consequently, they were forcefully placed under the British and or Boers administrative controls. One after the other, the Southern Nguni (Xhosa), the Northern Nguni (Zulu and Swati), the Sotho, the Bapedi and Tswana were dispossessed and proletarianised by the barrel of a gun (Grobler, 2014: 155, Terreblanche, 2002: 239). This process was accelerated and given a new impetus by the discovery of minerals. Below I turn to the era of mineral discovery and its related aggressive proletarianisation process unleashed upon the indigenous people of South Africa (see Bundy, 1972; 1988 and Worden, 1995; Horwitz, 1967).

### 2.2.3 Mineral Discovery

The mineral phase of the South African history commenced with the discovery of diamonds in Griqualand West (modern day Kimberly) in 1867 (Grobler, 2014: 179; Visser, 2014a: 189; Browett, 1982: 14; Bundy, 1972: 376; 1988: 65; Thompson, 2014: 115; Terreblanche, 2002: 242). According to Worden (1995: 18-9), the British Empire appeared to lose interest in South Africa as a colony and thus was withdrawing direct political control in the 1850s. However, the discovery of Kimberly diamonds made the South African interior a highly desirable region, as such; the 1870s witnessed an aggressive penetration of the South African interior by settlers. From 1870 onwards, the indigenous population was invariably placed under increased economic, political and social pressures by the changing economic landscape (I elaborate on this point below) (Worden, 1995: 18-9; Thompson, 2014: 122). The discovery of diamonds was followed, some 19 years later, by the discovery of gold in 1886 at the Witwatersrand in Transvaal (modern day Johannesburg) (Visser, 2014a: 193; Verhoef, 2014: 219; Pretorius, 2014: 239; Browett, 1982: 14; Bundy, 1972: 381; Johnstone, 1976: 13; Omer-Cooper, 1994: 101, 126; Van Onselen, 2001: 3-4).

A point of convergence in the literature surveyed is that the mineral revolution provided economic opportunities for all involved – settlers and indigenous Africans alike (Visser, 2014: 189; Browett, 1982: 15; Bundy, 1972: 376, 381; Bundy 1988: 67-71; Worden, 1995: 30). For example, Thompson (2014: 115) notes that twenty thousand whites and thirty thousand blacks had converged on the diamond diggings by 1872. Using only picks and shovels, the diggings presented an economic opportunity for all. The mineral revolution gave rise to labour shortages as a corollary. There was a need to control the labour supply and ensure that it remained constant. As such, dormitories or compounds were first introduced in Kimberly following the discovery of diamonds as open spaces and workers could come and go as they pleased. However, in 1885 “closed” compounds were introduced to give effect to the aforementioned objective, and also to prevent theft of diamonds (Visser, 2014: 191a; Thompson, 2014: 119).

With the discovery of gold however, new measures of securing labour were required. In order to address the problem of labour shortages, non-market forces were adopted and implemented with vigour. These were embodied in the discriminatory and coercive means deployed in order to disadvantage and disempower African peasants. The

period following mineral discovery was characterised by an aggressive imperialism on the part of Britain. The aggressive approach to the region can be explained by reference to two processes, one external to the region and the other, internal. The 'scramble for Africa' made it of the utmost necessity for Britain to consolidate its grip on those parts of the developing world already under its control. On the other hand, the discovery of minerals, made the region too precious to lose. Following from this, the introduction of coercive legislative measures such the reserve system, hut as well as head tax were important facilitators of the imperialist project. Thus, segregation became the next phase in the making of the South African working class (Terreblanche, 2002: 241-2; Visser, 2014: 204a; Bundy, 1972: 371).

#### **2.2.4 Segregation**

In an attempt to explain the origins of segregation, Terreblanche (2002) provides a lucid and nuanced account of British imperialism and its racist capitalist system in particular. This is because, British imperialism, as practiced in South Africa can be directly linked with racial separation (see also Beinart and Dubow, 1995; Legassick, 1995; Dubow, 1995; 1989)<sup>2</sup>. According to Terreblanche (2002: 243) the ruthless, exploitative and oppressive capitalist system that operated in South Africa can be accounted for by the economic conditions in Britain (see also Dubow, 1986 for an elaboration of 'scientific racism' and its British origins and Christopher, 1983 on the origins of the apartheid city). From the early 1870s, Britain's economic development was stunted by the so-called 'long depression' as a result of which it lost economic and industrial ground to Germany and the United States. Furthermore, its economy was characterised by high levels of inequality, abject poverty, and unemployment. The British economic situation was worsened by the fact that the world economy was based on the gold standard, yet Britain was losing gold. It is in this context that the Rand gold mines became the quintessential solution. Thus:

In an attempt to protect its shrinking economic interests...Britain conducted an increasingly more aggressive and ruthless policy of

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<sup>2</sup> There exists competing claims with regards the precise origins of segregation. It seems (and this has influenced how the thesis has presented the argument) that there is some level of agreement that segregation can be linked to British imperialism rather than the outcome of Boer republics and their penetration of the interior.

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imperialistic conquest and capitalist exploitation of colonised people ...  
(Terreblanche, 2002: 243).

Two factors however, threatened to undermine the abovementioned objective. The first is related to Africans and their reluctance to provide the required labour. This can be accounted for by the fact that some Africans were successful farmers whilst others had established various forms of beneficial labour arrangements with white farmers. Feinstein (2005: 60-1) discerns the following labour practices; first, sharecropping or farming on the halves. This system was based on an understanding in which Africans farmed the white owned land, worked it and shared the harvest equally with the owner.

Second, labour tenancy; landless Africans allowed to live on white owned land in return for the whole family providing labour for the farm. Third, rent tenancy involved working the land in return as rent payment. In addition, Van Onselen (2001: 9) observes how African men could avoid mine labour by providing household services. He details the economic activities of the so-called *Amawasha* or Zulu washer-men's guild, made of small groups of Zulu speaking washer-men who provided laundry services to the boarding houses and the more affluent families in Johannesburg. As an industrial corporation enjoying the monopoly of a particular economic space, this guild was exempted from certain laws such as the Masters and Servants Act. In the end however, the *Amawasha* were decimated by the advent of urban segregation (Van Onselen, 2001: 275-308). In addition, the second had to do with the behaviour of Afrikaners in the ZAR (Grundling cited in Cameron, 1986: 185; Thompson, 1990: 120-2 cited in Terreblanche, 2002: 242). To address this problem; the imperialist Britain adopted a two-pronged strategy. To deal with the Afrikaners and the ZAR government, Britain declared war. This war is known famously as the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) (see also Pretorius, 2014). Terreblanche has argued that the Anglo-Boer war was "an imperialist war *par excellence*" (2002: 243 original emphases).

After the war, race took centre stage and Africans bore the brunt of segregationist legislation. The war addressed itself to the problem of the Afrikaner pastoral feudalism led by corrupt agricultural elite fascinated with primitive accumulation. Following a realisation that the mining industry needs the co-operation of the defeated Afrikaner elite, a rapprochement strategy was the next phase from around 1906. This strategy meant that the interests of Afrikaners were catered for after the war. In the final

analysis, Africans suffered severe setback against a formidable alliance of mining corporations and Boer farmers. As Terreblanche (2002: 245) pertinently puts it:

From the point of view of power relations and labour patterns, the Anglo-Boer War had devastating consequences for Africans.

According to Worden (1995: 72; 1994: 72) segregation needs to be differentiated from white supremacy, notwithstanding the fact that it is premised upon notions of racial differences. *Separation* and not just racial subordination is the cornerstone of segregation. A more related approach explains segregation as a complex amalgam of political, ideological and administrative programme aimed at and designed solely to entrench white supremacy (Worden, 1995: 72; 1994:72; Dubow, 1989: 1; Browett, 1982: 19). The emphasis on separation is central to this current discussion owing to its geographic implications (see Chapters 1 and 3). Early segregationist legislation can be traced to the Glen Grey Act of 1894 in the Eastern Cape and the so-called Shepstone system in Natal. These segregationist measures, Terreblanche (2002: 240) shows were emulated from the United States (US) (see also, Thompson, 2014: 155). The geneses and early development of segregation in South Africa and the American South were historically linked. Following the Civil War, the American South embarked upon racial separation based on the conviction that African Americans were inferior to European Americans. Influenced heavily by social Darwinism, these ideas crystallised into legalised legislative segregation in South Africa. However, it was only after the end of the South African war in 1902 that a more coherent and systematic ideology of segregation emerged (Scher, 2014: 271-72; Worden, 1995: 72; 1994: 72; Terreblanche, 2002: 240, 253; Dubow, 1989: 25; 1995: 149; Beinart & Dubow, 1995: 10-1; Legassick, 1995: 44; Marks & Trapido, 1987: 8). It is perhaps worth reiterating, that segregation as a strategy was designed to address the first of the two factors that hampered British imperialist ambitions; that of the independent and arguably self-sufficient African peasants locked in a system of primitive accumulation.

Following the recommendations of the South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC), the idea of segregation crystallised into the following Acts: (a) the Native Labour Regulation Act and Mines and Works Act of 1911, which imposed the colour bars; (b) the Natives Land Act of 1913 which segregated land ownership and confined the black majority of this country to only 7% of the land. It is the Natives Land Act of

1913 that laid the foundation for later homelands policy in the 1950s; and finally, (c) the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 which provided for residential segregation in towns.

The above are collectively referred to as “bedrock legislation” (Scher, 2014: 271; Worden, 1995: 72; 1994: 72; Browett, 1982: 18; Thompson, 2014: 163; Legassick, 1995: 58). Scher (2014: 272) points out that it was the Natives Land Act and the Urban Areas Act that became the mainstays of the apartheid government’s segregation policy. The abovementioned Acts are by no means an exhaustive list of the legislative machinery developed and aimed at disempowering Africans. The aforementioned are the most notable and assisted the then government in addressing some of its most pressing needs. For example, labour shortage and the need to modernise agricultural production necessitated the 1913 land Act that brought to a halt the system of sharecropping (farming on the half) (see the story of Kaise Maine). Before, 1913, most Africans were successful maize and cattle farmers. Details around the successes of the Mfegu peasants in Fingoland and later on the Xhosas and the Thembu are well documented. African farmers produced maize for the mines and competed for such things like firewood and transport contracts with Boers. Thus, they were not compelled to sell their labour to the mining industry in particular.

The above speaks to what Feinstein highlights as the paradox of scarce labour and low wages. This contradiction relates to the fact that both mining and the agricultural sector were unwilling to pay higher wages, yet complained about the scarcity of labour. The explanation for this, mine bosses and farm owners alike argued, lay in the fact that Africans were not necessarily attracted by higher wages, therefore:

Unlike any normal market, in which a higher price evokes a larger supply, the supply curve for African labour was actually ‘backward sloping’ so that a higher wage would call forth a smaller amount of labour (Feinstein, 2005: 68).

This argument is unconvincing and as Feinstein makes clear, a more plausible explanation was simply that higher wages meant lower profits margins. As such, farmers and mine owners naturally gravitated towards a reliance on other methods of obtaining the required labour.

These methods came in the form of land restrictions, taxations, pass laws etc. These were well received by capital as long as the political instruments necessary to attain these were available (Feinstein, 2005: 69). As a purely economic position, the above argument demonstrates clearly, the intricate relations between oppression, class, race and socio-political landscape of South Africa. This will be confirmed by the findings of this study in later chapters, for example by how MTS members, as a class refer to themselves as those who sell hands to the Koekomoer (see Chapter 6). As Chapter 3 will make clear, South Africa as an absolute space, was consciously and deliberately tempered to produce a particular kind of relative and relational space (see Harvey, 2006). The 1913 land Act not only denied Africans access to the means of subsistence but also pushed landless Afrikaners/Boers (bywoners) off the land into the urban areas to compete for employment on the mines with Africans. This represented the famous victory of the alliance of maize and gold (Terreblanche, 2002: 250; Thompson, 2014: 163; Browett, 1982: 17; Bundy, 1972: 384; Lipton, 1989: 54; Maylam, 2001: 148). However, Shula Marks and Stanely Trapido make it clear that the ideology of segregation did not only serve the interests of capitalists in the form of commercial farmers and mine owners, but that it also worked to the advantage of white workers seeking protection from cheap black labourers (Marks & Trapido, 1987: 8). Whilst the heavy artillery in the form of the 1913 Land Act (Bundy, 1972) met the needs and demands of the first two groups, for the latter, the Mines and Works Act of 1911 would suffice (Worden, 1994: 73; Hutt, 1964: 59, 62; Maylam, 2001: 149; Feinstein, 2005: 77).

Terreblanche, (2002: 253) is instructive in explaining what the aforementioned legislative measures sought to achieve. He points out the need to differentiate meticulously, in as far as black labour is concerned, between segregationist practices and legislation as methods of labour repression with an express purpose to ensure adequate supply of cheap labour on the one hand, and those methods of labour discrimination aimed at protecting white labour against competition from already cheap and passive black labour on the other. Discrimination in respect of the labour market addressed itself to such issues as job and wage differentiation. That is, legislatively specifying certain jobs as 'whites only' and that white workers must be paid higher salaries than blacks for the same job.



Segregation as a method of labour repression was advantageous to employers in mining, farming and industry and assisted in keeping costs to a minimum. Therefore, the post-war power constellations forged a symbiosis between the white controlled state and the British controlled capital, without a doubt, to the detriment of Africans (Terreblanche, 2002: 250, 253). The Mines and Works Act was amended in 1926, thus allowing the state machinery to regulate and enforce colour bars in private industry (Worden, 1994: 74; Hutt, 1964: 69).

... [T]his 'civilized labour policy' established racial differences in wage rates between persons whose standard of living conforms to the standard of living generally recogni[s]ed as tolerable from the usual European standpoint and others whose aim is restricted to the barer requirements of the necessities of life as understood among barbarous and under-developed peoples (Worden, 1994: 74).

To this end, the 'barbarous' and 'under-developed' people had no place in the cities of white South Africa. The 1923 Natives Act provided for segregated residential settlements in towns (see Chapter 1) (Worden, 1994: 73; Maylam, 2001: 149; Browett, 1982: 18-9). Under this Act, Blacks were regarded as temporary urban residents to be repatriated back to the reserves if no longer economically active. Furthermore, blacks were not allowed to hold tenure if not gainfully employed, and were to be physically, socially and economically separated from the white race (Welsh, 1971: 187-9 cited in Browett, 1982: 19). The abovementioned Acts fashioned the making of the South African working class and were further refined and applied with more enthusiasm, determination and brutality during the apartheid years.

### **2.2.5 Apartheid Era**

The 1948 National Party elections victory heralded the introduction of a new political system, apartheid. There is no single agreed upon definition of apartheid both as an ideology and a policy. Therefore, this study will not attempt to offer any, except to highlight the point of convergence in the literature reviewed.

Drawing insights from the literature surveyed, apartheid can be understood as a system of race-based discrimination enforced through legislative means that sought to exercise control over blacks – racial social engineering (absolute, relative and relational space, see Chapter 3). As a project apartheid pervaded every space;

political, social, economic and geographic. At the geographic level, apartheid simply refers to 'apartness' (Posel, 2012: 319, 323; Dubow, 2014: 10; Worden, 1994: 95; 1995: 95; Maylam, 2001: 179; Lipton, 1989: 52; Browett, 1982: 20). The debate about whether or not apartheid represented a departure from segregation is of little relevance to current discussion (see for example Maylam, 2001; Worden, 1994 & 1995, Terreblanche, 2002; Dubow, 2014).

The second debate that occupied much of the South African scholarship in the 70s concerns the extent to which apartheid was advantageous or disadvantageous to South African capitalism. This debate is also reflected in the challenges that confronted apartheid architects, how to develop a black labour policy that would allow capitalist accumulation without endangering the white establishment (see Merlen Lipton 1989, Herold Wolpe, 1972, Fredrick Johnstone, 1970 and others). While the current study will not directly contribute to the latter debate, it is worth noting that the interplay between race, class and capitalism cannot be avoided in the South African context. The relationship between capital, state and whites on the one hand, and the relationship between capital, state and black labour on the other hand deserves some mention (Wolpe, 1988: 55-6).

The fundamental aspect of these triangular relations shaped in important ways, especially relations between white workers and their African counterparts. This process finds expression in the sociological and geographic imaginations discussed in the chapter to follow (see Harvey, 2009) and provides critical lenses through which to dissect the economic landscape produced in South Africa under conditions of racial capitalism (see Herod and others). The ubiquitous nature of apartheid however, makes it a theme too broad to fully contemplate here. Indeed, Posel has argued that apartheid was not a single, coherent, uniform project. Therefore, the study will pay particular attention to economic and spatial apartheid.

The approach adopted here recognises a process by which the apartheid state attempted to satisfy two competing needs of its grand plan. At the spatial level, apartheid was an attempt to preserve white supremacy by geographic separation of South Africa's four racial groupings (see Chapter 1). This approach represents the position of those Posel refers to as the 'purist'. For purists, black workers should not be allowed to labour in the white economy and therefore must not be allowed entry

into white South Africa (Posel, 2012: 319; Smith, 1982; Lemon, 1982; Maylam, 2001: 180-2; Browett, 1982: 20-1; Maylam, 1995; Mabin, 1992). The problem was that while white supremacy could be maintained in this way, white prosperity was buttressed by dependency on black labour – “barekish ba matsogo”. This was not only because black labour was cheap and without workplace citizenship but also due racist notions around manual labour. For these reasons, it was impractical to maintain total racial separation. This position was advocated by the ‘pragmatics. In the final analysis:

[A]partheid’s *demographic conundrum* meant, therefore, that the project of coupling white prosperity and white supremacy was inherently tenuous (Posel, 2012: 325 original emphasis).

The aforementioned groupings looked to the apartheid system to safeguard access to an abundance of cheap black labour, while applying spatial separation through myriad and rigorous forms of state control. The economic and spatial apartheid as embodied by the Group Areas Act, job reservations, migrant labour system and lack of union representation embodied this understanding (Posel, 2012: 322). These processes are therefore instrumental to our understanding of the making of the South African working class. The need to focus on spatial and economic apartheid is necessitated by the research question informing this study (see Chapters 1 and 2).

### 2.2.5.1 Economic Apartheid

Economic apartheid, for purposes of current discussion refers the extent to which blacks were allowed to participate unequally in the economy with whites. These unequal relations reference both class and race relations. Because the apartheid system as a whole was underpinned by race, consequently, race was used as a tool to distribute economic rewards – that is to say, the dominant structure of the economic landscape reflected particular interests, to the exclusion of others. In the words of Frederick Johnstone:

The actual goal of apartheid policy [was] the pragmatic development of *economically* powerful white supremacy (Johnstone, 1970: 126 emphasis added).

This fact is clearly demonstrated by the adoption and implementation of state policies such as colour bars, migrant labour system and job reservations (Hutt, 1964: 58-63,

73-78, 117-8, Maylam, 2001: 194-5). Job reservations and colour bars ensured that blacks could not occupy certain positions in some industries and that their wages were kept at a bare minimum. The above measures severely disempowered blacks at the same time consolidating white power and privileges. The wage disparities in both mining and manufacturing reduced blacks to a mere subsistence (Johnstone, 1970: 135, Lipton, 1989: 17-9). Johnstone (1970: 135) and Lipton (1989: 43) show that wages were racially skewed in favour of whites in all sectors of the economy. Both however, indicate that wage inequalities varied across economic sectors with mining and the public sector being the most unequal in comparison to commerce and manufacturing.

This can be accounted for by the rigid colour bars and 'civilised labour policy' being applied much more effectively and stringently in mining and the state sector respectively (Johnstone, 1970: 135; Lipton, 1989: 43). Africans were forced to work for the whites at bare subsistence. This cheap, unorganised and exploitable labour benefited both the capitalist system and the white minority (Johnstone, 1970: 136). For Harvey, this reflects the extent to which capital actively seeks to shape economic landscapes in its favour (see Chapter 3). This demonstrates that economic apartheid was designed for nothing else but to keep blacks at an economic disadvantage. Terreblanche (2002: 337) compares the motivations for the Industrial Conciliation Acts of 1924 and 1937 with that of 1956. The first two were passed to protect the interests of unemployed 'poor whites' as measures to ameliorate the impacts of the so called 'poor whites problem'. He notes however, that unemployment was not an issue for the white population in 1956. He argues, therefore, that the 1956 act was passed merely because the white trade unions sought to entrench their petit bourgeois privileges in the face of black competition. For labour geographers such as Herod (see Chapter 3), this clearly demonstrates how workers have a vested interest in how the economic landscapes are produced. Workers, as active agents, will invariably, seek to secure their continued reproduction at times to the detriment of other workers, in this case, African labour.

Crankshaw (1997: 43-6) demonstrates this point succinctly by showing how the apartheid state, white labour and capital collaborated to keep black Africans out of skilled jobs even where there was clear demand from the labour market. This happened in one of two ways. On the one hand, employers restructured the work

organisations by introducing mechanisation while the apartheid state introduced effective legislative measures on the other. Because the colour bar created labour shortages, employers relied on a capital-intensive strategy to increase productivity while limiting the demand for skilled labour. In this way, capital was able to replace unskilled African labour through the use of machinery. Also, where there was a demand for skilled labours such as artisans, the machination process allowed employers to fragment aspects of skilled trades in order to employ African labour in those positions (Crankshaw, 1997: 44, 46). This meant two different things for the apartheid state and white unions. For the former, the well-mechanised industries meant the state was able to control the number of urbanised Africans in white South Africa, while the latter continued to enjoy a monopoly of well paying, and skilled jobs. Therefore:

... government's position on mechanisation and the racial division of labour during the 1950s and early 1960s was in complete accordance with the interests of white labour (Crankshaw, 1997: 45) .

Also Verwoed was of the view that:

... with mechani[s]ation and automation... decreasing number of Bantu would be required in and around White urban areas by the end of the 1970s (Crankshaw, 1997: 45).

Where mechanisation was not a solution, for example in building trades, motor vehicle repairs trades and other mining tasks, the state actively and deliberately intervened. To maintain the colour bar in such conditions, the Bantu labour amendment Act of 1970 came into place. The Act gave government untrammelled powers to prohibit and regulate the employment of Africans in any industry. To this end, the Act outlined the following conditions in relation to African job advancement: (a) there always must be a proper separation of races in the workplace; (b) no white worker would be replaced by an African worker; (c) Africans were not placed in authority over white workers; and (d) African advancement took place with the consent of white unions (Crankshaw, 1997: 46). This new Act was to be known as the 'floating colour bar'. In the final analysis, Crankshaw (1997: 46) shows that the floating colour bar worked to entrench the interests of white workers. This is because, in order to float the bar, the employer

was required to retrain and promote white workers into a more senior position to the Africans. Johnstone (1970) highlighted similar practices in the mining industry.

Johnstone (1970: 114) cogently observed how, for example, the class structure of the mining industry was asymmetrically related to its racial stratification. As the working class, white workers were in a subordinate position to mining capitalists, yet at the same time were dominant as members of the white race. Thus, colour played a prominent role as a criterion of status and power differentials in South Africa. Due to this, job reservation legislation *inter alia* was practiced in the form of 'colour bar, that is, job discrimination based on skin colour' (Johnstone, 1970: 114). The 'colour bar' was the outcome of sustained oppressive legislative measures by the apartheid state against black labourers that allowed capital to artificially keep African workers' wages below subsistence levels. Due to these state driven measures, African labour became cheap, which posed an economic threat to white workers as a class of expensive labour aristocracy, hence the 'job colour bar'. All skilled jobs were reserved for whites (Johnstone, 1970: 115). Furthermore, the interface between class and race constituted what Johnstone refers to as the 'class colour bar'. By this, he means that certain class benefits were accrued to white workers based on the job colour bar. The said benefits took the form of 'wage colour bar', which was beneficial to both white labour and the mining capitalists (Johnstone, 1970: 117).

Crankshaw and Johnstone's nuanced and empirically grounded analysis is helpful in understanding how the economic landscape was deliberately fashioned to the advantage of white workers at the expense of black labourers. Added to this, Herold Wolpe also attempted to show how the economic geography was engineered in order to facilitate the production and reproduction of certain classes. Through his notion of the subsidy thesis, (Wolpe, 1972) provides an explanation of South Africa's industrialisation as a process buttressed by a migrant labour system, most of whom still travel on the train today. According to Wolpe (1995: 67), the emergence of a capitalist mode of production can be linked inextricably to two other modes of productions. These were the African redistributive economies on the one hand and the system of labour tenancy and share cropping on white farms on the other. The latter was decisively decimated by the 1913 land act whilst the former was relatively kept in place. As such, Wolpe (1995: 66) focuses especially on the former and its relationship to the capitalist system of production. It is this relationship between the two different,

yet interdependent modes of productions that produced a particular spatial and economic landscape that contributed immensely in the making of the South African working class. The existence of a 'dual economy' allowed and accelerated development of industrialisation for it allowed capitalism access to an abundance of cheap labour (Wolpe, 1995: 67; Feinstein, 2005: 61).

The relationship between these two sectors was, therefore, such that the backward sector supplied labour to the capitalist sector. An important feature of this relationship is found in the peculiar nature of the labour force – that it is migrant and temporary, oscillating between the reserve and white South Africa in between periods of work. This is because the migrant worker has access to means of subsistence outside of the cash economy and:

When the migrant labourer has access to means of subsistence, outside the capitalist sector, as he [did] in South Africa, then the relationship between wages and the cost of production and reproduction of labour power is changed.

That is to say, capital is able to pay the worker *below* the cost of the production and reproduction (Wolpe, 1995: 69 original emphasis).

Over time however, the backward sector started to decline as a response to, inter alia overpopulation in the reserves, outdated and backward methods of farming as well as due to the absence of economically active adults. The corollary, almost immediately, was the decline in agricultural productivity of the reserves. This process facilitated social dislocation as more and more people sought to move to the urban centres in search of economic opportunities. Wolpe (1995: 80) notes that this process put Africans on a collision course with Afrikaner capitalists as well as Afrikaner labourers. Thus, this problem was addressed by means of repression. Therefore economic apartheid emerged in this context as a response to a problem that was inexorably linked to conditions of repression, namely segregation. The economic prosperity of the 1960s exposed the acute nature of labour shortages. This was exacerbated by the discriminatory legislative framework in place. To deal with this problem the apartheid state allowed colour bar to become the 'floating bar'. This process was accompanied by a geographic strategy that sought to perpetually keep Africans at an economic

disadvantage. As a result, the economic and the spatial apartheid were interdependent. I elucidate on this in the section to follow.

### 2.2.5.2 Spatial Apartheid

It is now a historical fact that the making of the South African working class required a particular form of socio-spatial engineering that sought to protect political, social, economic and racial supremacy of the white population. Maylam (2001: 181) observes that apartheid spatial engineering aimed to achieve a balance between racialised political differentiations and spatial separation.

Following the 1948 national election victory, the apartheid government commenced with a process of forced removals in order to give effect to the abovementioned objectives (see Chapter 1). This process dislocated the majority of black South Africans to desolate rural areas as new homes for the aged, the unfit, widows, the unemployed and women with dependent children; 'the surplus people'. Alan Mabin convincingly shows that South African spatial patterns can be traced to the Kimberly compounds of the segregation era. The racially segregated compounds provided the model for the modern apartheid city (Mabin, 1986). He concludes that the Kimberly compounds have had a revolutionary impact on South Africa, for their impacts were felt far beyond the Kimberly diamond mines. Whilst the compounds can be traced to place specific conditions – including class struggle in the mines – the genesis of state regulated townships can be found here (Mabin, 1986: 4, 22). Christopher (1983: 145), however, traces the origins of the apartheid city to thirteenth century English racial segregation:

It may therefore be argued that the historical foundation of modern Soweto (the all Black ... [township] of the all White Johannesburg) were laid by Edward I in his Welsh military foundations in the thirteenth century at Flint, Conway and Carnarvon.

Thus, the South African geographic landscape has come to reflect much of the English colonial city. Urban segregation is, therefore, intertwined with English racial attitudes. This is because the apartheid city exhibits numerous physical features of the English colonial city, this despite the fact it has evolved through several years of imperial expansion of the Welsh town of the thirteenth century (Christopher, 1983: 147, 148).



The apartheid city found expression in several legislative measures designed to secure its social and economic objectives. Amongst these objectives were the forced removals that aimed to geographically divide South Africa along racial and more importantly, ethnic lines. These groupings were relocated according to their ethnic affiliations into the following Bantustans: Bophuthatswana, Venda, Lebowa, Transkei, Ciskei, KwaNdebele and KwaZulu. Here, the African could express his/her political aspirations and build own economies. This process was facilitated by the enactment of the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act which sought to *retribalise* South Africa and her people into separate geographic spots as described above.

This set in motion the process of forced removals in which an estimated 3.5 million people were forcefully/coercively relocated between 1960 and 1983. In this way, Africans became migrants without citizenship rights in white South Africa and thus could not express any rights (economic, political or otherwise) in white spaces. The process of forced removals affected in profound ways, Coloureds and Indians as well. For purposes of current discussion, I focus sharply on Africans. To be sure, this was the main objective of the Group Areas Act of 1950; the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act and the 1959 Promotion of the Bantu Self-Government Act. The common denominator among the three Acts being their concern with spatial control, i.e the need to geographically divide South Africa into race and ethnic groupings (Maylam, 2001: 180-1; Lipton, 1989: 23; Worden, 1995: 110-12; Carruther, 2000, Mabin, 1992: 406; Hutt, 1964: 152; Johnstone, 1970: 127; Murray, 1987: 314; Wilson, 1986: 16; Platzky & Walker, 1985: 7; Western, 1982: 218-9).

The Bantustans performed a number of important functions in relation to apartheid. They, amongst others, functioned as dumping grounds for Africans being removed from white South Africa. This process was targeted at Africans deemed to be surplus to labour requirements in white urban and rural areas. Also, the Bantustans were the products of the divide-and-rule strategy, the ultimate aim being to spatially separate Africans into ethnic minorities thus undermine the broader African nationalist movement. This impacted upon Africans' experience of their spaces, both in absolute, relative and relational terms (see Chapter 3). Furthermore and as it relates to the thrust of this thesis, Bantustans were fundamentally, geographic divisions of the country. They represented absolute spaces, and therefore, as per the promulgations of the Bantu Homelands Citizenship of 1970, all Africans would be compelled to become

citizens of their respective homelands as determined by their ethnic affiliation (absolute, relative and relational space). With this, it was hoped the Bantustans would provide a political space for Africans (Maylam, 2001: 180-1; Johnstone, 1970: 127-8; Lipton, 1989: 23-4; Worden, 1995: 111-3; Browett, 1982: 22; Hutt, 1964: 110-12; Carruthers, 2000). This was an important phase/period in the making of the South African working class for one particular reason – the spatial engineering gave rise to the so-called the *'international' commuting labour force* (Browett, 1982: 22). Those removed from city centres of Johannesburg to Soweto, Cape Town to Cape Flats, out of Durban to Chatsworth, Phoenix and KwaMashu, Pretoria to Mamelodi etc constitute the so-called commuter migrants. This term describes those townships located close enough to white South Africa for labour to commute to work on a daily basis.

It is these commuter migrants who started to organise on the trains from the 1970s culminating, in the case of Tshwane, in the formation of MTS in 2001 (see Chapter 6) (Platzky & Walker, 1985: 8; Wilson, 1986: 15; Murray, 1987: 312, 14, 15). Joe Lelyveld records a particular graphic description of this development in his book: 'Move Your Shadow'. Dubbed, rather accurately, a *'nation of sleepwalkers'*, Lelyveld details the number of daily buses operated by Putco between KwaNdebele and Pretoria. These were 2 in 1979, 66 in 1980, 105 in 1981, 148 in 1982, 220 in 1983 and 263 in 1985 (Lelyveld, 1986 cited in Murray, 1987: 315; Goldblatt, 1986: 34). In his photographic work titled: 'The Night Riders' of KwaNdebele; Goldblatt (1986) observes that, those who work further from Pretoria catch a bus at 02:30am in order to be in Pretoria by 05:30am. These commuters spent anything between five and eight hours a day travelling to and from work (Goldblatt, 1986: 34). This, Murray (1987: 314) refers to as the "commuter(s)ation of the black labour force". Posel (2012: 329) crisply refers to spatial apartheid as having created:

geographies of distance and proximity ... co-producing [in the process] racially distinct spaces of community, schooling, friendship and mutuality ... *But the everyday racial crossings also opened (dangerous and vulnerable) space* for political allegiances, solidarity and friendships that would ultimately contribute critically to the regime's demise (emphasis added).

The power of the apartheid state permeated almost every facet of black lives, creatively mapping spaces for self-expression formed a critical part for both workers and political activities alike.

The above quote by Posel (2012) allows not only geographic, but to also ground MTS politically (see Chapter 6). For example, the 'commuterisation' process noted by Murray carved out trains as an important worker space (see Chapter 6). As worker convergence points, trains gained popularity as the numbers of commuters increased in response to the geographies of distance and proximity. This is reflected in official commuter figures recorded as 615 000 in 1978 and 773 000 in 1982 (Murray, 1987: 315). The racialised social and economic engineering, intertwined with geographies of distance and proximity to produce particularised economic landscapes (Posel, 2012: 328, 9). The aforementioned figures give credence to the central argument in this study. That is to say, the centrality of the train to the daily travel needs of black labourers make it a strategic point from which to build solidarities and revive the South African labour movement. Buttressed by geographies of distance and proximity, the spatial design of the South African economic landscapes no doubt is imbued with racial and class undertones. These are remnants of Apartheid South Africa that continue to shape the daily lives and work experience of poor blacks. Interestingly enough, much as spatial apartheid sought to relocate citizen and labour rights of the black South Africans elsewhere, arguably, the current externalisation process brought about by globalisation is replicating more or less the same thing when applied in the South African context. Just to restate, Bantustans, and black townships were designed to geographically relocate labour rights away from and outside white South Africa. In a similar logic, outsourcing, casualization and externalisation, are similar post-apartheid measures to achieve the same objectives – albeit only focused on the workplace.

It is here that Soja's socio-spatial dialectic is powerfully demonstrated whilst being brought to life by Harvey's matrix of spaces (see Chapter 3). The 'international' commuting labour was the product of apartheid government's policy of separation/segregation. Yet the train, as a workers' space, experienced both in absolute, relative and relational terms is a related by-product of commuting under conditions of racial capitalist system (see also Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). The interplay between economic and spatial apartheid reinforced the importance of

the train as a strategic location for those disempowered economically, politically and geographically. Thus, in the section to follow, the study shows how the making of the South African working class influenced the form/shape; character and repertoires of the South African labour movement. These are understood and presented as geographically sensitive. The geographic element is multi-layered as it represented the interests of a myriad of players. It reflected the interests of the racist apartheid state, racist capitalism and racist white workers as well (Crankshaw, 1997: 43-6). These three groupings worked to produce an economic landscape that disadvantaged black labours whilst ensuring their own self-reproduction. It is for this reason that from early on, black workers sought to group together in an attempt to produce a different kind of an economic landscape.

According to Herod, workers have a vested interest in how economic geographies are designed. This is because workers have to secure their own self-reproduction, even under oppressive conditions as exemplified by apartheid South Africa and neoliberalism in the current epoch. The South African labour movement, in its entirety, emerged under the aforementioned conditions as vehicles through which to advance the interests of white workers on the one hand and to fight against exploitation, abuse and maltreatment of black labour on the other hand. The subsequent chapter traces the history of trade unionism to 1841 and attempts to demonstrate that the character and organisational repertoires of these labour movements can be linked directly to racial capitalism that operated in South Africa. These movements came to represent the aspiration of class interests buttressed by racial objectives. These are discussed and engaged from the geographic/spatial angle. That is, the South African workers are situated geographically and their actions analysed in relations to the influences of space.

### **2.3 Summary**

The preceding chapter sought to, first and foremost, ground the understanding of the South African working class. This was done by historicising the 'making of the South African working class' as a process that started in 1652 with the arrival of Jan Van Riebeck. The chapter starts out by detailing a descriptive picture of the making of the modern industrial South Africa and the related impact upon its people – race relations and class formations. Employing a descriptive approach, the section is able to map-

out the negative impacts of colonialism, segregation and apartheid in the lives of black South Africans. The aforementioned periods are clearly delineated and discussed in order to construct a space-specific picture of race relations and how these shaped the class structure of the South African society.

These historic epochs entrenched a system that advanced the interests of one race and class to the detriment of blacks, both as labourers and citizens. The chapter shows how each period served a specific purpose in the development and institutionalisation of racial capitalism. With the discovery of minerals, black Africans lost their ability to self-sustain as peasants. One ethnic group after another, the indigenous population were forced into wage labour that fuelled the industrialisation process of Southern Africa. Colonialism, segregation and apartheid collectively set in motion the process of unfree black labour that became the backbone of modern industrial South Africa (see for example, Terreblache, 2002). The process of industrial modernisation started with the discovery of minerals and reached its apex with the South African war of 1899-1902. According to one historian, this was an imperial war par excellence. The conclusion of the war had its own social, economic and political ramifications for South Africa as a whole and black Africans in particular.

With its origins in British imperialist ambitions, segregation represented a different epoch in the making of the South African working class. Historians have demonstrated convincingly that segregation can directly be linked with British colonial expansion in Africa and elsewhere. Its genesis predates the Glen Grey Act of 1894 and can be located firmly within British's internal economic problems. Terreblanche (2002: 253) avers that segregation, as a method of labour repression, was to the advantage of the white employer class. Segregation was succeeded by apartheid following the 1948 elections and introduced 'new' and much more stringent separation measures from the 1950s. These were aimed chiefly at preserving white supremacy and thus sought to discourage black Africans from living and working in white South Africa.

Posel shows how apartheid battled to counterbalance its racial objectives with the economic requirements of white South Africa. This is because whites were averse to certain kinds of labour, yet prosperity of white South Africa depended very much on the availability of rightless, docile and migrant African labour. With a specific reference to the geographical and colour bars (Johnstone, 1970: 130), the chapter has

demonstrated how space was manipulated in order to achieve a particular social outcome and how certain conditions were engineered to effect specific spatial outlook (socio-spatial dialectic; see Chapter 3). In respect of spatial engineering, what Posel (2011: 329) refers to as geographies of distance and proximity, the chapter highlights how the policy of separation and segregation were used to push black Africans to rural and urban peripheries of white cities. At the economic level, the same legislative machinery was used to effect class formations. Paradoxically, the chapter has also noted how capital in post-apartheid South Africa is also using geography of space and place to control, fragment and weaken South African labour. This is done by rendering the workplace, as a geographic locale, meaningless (see Chapter 5).

It is this contextualisation that permits us to insert transportation into the story of South African working class. The 'commuterisation' of the South African labour force is presented as a particular outcome of spatial engineering process. Because of this, travelling and modes of travel became sites of contestations. Travel modes, such as trains were experienced as contributors to the process of oppression and exploitation. In the final analysis, the making of the South African working class, (as a process) is imperative to understanding the current material conditions of the South African working class.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Survey: A Spatial and Geographic Appraisal

#### 3.1 Introduction

The research question(s) that this study endeavours to answer requires a sociological approach that privileges the role of space/place influencing and shaping human agency or lack thereof. Put differently, the phenomenon under investigation demands an approach that will sociologically ground the findings spatially. For this reason, the sociological framework is supplemented by geographic literature, notably geography of labour (Marxist approach concerned with structure than worker agency) and the labour geography (an approach that conceives of workers as agents of change). A combination of the aforementioned frameworks is imperative for this study for the following reasons.

First, to the extent that this study attempts to highlight how place/geography shapes workers' actions, the sociology of space becomes an important analytical tool in understanding social processes that unfolds upon place (Gieryn, 2000: 465). Second, the enduring apartheid spatiality – by this I mean that South Africa is still very much grappling with apartheid legacies both geographically, politically and economically – is in part, a result of two forces: state and capital. Thus, the largely Marxist geography of labour is instructive in this regard (see for example Harvey, 2009; 2006). Nevertheless, citizens and workers are not passive subjects of the spatial strategies of the state and capital; they have agency. Therefore, drawing on the insights provided by labour geography with its emphasis on the agency of workers is key in framing how workers make use of geography (apartheid spatiality in this case) to advance their demands both within the workplace and place of residence (Herod, 2001: 2, 15-16, 18).

Furthermore, counterbalancing the two takes into account Herod's observation that:

Conceiving of workers as simply factors of production or as variable capital is to tell the story of the making of economic geographies

through the eyes of capital. By proposing the notion of a spatial fix<sup>3</sup> for labour and arguing for a more active and central role for workers in theory-building and empirical investigations of the creation of economic landscapes, it is also possible to tell the story of the making of economic geographies through the eyes of workers (Herod, 1997: 26).

The capital-centric approach that Herod refers to suffers from obvious limitations. In recognising these limitations, the study has amplified the tensions between the two approaches and has therefore consciously adopted a dialectical engagement of structure and agency. For, as Bezuidenhout and Webster (2010: 370) have pointed out, accounts of agency which do not sufficiently address the realities of power dynamics degenerate into naïve voluntarism. Thus, as the study will show, workers are not passive victims of state and capital economic landscapes. In other words, geographic social engineering is not a seamless state/capital driven process; rather it is punctuated by pockets of resistance by those affected. This is elaborated on further in the sections to follow.

### **3.2 Place, Space and Geography**

With a few exceptions (see for example Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Bezuidenhout & Webster, 2010; Mmadi, 2012; Mashayamombe, 2014) space/place/geography is yet to emerge as a key analytical tool in post-apartheid South African labour scholarship. This is surprising, given the fact that the history of labour relations in South Africa is arguably shaped in important ways by geographic/spatial manipulations. This can be traced all the way to the period of slavery, but more so with the advent of segregation (see Chapter 2).

The nadir is the geographic manipulations of the 1950s as buttressed by segregationist Group Areas legislation that were essentially about subjugating African labour (see Chapter 2). The outcome of these legislative measures was, *inter alia*, to produce cheap, migrant African labour without workplace rights. Therefore, geography played an important role in facilitating apartheid led objectives. Indeed the geography of apartheid has continued to shape the work experiences of black workers

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of 'spatial fix' will be discussed in the sections to follow. It is merely introduced here as part of the quote by Herod.



to the extent that it can be argued, that the changing nature of work has also, in many respects relied upon geography/space as means to weaken the militant labour unionism of the 1980s. Harvey employs the concept of 'spatial fix' to demonstrate this point. Elsewhere, for example, Webster and Von Holdt (2005: 27) observe a pattern they refer to as 'continued with change' (see also Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017: 7). Below I present the basic meanings of place, space and geography and demonstrate how they speak to each other and link to the research question central to this study. This is done to show how the state-capital alliance worked in tandem to weaken African workers' workplace bargaining power so as to exploit them economically.

### **3.2.1 Place**

According to Gieryn (2000: 464-5), a definition of place will incorporate the following necessary features: geographic location, material form and meaning laden with values. Therefore, a place can be understood as a unique spot in the universe worked by people and ensconces history, danger or security and identity or memory (Gieryn, 2000: 464-5). A more nuanced approach posits place to embody three related aspects. First, place denotes a location, that is, a particular and distinguished point of earth's surface. Second, place, as a locale is a physical arena encompassing everyday social life. Third, place is a locus of identity. The latter focuses upon the personal and collective loyalty, affect and commitment (Agnew, 2005: 7-8; Agnew, 1987 cited in Herod, McGrath-Champ & Rainnie, 2010; 8-9). As a less abstract and theoretical notion, place simply refers to South Africa as a country and Mamelodi township as one part of this country.

Defined by apartheid spatiality, Mamelodi is but one township that can be used to understand workers in South Africa:

Place is not merely a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game ... a force with detectable and independent effects on social life (Werlen, 1993 cited in Gieryn, 2000: 466).

Contextualised in this way, apartheid spatiality is instructive in understanding the middle passage as a particular form of space. This can be linked to the fact that spatial forms are not mere inanimate objects within which social process unfolds, but that

social process are spatial outcomes (Harvey, 2009: 10-1). In a rather relevant approach to demonstrate how human action shapes and are in turn shaped by place/space, Harvey (2009: 23-4) draws out the relationship between C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" and what he refers to as "spatial consciousness" or "geographic imagination". The former can be defined as something which:

Enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals ... The first fruit of this imagination ... is the idea that the individual can understand his<sup>4</sup> own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those all individuals in his circumstances... The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society... Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being (Mills, 1959: 5 cited in Harvey, 2009: 23).

The latter refers to an imagination that:

Enables the individual to recogni[s]e the role of space and place in his own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recogni[s]e how transactions between individuals and between organi[s]ations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him<sup>5</sup> to recogni[z]e the relationship which exists between him and his neighbourhood, his territory ... it allows him ...to use space creatively and to appreciate the meaning of spatial forms created by others (Harvey, 2009: 24).

Writing largely for geographers (nevertheless a message that is useful for the purpose of this study), Harvey avers that the distinction between the geographical and sociological imagination is artificial and unhelpful. An approach that privileges the two imaginations allows the thesis the important tools in conceptualising workers, the state and capital in South Africa. Certainly, this imagination enables the individual to realise

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<sup>4</sup> The sexist language used simply reflects Mills' period and the context within which he was writing. The quote has not been edited for stylistic reasons.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote number 2 in respect of Mills above.

the role of space and place in his/her own biography (Harvey, 2009: 24; Herod et al., 2010: 6-7; Ellem, 2010: 35; see also Bezuidenhout & Webster, 2010; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Mmadi, 2012; Mashayamombe, 2014). This is important, as Harvey (2009: 26) points out and as the thesis will demonstrate, any successful strategy must take into account the fact that spatial form and social process are different ways of thinking about the same thing.

Place is not an innocent container of events as previously perceived (Herod et al., 2010: 6). Generally, place can be designed and manipulated to overtly project certain images and it is this spatial overt behaviour that provide clues to our understanding of spatial significance (Harvey, 2009: 33). It is unsurprising then, that the geographic separation of 'races' in South Africa is an important determinant of class location – conversely a factor in who rides on the trains to and from work on a daily basis. This leads to the creation of (without suggesting that the working class is homogenous) a racially based class distinction between Africans and all other races in South Africa.

Understood in this way, geography can provide the necessary conditions for class formations and racial solidarities. For example, the findings of the study show that workers make a distinction between themselves and their employers in racial terms. That is because they are black; they sell their hands to whites as employers. This contained in the reference to the Afrikaner surname, Koekemoer (Gieryn, 2000: 474; see also Herod, 1997; 2012; Ellem, 2010; Herod, Rainnie & McGrath-Champ, 2010). This is because place has implications on the kind of space(s) workers carve up. The former refers to the physical geography and the latter talks to particular products of social forces (Herod et al., 2010: 2; Herod, 2012: 339; Agnew, 2005: 3). As Castree (2010: 463) aptly puts it:

This means that we have to understand geography to fully comprehend what happens to workers, as well as what potential and actual options workers have to respond to their situation.

Accordingly, the two should be read together. As Agnew (2005: 2, 7-8, 10) points out, space and place rely upon each other to fulfil their potential. Understood as conceptual twins, they are theoretically enriching than use of either does separately. Embedded within apartheid spatiality, trains can be conceptualised as being more than a transport mode. By drawing on both labour geographers and Harvey's matrix of spaces, below

the thesis demonstrates how place is important in understanding and shaping space and workers' scalar actions.

### **3.2.1.1 Train coaches as workers' spaces and scale**

Harvey (2006: 121; 2009: 13) identifies three useful ways in which space both as a concept and analytical tool can be understood and utilised. He argues that space can be absolute – meaning it becomes a 'thing in itself' and exist independent of matter. In this Newtonian approach, space is fixed and can frame events, South Africa and/or Mamelodi suffice as typical examples (Harvey, 2006: 121, Gieryn, 2000: 464). Relative space on the one hand can be understood "as a relationship between objects which exists only because objects exists and relate to each other". The notion of relative space is generally associated with Einstein and the non-Euclidean geometries (Harvey, 2006: 121-2). While the Euclidean metrics are fixed, the physical distance between two places (say, Mamelodi and Tshwane CBD) will always remain the same. In a counter argument, Einstein points out that all forms of measurement are dependent upon the frame of reference of the observer (Harvey, 2006: 121-2; Harvey, 2009: 13; Herod, 2012: 338). It is on this basis that Harvey argues that relative space can be understood in a double sense.

Finally, relational space as advocated by Leibniz refers to a space that comes about due to particular processes and actions (e.g. apartheid spatiality and the distance many workers travel to work). This is because "processes do not occur in space but define their own spatial frame" (Harvey, 2006: 123). For this reason, Harvey argues that relative space cannot be disentangled from time (context/history). Thus, the relational notion of space-time duality implies the idea that an event or a thing at a point in space exists only at that point. It depends upon everything else going around it. While it was important to delineate the various ways, in which space can be used conceptually. It is equally important to point out that space is neither absolute, relative nor relational in itself. Rather, space can be conceptualised as one, two or all of the above depending on the context (Harvey, 2009: 13; 2006: 124) (see Fig 1 below). As Harvey (2009: 14) cogently explains:

[our] understanding of ... [the comrades coach] and of the social-process-spatial-form theme requires that we understand how human activity creates the need for specific spatial concepts and how daily

social practice solves with consummate ease seemingly deep philosophical mysteries concerning the nature of space and the relationships between social processes and spatial forms.

Notwithstanding the explanation by Harvey above, his conception of space suffers from what can be referred to as 'ubiquitous-ambiguity'. That is to say, the ever presence of all three matrix of space at times present some level of ambiguity for analytical purposes. With this in mind, the thesis will attempt to tease out and clearly differentiate between the three in order to address the abovementioned shortcoming. This problem results from Harvey's deliberate intensions to keep the three concepts in a dialectical tension with each other (2006: 126).

Harvey's matrix is fundamental in locating workers in places and space: place of residence in Mamelodi (absolute/relative space) train travel (absolute, relative and relational space) and the workplace (absolute and relational).

**Table 3.1: Spaces**

	<b>Mental Space (experienced space)</b>	<b>Representations of Space (conceptualized space)</b>	<b>Spaces of Representation (lived space)</b>
Absolute Space	Walls, bridges, doors, stairways, floors, ceilings, streets, buildings, cities, mountains, continents, bodies of water, territorial markets, physical boundaries and barriers, gated communities...	Cadastral and administrative maps; Euclidean geometry, landscape description; metaphors of confinement, open space, location placement and positionality...Newton and Descartes	Feelings of contentment around the hearth; sense of security or incarceration from enclosure; sense of power from ownership, command and domination over space; fear of others "beyond the pale"
Relative Space (Time)	Circulation and flows of energy, water, air, commodities, peoples, information, money, capital; accelerations and diminutions in the friction of distance...	Thematic and topological maps (e.g London tube system); non-Euclidean geometries and topology; metaphors of situated knowledges, of motion, mobility, displacement, acceleration, time-space compression and distanciation – Einstein and Riemann	Anxiety at not getting to class on time; thrill of moving into the unknown; frustration in a traffic jam; tensions or exhilarations of time-space compression of speed of motion
Relational Space (Time)	Electromagnetic energy flows and fields; social relations; rental and economic potential surfaces; pollution concentrations; energy	Surrealism; existentialism; psychogeographies, cyberspace, metaphors of internalization of forces and powers...	Visions, fantasies, desires, frustrations

Source: Adapted from Harvey (2006: 135)

In relational terms, the train becomes more than just a representation of a physical space (Gans, 2002: 329). Located within apartheid spatiality, trains cease to be only a mode of travel, but are imbued with expressions of both racial and class relations in South Africa. For MTS members, it is a refuge against the assault upon their class collective identities as exemplified by the trinity of interlocking processes. Conversely, spatial production must be understood as a set of relations between individual and groups (Soja, 1985: 92). Thus in South Africa, living in a township as a place (absolute/relative space) and travelling on a train (relative and relational space) to and from work is fundamentally political. Blackness, over and above being a skin colour also manifests itself in being a residence of Mamelodi Township for example. It is for this reason that MTS uses the train to articulate not only class-based struggles, but also party political ideologies and affiliation. This is based on an approach that views the ANC and SACP as friends of the working class (see Chapters 6 and 7). Consequently, collective identities and memories of being African are part and parcel of the middle passage. Here, the sociological meets the geographical imagination (Harvey, 2009).

Going back to the question central to this study i.e. to investigate the role of train travels in shaping worker identities and solidarities, Harvey's conception of space is important in interrogating how place (absolute space) shapes worker's collective memories and thus influences upon their everyday actions (relational and relative spaces) (Harvey, 2006: 125). This is due to the fact racial and capitalist spatial configuration of South Africa were a spatial patterning of an urban-based labour force that largely commutes on trains (see Chapter 3). To this end, as Soja (1980: 208; 1985: 98) puts it, space should be conceptualised as both product and producer – socio-spatial dialectic. Importantly, Soja's (1985) concept of socio-spatial dialectic is insightful in navigating the spatial fetish and the capitalist centred social relations approach (Soja, 1985: 208; Herod, 2012: 341). Adopting an approach that conceives of space as product and producer allows for an interrogation of the train as a mirror image of the broader South African society.

For Soja, spatial relations and social relations are mutually constitutive:

The structure of organi[s]ed space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it

simply an expression of the class structure emerging from the social (i.e. aspatial) relations of production. It represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial (Soja, 1980: 208).

According to Burawoy (2009: 203) the comrades' coaches are micro-processes of the South African macrostructure. This is because; the production of space embodies both the medium and outcome of social action relationship. Burawoy (2009) (see Chapter 4) when read together with Harvey (2006) and Soja (1980; 1985) permits for an opportunity to contextualise and historicise the comrades' coaches. Add to the mix labour geographers, the comrades' coaches are spaces filled with possibilities.

Despite the heavy criticism directed at Marxist geographers for focusing on geography of labour, the study has solid sociological reasons for combining the abovementioned geography of labour and labour geographies. The criticism, often levelled against Harvey in particular notes the following and I quote at length from Herod:

... Harvey ... has tended to conceive of workers' roles as shapers of the economic landscapes only in rather limited terms of how the migration of labo[u]r affects the accumulation process. Elsewhere; in viewing class struggles in terms of "the resistance which the working class offers to the violence which the capitalist form of accumulation inevitably inflicts upon it" Harvey's ... epistemological priority allows labo[u]r to resist capital but apparently not to take the initiative in class struggles. Likewise, his comments that "capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image" and that "capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time" ... highlights the extent to which he sees the geography of capitalism as largely the product of capital itself. Such statements leave little theoretical room to acknowledge that workers struggle (often successfully) ... shape the economic geography of capitalism in ways which they themselves view as advantageous.... (Herod, 1997: 11).

The geography of labour – those who privileges structure over agency – and labour geography – those who view workers as active agents of change – combination is motivated by the following four reasons. The first reason is ontological. That is to say,



class formation in South Africa cannot be surgically separated from the apartheid government led spatial engineering. This can be accounted for by the relationship between the South African workers, those in COSATU and its alliance with ANC and SACP (see Chapter 5).

It is sociologically prudent to ground the South African class formation in its constitutive context (see Chapter 2). In trying to provide a counter-balance to what is referred to as capital-centric analysis by Silver (2003), Bezuidenhout and Webster (2010: 370) are mindful of the role capital and the erstwhile apartheid state played in shaping and influencing the process of class formation in South Africa. Conversely, class formation in South Africa cannot be divorced from its racial underpinnings. This means therefore, our understanding of space in South Africa has to consciously incorporate state, capital, race, gender and class. Where state and capital's roles are augmented, this is not done to negate the agency of labour, simply to ground and give it meaning. Arguably, workers acknowledge this through the lyrical content in some of the songs they sing (see Chapter 7). The weakness inherent within labour geography is that it places at the centre of analysis the relationship between capital and labour. Even where the role of state is acknowledged, the understanding remains concerned with state and labour in class terms. The South African context is such we interrogate the context within which a relationship between capital and labour can be theorised. In addition, and equally important, we grapple with an analysis that speaks to the twin state-capital relationship with labour in class and racial terms (see Chapter 2). The apartheid spatial engineering therefore, was not concerned with class relations only, but also sought to shape racial separation (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Certainly, reliance upon geographies of labour is informed by the need to take into account the spatial realities of the South African working class (see Chapter 2). Second, reading between the lines one has to discern areas of convergence between geographies of labour and labour geography. For, as Herod (2012: 336) concedes, Harvey and others have sought to develop a historical-geographic materialism. Here there exists, albeit in limited terms, a recognition of agency (see Harvey, 2009; Soja, 1985). Whilst adopting a position that is in both shape and form pro-worker agency, labour geographers also acknowledge the limits inherent in their position (see Herod, 1997: 26; Bezuidenhout & Webster, 2010: 370). Most tellingly, Coe and Jordhus-Lier

have suggested that labour geography tends to gloss over issues of structure by displaying:

... [a] bias towards isolated success stories of workers with strong capacity to act and enhance their relative position vis-à-vis capital (2010: 213).

Third and as already indicated above, labour geography is a counterbalancing force to the Marxist capital-centric analysis as exemplified by Harvey and others. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the two approaches are combined for historical and contextual reasons. The thesis places at the centre of analysis issues to do with workers and transport. This being the train, a mode of transport imbued with colonial legacies and playing a central role in the daily commute experiences of black workers because of its historic links to the apartheid state's racially buttressed spatial engineering strategy. Unsurprisingly, South African workers had to employ tactics centred on what is referred to as transportation politics in the push back against the twin state-capital alliance (see Chapter 2).

It flows from the above that the contested nature of place and space has been at the centre of the state-capital and labour relationship in South Africa (see Bezuidenhout & Webster, 2010; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011).

For his part, and contrary to the capital-centric analysis, Herod (2001: 8) makes the following observations:

The production of space in particular ways is not only important for capital's ability to survive by enabling accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism itself, but it is also crucial for workers' abilities to survive and reproduce themselves. Just as capital does not exist in an aspatial world, neither does labo[u]r. The process of labo[u]r's self-reproduction (both biological and social) ... must take place in particular geographic locations. Given this fact, it becomes clear that workers are likely to want to shape the economic landscapes in ways that facilitate this self-reproduction.

Workers' desire to self-reproduce (both biologically and socially) with a particular reference to MTS helps us understand the embeddedness of what would otherwise have been a regular mode of transport into workplace and township based identity

politics. The tendency to reinvent and attach new meanings to space and place is well established in South Africa.

For example, the National Union of Mineworker (NUM) members reproduced the erstwhile (oppressive and control mechanism) compound system in their own image by turning the compound system's logic of control on its head (see Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). The above-mentioned example give weight (and the study will take this further) to Herod's persuasive argument that *workers' ability to produce and manipulate geographic spaces into specific forms is a potent form of social power*. The NUM example above, clearly shows workers engagement with "spatial praxis" – that is, how social actors consciously and deliberately struggle to shape geographical relationships in a manner compatible with their daily lives. This is manifestly the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Essentially, spatiality situates social life, consequently, demanding of purposeful human agency to jostle continuously with social determinations to influence every day social interactions. The study hopes to emplace social change and embed spatially the course of time and the making of history.

Faced with decomposing workplaces and a crisis of representation, workers have managed to successfully relocate their associational power elsewhere (see Chapters 5 and 6, Herod, 1997: 3; 2001: 2; Harvey, 2009: 23-4; Soja, 1985: 90). Implicitly, by focusing on MTS and its location of operations – the train – the thesis is cognisant of the fact that, labour as a social group is punctuated by the existence of cleavages. These cleavages are an embodiment of specific capital geographies that imposes limits and opportunities for certain groupings of the working class. The study refers to this differentiation as 'spatial entrapment' (see Chapter 6 and 7). It is suggested that organising on the train, can overcome some of these limitations.

According to Herod (2001: 49), it is important to recognise that the varied nature of place and space presents varying pressures and solutions to workers situations. In the final analysis however, this is not to suggest that workers are passive victims of circumstances. On the contrary, workers are sentient social actors who both intentionally and at times unintentionally produce economic landscapes to further self-interests goals. The productions of such economic landscapes however, need to not aim to overthrow the existence of the capitalist system, merely to ensure workers'

generational self-production (Herod, 1997: 16; 2001: 16). To some extent, this suggests labour is aware of its own limitations. The thrust of the argument herein is that much as capital is capable of spatial fixes so is labour.

Such fixes aim to achieve different objectives – the one for profit and the other is concerned with better working conditions (see Harvey, 2001 and Herod, 1997). This necessitates, as a point of departure, an understanding of geography in order to ground, comprehensively, workers' situation in particular locales. The existing economic landscape in South Africa has shaped and continues to impact upon workers' sense of belonging; identity and solidarity (see Chapter 2, 6 and 7). Because of this, South African workers have had to be strategic about their scalar praxis in order to effect change meaningfully.

### **3.3 Scale**

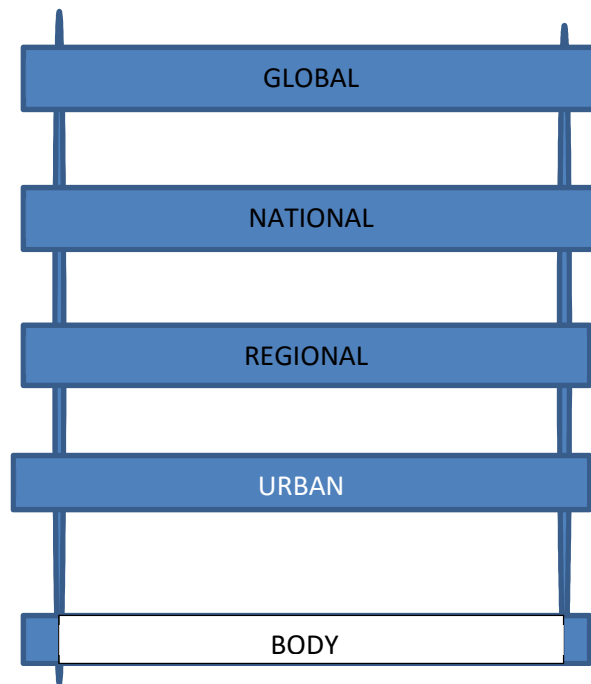
The notion of scale is important for this study and our understanding of South African workers for it disrupts commonly held understandings of worker power. By organising on the train, the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) requires of us to be innovative when dealing with and theorising workers' organising strategies. The resource power approach (PRA) for example, has a tendency to attach and limit associational power to places of work. The findings of this study challenge such an approach and suggest we need to expand our understanding of the aforementioned power resource (see Chapter 5, 6 and 7). Our understanding and usage of the notion of scale is informed by an approach that view scale as socially produced. Scale is a "material entity through [which] social praxis *opens* possibilities for political action" (Herod, 2001: 38). This view of scale is alive to the fact that scale as a social construct can be deliberately manipulated for political motives. Hence, the train represents a scalar action for worker mobilisation.

The workerist/populist debate (to be introduced in the section below and Chapter 4) will sociologically ground this view of scale. Elsewhere, Bezuidenhout and Webster (2010) show how the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) strategically used its localised power base to develop a national bargaining system. Scale allows the thesis to conceptually ground MTS and its individual members. This becomes evident when linked with the following concepts, 'resonant place' and 'spatial fix' (to be discussed in detail below). The preceding section attempted to draw attention to the notion of

worker agency. The approach adopted however, was to embed the said agency in its South African context by showing how the twin state-capital spatial engineering (structure) has heavily influenced upon workers action. For this, the thesis draws extensively from Marxist geographers such as Harvey. Juxtaposed against this backdrop, this section attempts to further develop the interconnections between scale and the arguments presented in the previous section. However, by itself, the notion of scale fails to adequately provide enough theoretical coverage for workers' action under investigation. Therefore, the study will incorporate the notion of resonant place and spatial fix to supplement our conception of workers and their actions.

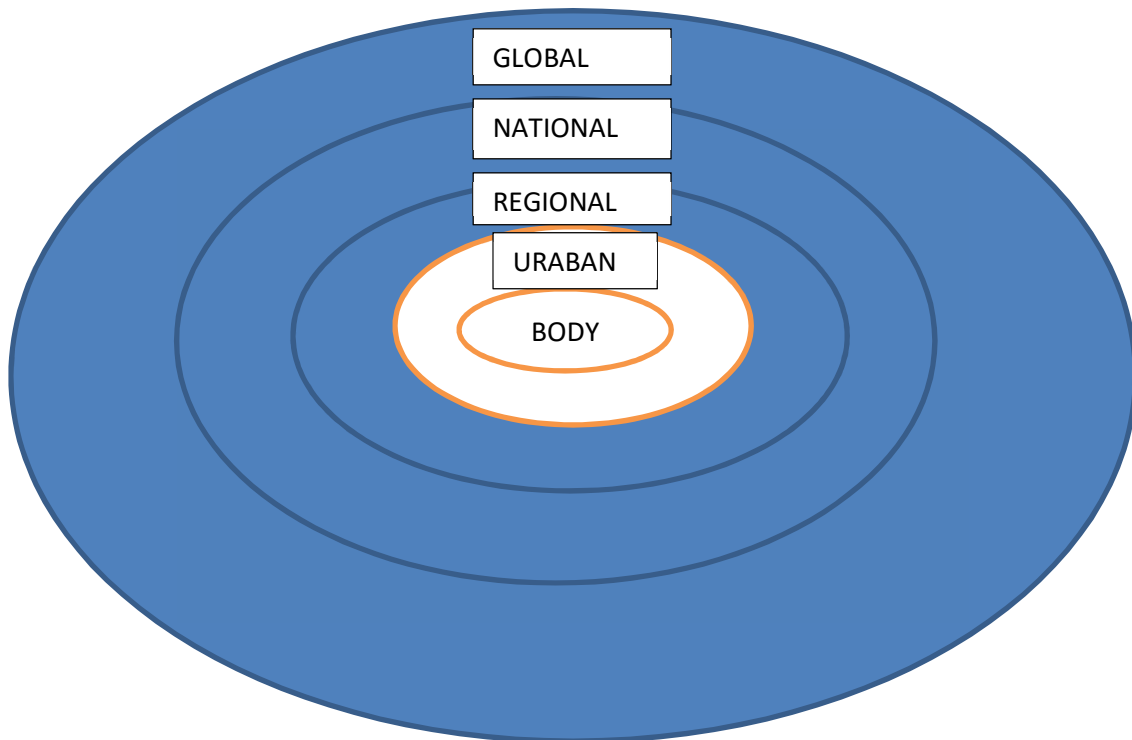
Whereas scale simply references how workers in particular localities can incrementally apply pressure to various actors, (for example by making demands against certain local employers and then build upon that foundation as motivation upon which to scale further demands), the notions of 'resonant place' and 'spatial fix' tangibly embed such scalar actions. The nature of labour unionism to emerge in South Africa – social movement unionism – demands an approach that is sensitive to the particularity (form, organisational structure and repertoires) of worker actions from a country buttressed by a racially oppressive industrialisation strategy (see Chapter 2 and 4). The thesis deploys the concept of scale both in its vertical (level) and horizontal (size) sense (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2) (for debates on all things scale see Herod, 2011). The choice of the former is not an attempt at ordering realms within which workers' actions take place (Collinge, 1981; cited in Herod, 2011: 31). Rather, the vertical approach to scale is informed by the need to dialectically tease out the relationship between structure and agency. Put differently, how and when workers scale their actions is informed by particular circumstance located in a specific time-place. The existence of MTS is an embodiment of this; that is to say, the need to scale out of the workplace onto a mobile space is a product of certain constraints and opportunities. To be sure, MTS is a reflection of South African workers innovative, situation dependent and strategic use of power – *tactical flexibility* (see Chapter 5).

**Figure 3.1 Scale as a ladder**



Source: Adapted from Herod (2011: 15)

**Figure 3.2 Scale as concentric oval circles**



Source: adapted from Herod (2011: 15)

Guided by history of South Africa and the nature of labour movements to emerge in this country (see Chapters 2 and 4), my ontological approach to the question of scale is such that scales exist and are real. In addition, the thesis posits that scales have real material bases to them. Drawing on Smith's (1984/1990 cited in Herod, 2011: 9) conception of scales, it is clear that the train and MTS can be located in what he refers to as Travel-To-Work Area (TTWA); that is, the distance traversed by workers from their places of residence to their places of paid work. For most South African workers who laboured under apartheid, TTWA poignantly highlighted the contradictions of daily life (see Seidman, 1994). On the one end of the TTWA, most workers lost their sense of identity and dignity because they were stripped of the most basic of rights, both as labourers and humans (see Chapter 3). Workplaces were generally located in 'white South Africa' where blacks were nothing more than migrants without workplace protection. On the other side of the TTWA, blacks were subjugated subjects of 'white South Africa' (see Chapters 2 and 4). The manner in which I use scale in this thesis is influenced by the abovementioned realities of South African workers.

As a geographic locale, South Africa can be subdivided into some of the scales represented by the metaphors above as demonstrated by Fig. 2.3.1 and 2.3.2. Framed through apartheid spatiality, it becomes clear that there was both geographic and a socially constructed demarcation of the country. The former can be accounted for by the existence of clearly delineated geographic locations such as Mamelodi and the erstwhile Bantustans (see Chapter 2). The latter encapsulates the workerist/populist debate. Therefore, workers' actions were carried out at clearly demarcated geographic scales but also upon socially produced scales. By socially produced scales, the thesis recognises the limitation of language in as far as the present metaphors are concerned. The metaphors refer to a demarcation of the 'body'; 'urban'; 'regional'; 'national' and 'global'. Whilst the demarcation between places of residence and places of work is generally geographic, such demarcations are not accounted for on the ladder and concentric circles metaphors.

For workers however, there exists a social separation of the two spaces (workplace and place of residence), even when geographically located within the same province, say for example, the Gauteng province. At the material level, this distinction of geographic and socially produced scales becomes easily discernible. There were limits to what can be demanded in the workplace; the apartheid state allowed workers

organisation to only demand bread and butter issues in the workplace. Due to this approach by the apartheid government, it was imperative for workers to be strategic about where, how and when to scale demands in order to achieve the twin objective of defeating workplace exploitation and achieving citizenship rights (see Chapter 5). For these reasons, those who conceived of scale as nothing more than mental contrivances have little relevance to our understanding of South African workers. The thesis argues that even where scales do not exist a priori, but must actively be engaged and brought into being, such actions are buttressed by a materialistic understanding of scales (Herod, 2011: 9-14). MTS members are organising on the train due to the exclusion experienced in the workplace, and also because they are residences of Mamelodi township and informal settlement dwellers. Therefore, the organisation allows them to scale their demand both politically and in terms of workplace bread and butter issues (see Chapter 6 and 7).

In its vertical sense as exemplified by metaphors such as ladders and the horizontally more inclined approaches such as the concentric circles, a hierarchical outlook to this conception of scale is created. These are generally areal conceptions of scale. For the current purpose, however, the scalar actions under considerations cannot adequately be framed in hierarchical fashion only. It is expressly challenging to locate the train hierarchically. This raises a number of questions; firstly, where in the hierarchy should the train be located, below the body or after it? Secondly, because the train is a mode of transportation utilised to traverse various localities, for example places of work and places of residence, Mamelodi and Tshwane CBD, Tshwane and Johannesburg, it then becomes challenging deciding whether or not the train represent an up-scaling or down-scaling from the workplace. To overcome this hierarchical biasness inherent to areal mappings of scale, the thesis will supplement the abovementioned methods of understanding scale, with an approach that conceives of scale as a network.

Latour argues that the world's complexity cannot be reduced to "notions of levels, layers, territories, [and] spheres". It is inadequate to simply conceive of the world as being made up of discrete areas of bounded space, which fit seamlessly into each other. Hence, Latour proposes an approach that thinks of the world as:

Fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, [and] capillary (Latour, 1996: 370; cited in Herod, 2011: 48-9).



Conceptualised as a network, my understanding of scale lends itself to metaphors such as tree roots and earthworm burrows (see Figure 3.3 and 3.4). Unlike the discrete, well-demarcated spatial arenas associated with understanding scale as a ladder or concentric circle, scale as network embodied by the tree roots metaphor speaks to an approach to view scale as locations along various parts of the network. Contrary to the unidirectional approach of the ladder, the tree roots approach suggests that scale can be understood to run in two directions:

... [T]he point where the tree trunk emerges from the ground can readily be thought of as representing 'the global' scale, with its roots reaching deep into the soil of other scales. However, this same point could just as easily be seen as the scale of the 'local' or 'the body', the starting point from which all other scales originate (Herod, 2011: 50).

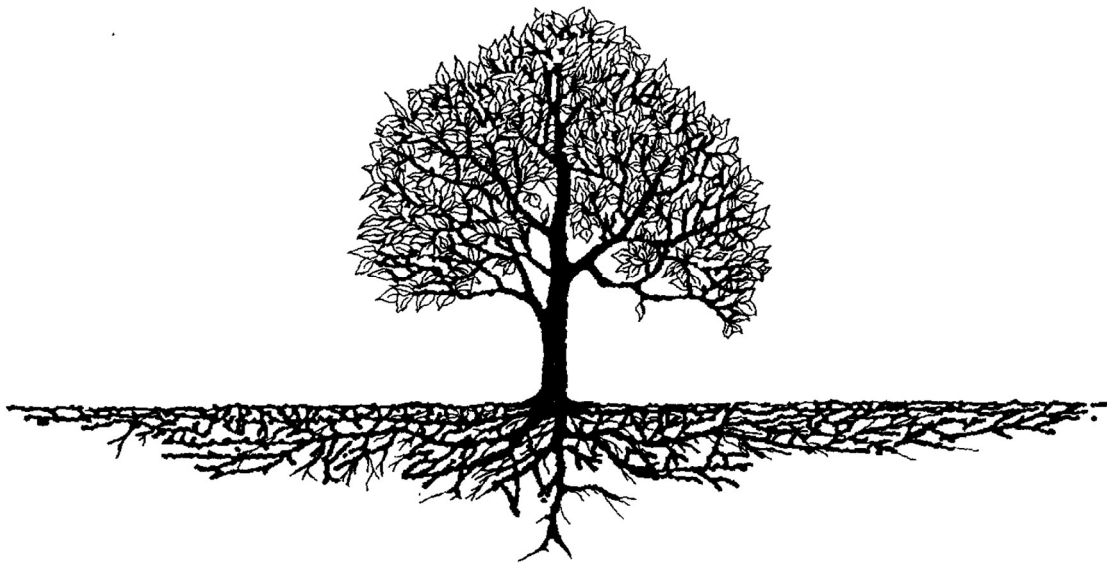
The tree roots and earthworm metaphors emphasises the idea that scales are interlinked and interconnected completely. The non-hierarchical nature of scale as network allows the thesis to embed the 'train' and the 'body' as scalar phenomenon. Their significance is then drawn from the extent to which the train and the body allow workers to interlink and use such linkages and interconnectedness as a source of power. Where Herod (2011: 51) has pointed out weaknesses in relation to the tree roots and earthworm metaphors, such shortcomings are addressed by the metaphors of scale as a ladder and concentric circles respectively. He argues, the aforementioned is difficult to delimit where one begins and where the other ends.

For the purpose of this study, the network metaphor is relevant in order to map how the body and the train traverse the interconnected localities taping workers' power in the process. In this way, it is no longer a question of whether or not the train represents an up-scaling or down-scaling from the workplace. *Rather the thesis is able to plot workers points or sites of power over and beyond the workplace.* Most importantly, it will show how such power nodes in the network can be linked across space and place. This approach then, allows for interpretation of workers' actions that does not privilege certain scales over others. Therefore the concern is not so much that workers should seek institutional, structural and organisational forms of power to be operational at the urban, regional, national or global scale (I address the notion of power in Chapter 5). The emphasis is simply on workers' ability to generate and tap new sources of power

and the extent of interconnectedness that allows workers to spread such power sources across space and time.

Equally important is that the decision to scale workers mobilisation en-route to and from work fittingly justifies the combination of labour geography with geography of labour. As already alluded to, the train as a means of transportation is not an innocent space; rather it embodies the twin state-capital spatial engineering that is South Africa. Linked to this, it can be said that the train was used as a form of worker control mechanism much like was the case with compounds system (see Chapter 2). Whilst MTS's use of the train points to a strategic locus of power, the thesis suggests that, linking scale to the notion of a resonant place, allows one to interrogate ways in which MTS can link with other workers organisations beyond the train.

**Figure 3.3 Scale as tree roots**



Source: Sketch sourced from the internet. Bing Image search engine, online pictures. Creative Commons Licenses, 2017)

**Figure 3.4 Scale as earthworm burrows**



Source: Adapted from Herod (2011: 50)

For reasons of clarity, the study adopts an approach that conceives of the body's ontology as biologically and social produced (Herod, 2011: 59-60). I argue that the debate on whether or not the body is biologically or socially produced is unproductive and, to some extent, trivial to my purpose. Drawing on the example of twins is sufficient to justify the aforementioned position. The conjoined twins' illustration addresses itself to the question of whether or not such twin represents two or one body; two or one personalities (see Herod, 2011: 76, Box 3.3). Using the example of the famous (Thailand born) American twins, Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874), Herod probes the extent to which Chang and Eng represented one or two personalities. For the current purpose (and perhaps something that Herod failed to make clear) is that the example of conjoined twins cogently demonstrates that bodies are both biologically and socially produced. At the biological level, conjoined twins might share one or other bodily organs, circulatory systems etc., however conjoined twins can still develop different personalities in line with the 'nature or nurture debate' (Herod, 2011: 74, 76).

In relation to the current discussion, the body as a scale permits one the theoretical tools to assess the extent to which an individual worker can access different forms of worker power resources (see Chapter 5). It is conceivable that worker organisations are built upon individual biological bodies that coalesce at the social level into a collective. Thus giving life to traditional forms of union power, namely structural and associational power (see Chapter 4, 6 and 7). At the conceptual level, this approach also lends itself to the cultural understandings of the body. Herod considers how certain Western approaches have conceptualised the body “as an individuali[s]ed entity separated from the world around it”. On the other hand however, non-Western perspectives such as the Chimalapas of the Southern Mexico have sought to emplace the body. Equally, in the South African context, the Zulu concept of Ubuntu, encapsulates an understanding of the body as inextricably connected to all others around it (Herod, 2011: 78-80). The latter concept can successfully be linked to the famous union slogan “an injury to one is an injury to all” and “unity is power”. Drawing on the notion of the body as scale, the thesis endeavours to show that individual members have agency and power. This can be accounted for the by the fact that MTS exists as a collective only on the train and not in the workplace. Despite this geographic limits, MTS is able to empower its members.

For example, interviews with comrades Mmotong and Dinakanyane demonstrate how bodies – individual – have scaled out of the train in order to assist workers in other spaces (see Chapter 6). Furthermore and most pertinently, the thesis seeks to *eschew the institutional bias* inherent in most studies concerned with understanding workers and their agency. A focus upon the body is an exploration of how various sources of power can be effectively harnessed. Furthermore, it can be suggested that thinking of scale as a network and the body can greatly enhance our efforts to theoretically draw linkages between varying forms of power resources. Arguably, using power strategically requires that we think imaginatively about scale and where and when power should be deployed (see Chapter 5). This is not merely for contextual convenience, but to demonstrate that space and spatial relations may serve as sources of power (Tufts and Savage, 2009: 946; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010: 217-8; Herod, 2001: 2, 47).

Below I explore the notion of scale with reference to the concept of resonant places and show how this represents a potential workers’ spatial fix. In his attempt to project

the global as the local, Anderson (2015) is interested in exploring how to circulate union power across different spaces notwithstanding the fact that unions are generally restricted to single sites. He deploys the concept of 'resonant place (s)' to demonstrate how unions organising in the transportation sector have managed to win battles against global multinational companies by building single site activism and campaigning. Single site organising, Anderson avers can have wider global organising strategy (Anderson, 2015: 48, 50-1, 57-8). With a focus on unions that attempts to organise against Trans-national corporations (TNCs), he discerns two union strategies. The first one is informed by an approach that designed with an aim to have maximal spatial reach. This approach centres on establishing global union federations (GUFs) that engage TNC's headquarters and sign global framework agreements (GFAs). These GFAs customarily comprise a commitment to basic rights such as the International Labour organisation's (ILO) core labour standards. These have unfortunately proved problematic. Amongst others, GFAs lacks an effective implementation strategy. In other instances, Cumber, Nativel and Routledge (2008, cited in Anderson, 2015: 49) note how some GFAs have led to divisions between GUFs and national unions. This stems from the fact that, often national unions find themselves frozen out of the negotiation process.

The second strategy talks to union struggles that are grounded in particular places. These grounded struggles rely on broad spatial connections and converts these into forms of pressure (Anderson, 2015: 50). This is an example of resonant place. It speaks to struggles that are place based. However, where workers are able to leverage an array of connections beyond the immediate space. Drawing from Anderson, this study will demonstrate the possibilities and limit of the comrades' coaches as a train based resonant place:

[This is because] ... struggles for labour rights communicate very effectively across space, radiating political energy outward (Anderson, 2015: 57).

The communication channels and the outward political energies that Anderson refers to, can be scaled at the bodily level. For many workers in third world countries, face-to-face individual interaction remains the most dependable form to disseminate information across space. As a resonant place, the train is the product of both the

apartheid spatiality and has arguably been kept relevant by the current neoliberal attack on labour movements. Yet, it has the potential to become the 'spatial fix' in favour of the working class. Employed as an analytical tool through which to dissect the phenomena under study, Anderson's resonant place arguably turns Harvey's spatial fix (2001) logic on its head. Spatial fix describes capitalism's ability to resolve its internal crisis tendencies through geographic expansion and or restructuring (Harvey, 2001: 24). In his usage of the concept, Harvey intentionally draws attention to the meaning of the word 'fix' (see Harvey, 2001). He outlines the meaning as follows: "to locate and pin down in a particular location; to restore things to working/normal function".

However, when understood in relation to a drug addict, the 'fix' is then a temporary measure and to this effect, there arise the need to continually seek solutions (Harvey, 2001: 24). Arguably, Harvey (2001) finds common ground with Anderson (2015), albeit in opposite directions. Here, the initiative to spatially fix workers' problems is favourable to the South African working class. In absolute terms, the train has the potential to become the 'new shopfloor'. It is the abovementioned racial and capitalist spatiality (see Chapter 1 and 2) that gave birth to social movement unionism (see for example Von Holdt, 2002). Social movement trade unionism has its roots in the famous populist/workerist debate that characterised much of South Africa's labour scholarship of the 80s (Buhlungu, 2010a: 22, Webster & Southall, 2010: 139). Generally speaking, in many societies the role of labour movements have been historically well defined and limited (in both scope and focus) to workplace based matters. In South Africa however, the subjugation of the African working class in both the workplace and broader society meant that the traditional workplace confined trade union model was not adequate.

This question came to dominate much of the popular and academic discourse following the re-emergence of African trade unionism in January 1973 (Buhlungu, 2010a: 22). This debate was about two fundamental issues, race and class. The question of race was, in important respects, about how to liberate the oppressed African majority. The question of class was the second aspect of this debate and relates to worker bread and butter issues in the workplace. For the unions this debate was primarily about approach and strategies crystallising in what came to be known

as the populists and workerist positions or approaches. This because, as Rick Turner (1972: 35) argues:

[South African] ... intergroup conflicts and tensions are ultimately bound up with economic inequality, with conflict over ownership of resources and of the fruits of industry. The alternative analysis of conflict, in terms of cultural and/or racial differences, is not even a half-truth.

As history has shown, the abovementioned positions were flawed in many respects. However, something worth noting is the fact that these positions seem to be re-emerging as embodied by the on-going conflict between National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) and COSATU. At the heart of this conflict is the contentious issue of whether COSATU should be used to serve the interest of the ruling party or champion the interests of workers first (see Chapter 5).

I would like to argue here that the elevation of geography to the centre of the analysis has the potential to also contribute to the unproductive and artificial focus of the workerist/populists debate by bringing into sharper focus the oppression at both ends of the middle passage. The populist/workerist debate is explored fully in Chapter 4. It is merely mentioned here to signify the thesis's envisioned theoretical contribution to our understanding of workers' actions and scalar strategies. Couched in labour geography parlance, populist/workerists approaches can be understood as scalar actions. Such actions however, were buttressed by resonant place (see also Tufts, 2009). This multi-scalar approach was necessitated by a racial and capitalist spatiality characteristic of South Africa. The need to rethink these two positions is due to the fact that both suffer from in-built limitations. A geographically informed approach is sociologically relevant in elevating a regular mode of travelling to a status of worker space. Arguably, this can be explained by the fact that the apartheid spatiality created a unique form of relational space resulting in a spillage of issues from the townships into the workplace and vice versa (Harvey, 2006: 123-4, Soja, 1985: 92).

This can be accounted for by the fact that the apartheid government did not only limit its actions to employer-employee relations (by legislatively excluding African workers) but also scaled up to the national level by (through racial zoning) pushing workers to the peripheries of white South Africa (see Chapter 2). The populist and workerist

approaches derived from the fact that Africans shared a common experience of racial oppression (relational space) in the workplace and townships (absolute space) that find expression in singing en-route to and from work.

Through his notion of strategic interventions, Anderson (2010, cited in Coe, 2012: 8) advances that multi-scalar approaches are best served by identifying strategic nodes from which to organise. Among what he identifies as key zones, transportation nodes are mentioned. In the section below, drawing from a multidisciplinary literature, the study extrapolates how apartheid spatiality, workerist/populist approaches and the transport mode provided to African workers produced these spaces as comrade coaches. In other words, the importance of train coaches as organising spaces can be linked to apartheid spatiality.

### **3.4 South African Labour Movement: A Historical Background**

As already stated above, space is both a product and producer (Soja, 1980: 208; Soja, 1985: 98). Because of this dialectical relationship, the history of the South African labour movements is intrinsically embedded in the three aforementioned historical periods. Arguably, the period 1652-1994 has, in many respects, set apart the South African labour movement from the rest. Hence, for many scholars, the term social movement unionism (SMU) (discussed in detail below) aptly captures our understanding of the South African labour movement (see for example, Webster, 1988; von Holdt, 2002; Seidman, 1994; Lambert & Webster, 1988). The formation of Commercial Workers Union of South Africa (ICU) in 1919 formally heralded the formation of black workers' resistance against both capitalism and white domination (see Bonner, 1978; Lacom, 1989; Ncube, 1985). It is perhaps noteworthy to mention here that while this section is concerned with detailing the history of social movement unionism in South Africa, this is done so through geographic/ spatial lenses. Therefore social movement unionism failures and successes are understood to be geographic opportunities and constraints. This is because space is presented and privileged as an agentic player in social actions. We seek here, to eschew the dominant race/class approach to social movement unionism that has, over the years, been the mainstay of labour studies in South Africa (see Chapter 2 and 6). This section provides a brief picture of the pre-1973 unions. This will be followed by a much more detailed discussion of the labour movement's revival in the 70s.



A point of convergence in the literature on labour movements in South Africa is that union ideas were brought to South Africa by emigrants, particularly British emigrants (see for example Feit 1975; Wickins 1978; Webster, Buhlungu & Bezuidenhout 2003; Visser, 2014b). This point is significant in as far as couching our discussion in the language of sociology of space and geography. British workers brought with them a unique spatial/geographic experience (absolute, relative and relational space) of worker organisation. The first trade union, The Cape of Good Hope Printers Protection Society was formed in 1841 and was later followed by the Cape of Good Hope Printers and Bookbinders' Society in 1857 (Visser, 2014: 479b). Printing unions were the earliest to proliferate and take root to such an extent that by early 1880s they formed an umbrella body called the South African Typographical Union. This was followed by the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners established in 1881. However, it was only after the discovery of minerals that the development of trade unions and organised labour took on a new direction (Visser, 2014: 479b). The Witwatersrand Mine Employees' and Mechanics' Union (also known as Labour Union) was established as an umbrella body for British mine workers and artisans. Its stated aim was to unite white workers on the Witwatersrand (Visser, 2014: 479b). The dominance of British union experience became more conspicuous and almost ubiquitous as branches of British unions were transferred, almost wholesale to South Africa.

The Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) was established, with branches in Cape Town, Durban, Kimberly and Johannesburg (Visser, 2014: 479-80b). The most influential trade union, the Transvaal Miners' Association came into being following the South African war in 1902 and changed its name to the South African Mineworkers Union (MWU) in 1913 (Visser, 2014: 480b). Many of these unions borrowed e.g. titles, lock-stock and barrel from their British counterparts. Thus, many were regarded as nothing more than branches of British mother organisations (Visser, 2014: 481b). While the British influence shaped the lives and work experiences of white workers, these developments lit a spark in African workers as well. The repressive work conditions in both agriculture and mining made unionisation a necessity for the majority African workers. The South African union landscape was a product of British experience and influence which, in turn, laid the foundation for African workers' (socio-spatial dialectic).

To this end, the Industrial Workers of Africa was formed in 1917 as a general industrial trade union for black workers (Visser, 2014: 482b). It was unfortunately disbanded in 1918 and the following year, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa (ICU) was established.

As a union, the ICU was spatially located in Cape Town under the leadership of Clements Kadalie as general secretary. According to Wickins (1978: 20) and Visser, (2014: 482-83b) the spatial origins of the ICU were influenced by factors both internal and external to South Africa. The wartime economic boom gave rise to increased industrial output coupled with increases in employment. However, the wartime boom was nothing more than a price boom. Grievances around wages and prices of food stuffs were common complaints among blacks and whites alike. These conditions provided fertile grounds for the establishment of workers' organisation. Following a chance encounter between Clements Kadalie and white trade unionist, Albert Batty, the ICU was born. With the assistance of F Rayner and JH Dean, the ICU emerged with the chief aim of organising dock labourers in Cape Town (Friedman, 1987: 12; Wickins, 1978: 23; Feit, 1975: 14). By November 1919, the ICU had a reported membership of a thousand, largely docks and railway labourers.

For Wickins, the docks and railways were the propitious spaces for industrial mobilisation owing to the large concentrations of black labourers in Cape Town. These conditions provided, for the first time, formal organisation for black workers. It is for these aforementioned reasons that many turned to the ICU as almost the only organisation that provided hope in a climate hostile to black workers' interests. Spatially (in absolute terms), the ICU branched out of Cape Town and established offices in Durban, Johannesburg and Bloemfontein while also bridging the rural/urban geographic (absolute, relative and relational) divide by organising rural farm workers. To this end, the ICU had amassed a membership of around 100 000 by 1927 (Wickins, 1978: 117-8; Bonner, 1978: 114-6, Tabata, 1974 quoted in Ncube, 1985; Lacom, 1989: 69; Feit, 1975: 21; Visser, 2014: 482-83b). After the windfall of 1927, the ICU entered a phase of decline (starting in 1928) from which it never recovered.

Philip Bonner (1978) insightfully and critically details the reasons for the ICU's decline and eventual collapse. At one level, the ICU suffered the cult of the personality embodied both by Kadalie and AWG Champion (its Natal leader). Furthermore, and

most importantly, the ICU failed to build workplace power base due to its misguided spatial focus, rural farmworkers (Bonner, 1978: 116, 118; Feit, 1975: 25; Friedman, 1987: 15; Wickins, 1978: 205).

According to Bonner:

This notoriously unorganisable group soon proved themselves the Achilles heel of the ICU. Scattered across thousands of square miles of countryside, they were virtually impossible to protect ... (Bonner, 1978: 116).

It must be said, that the successes of the ICU are a reflection of the organisation's ability to intertwine the connections between absolute, relative and relational spaces. Its failures on the other hand are telling of the ICU's inability to operationalise these spaces albeit under repressive conditions (see Chapter 2). This can be accounted for by the union's failure to make use of the strike action weapon (Wickins, 1978: 205-6; Bonner, 1978: 117).

Strike action is arguably, an emotional and strategic expression of workers' spaces (relative, relational and absolute). By becoming a peasants' revolt, the ICU tapped into farm workers' personal and collective experiences (relational, relative and absolute space) of abuse underscored amongst others by unjust evictions (Wickins, 1978: 118-9, 124-5, 149, 205; Bonner, 1978: 116; Browett, 1982: 18). The evictions were facilitated by apartheid's economic and spatial engineering strategy. This process traversed all three spaces (absolute, relative and relational). That is to say, the process itself was motivated by race and class relations on the one hand; economic development for Whites and geographic separation of the South African population on the other. However, the aforementioned spaces were negated by geography (space-time), ultimately rendering the 100 000 strong organisation weak. As a consequence, the union withered and disappeared in the 1930s because, in Bonner's words:

Agricultural labours ...were virtually unorganisable; so too, it could be argued were those in the then reserves. Clamped into a system of tribal control and insulated administratively from outside, the ICU could never easily have achieved penetration there – whatever the merits of organising migrant labour at its rural end ...All this left, therefore, was

the *urban* working class; and it is in this failure to organise this group the ICU can chiefly be criticised (Bonner, 1978: 118 emphasis added).

Bonner's (1978) argument, as reflected in the quote above, suffers from a failure to operationalise space; that is a tendency to read space only in geographic lenses. Arguably, as this study will show (see Chapters 2 and 6) workers' willingness to mobilise is a culmination of Harvey's (2006) trio of spaces, Soja's (1980) socio-spatial dialectic and Burawoy's (2009) macro-micro link. Conceptually, this means that both the urban and rural sites represent an opportunity to be mobilised at various levels: space-time, absolute, relative and relational. Put differently, these geographic variations required strategic and tactical flexibility in order to adequately confront workplace and societal issues afflicting workers. It is worth noting that at the relative and relational spaces, the rural and the urban workers can be organised into a single organisation and it is this fact that Bonner (1978) fails to appreciate.

Situated in repressive environment within which ICU was trying to organise, Bonner's argument carries some merits. Here, Anderson's (2015) resonant place concept is instructive. Below I turn attention to the story of unions that emerged after the ICU. After being disenchanted with the racist Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), fourteen unions, with nineteen affiliates of the Council for Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) came together in March 1955 to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) (Lacom, 1989: 121; Friedman, 1987: 27; Magubane, 1979: 302; Ncube, 1985: 90; Feit 1975: 32; Lambert, 1988: 5; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006: 192; Maree, 1985: 281).

At its first conference, SACTU made it clear from the onset that:

... [it] recognised that the organi[s]ing of this great mass of workers was linked inextricably with their struggle for political rights and liberation from all oppressive laws. Every attempt by the workers to organi[s]e themselves was hampered by general legislation affecting their right of movement, domicile and political representation. Every effort for higher wages, better working conditions or reinstatement of unjustly dismissed fellow workers was immediately met by the full force of the state ('Battle in the factory' Fighting Talk, October 1961 quoted in Feint, 1975: 32).

Without hesitation, it is evident from the abovementioned quote that SACTU became a political union from the day it was established (see Magubane, 1979: 302; Ncube, 1985: 90; Feit, 1975: 32-3; Maree, 1985: 282; Friedman, 1987: 27; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006: 192-3). In geographic terms, SACTU's actions were scaled at the national level, and can therefore be inferred – approached workers' grievances through racial lenses.

Thus, SACTU joined the Congress Alliance consisting of the Africa National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) and the Congress Democrats (COD) (Friedman, 1987: 27, Feit, 1975: 31, 33). Because SACTU perceived the struggle against economic exploitation to be inextricably linked to racial oppression – it therefore pursued a strategy that sought to fight for political emancipation as a point of departure. This strategy centred around forming factory committees that would not only be concerned with factory issues, but also be groupings that advanced a combination of economic and political demands. With this amalgamation, it was hoped the factory committees would transform SACTU from a conventional union, into a militant political union (Maree, 1985: 281-82; Ncube, 1985: 90; Feit, 1975: 32; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006: 192). According to Lambert (1988: 32), SACTU leadership consciously redefined the role of trade union and aimed to make a "clean break" with past patterns of worker organisations. Therefore, a new trajectory for the labour movement was set in motion in the 50s.

Political unionism recognised the interdependency and interrelatedness of race and class and how these permeate the three spaces – absolute, relational and relative. Without a doubt, organisations such as MTS still mirrors this. This is demonstrated by MTS and its function as a mobilising structure for the alliance. Furthermore, its members are encouraged to join ANC and SACP as political vehicles through which to advance workers class interests (see Chapter 6 and 7). This recognition required SACTU to meet three essential conditions: (a) to forge alliances at national and local levels (scale); (b) engagement in and linkage of resistance campaigns in the factory to local and national resistance; and (c) to foster forms of organisations and leadership ideology in the workplace to facilitate such an outlook (Lambert, 1988: 32).

SACTU's political outlook represented a spatial reorientation in relations to the erstwhile unions such as ICU and CNETU. It is worth contextualising this spatial

reorientation given how SACTU's political stance influenced scalar actions of the post 1973 unions (see Adler & Webster, 2000; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006). Lambert (1988: 64) points out that SACTU's political position were heavily influenced by the work of Harmel and Rusty Bernstein. Harmel and Bernstein advanced that South Africa was a unique society because of its internal colonialism. This "uniqueness" meant that the South African labour movement lacked a prior model to emulate. Thus, the situation necessitated an important question, whether to prioritise the needs of a liberation movement or that of a labour movement? In order to effectively dismantle the evil structures of internal colonialism, it was important to channel energies into a movement that represented an alliance of classes, a mass based liberation movement (Lambert, 1988: 64-3, Maree, 1985: 281; Feit, 1975: 33). In its recruitment of members however, SACTU relied on shopfloor mobilisation while scaling demands at the national level as embodied by the famous 'Pound-a-Day' campaign which started in 1957 ending in 1963. This campaign not only focused on wages as its name suggests, but galvanised township residents into action on issues ranging from working conditions, living conditions and transport (Feit, 1975: 100; Maree, 1985: 282; Friedman, 1987: 30-1; Ncube, 1985: 95; Lacom, 1986: 146-9; Lambert, 1988: 381, 391-2; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006: 193, 195). The merging of political and shopfloor issues as a war strategy by SACTU was to have profound implications for the union.

Due to its political agitation, SACTU suffered state repression and consequently entered a phase of inactivity in the 60s following the banning imposed upon the ANC and other anti-apartheid mass movement organisations. It is important to point out that SACTU as a union was not banned, however the harassments and arrests meted out against its leadership hamstrung the union and brought its activities to a halt (Friedman, 1987: 32; Maree, 1985: 282; Lacom, 1986: 152; Feit, 1975: 174-5; Ncube, 1985: 103; Adler & Webster, 2000: 1; Lambert, 1988). Because SACTU as a union was not banned, Steven Friedman assessed the situation as follows:

The unionists who went underground may have believed the bannings made it impossible to continue with open union work – but their decision that worker organi[s]ation was a much *lower priority* than advancing congress goals. It sealed SACTU's fate (Friedman, 1987: 32, emphasis added).

The self-inflicted demise of SACTU, Friedman asserts, ushered in a period of industrial peace that was shuttered by the unexpected Durban strikes of 1973 (Friedman, 1987: 33, 35-40; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2009: 189-192; Lacom, 1986: 161-7; Magubane, 1979: 321; Adler & Webster, 2000: 1).

### **3.4.1 The Durban Space**

The year 1973 transformed apartheid spatial configuration forever (see Friedman, 1987; Barchiesi & Kenny, 2008; Byrne, 2012; Adler & Webster, 2000; Legassick, 2008; Ulrich, 2007; Friedman, 2011; Seidman, 1994, Maree, 1985; Naidoo, 2017). By spatially (absolute, relative and relational) re-inserting African worker's rights back on the agenda, the 1973 moment permanently changed the South African political and economic landscape.

Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster captured the moment in this way:

... the Durban strikes were a fundamental departure in the history of resistance against apartheid. Not only did they break more than a decade of relative quiescence during the highly repressive 1960s, but these collective acts profoundly transformed the conditions under which resistance was to take place (Adler & Webster, 2000: 1).

True to form, in a space of about two months (Jan & Feb) of 1973, over 100 000 black workers embarked on a series of spontaneous strikes in Durban alone. Due to the shared, spatial experiences (absolute, relative and relational), the industrial action soon spread geographically to places like Johannesburg and East London. This suggest that workers scaled their actions from the local to the national. (Adler & Webster, 2000: 1; Sithole & Ndlovu, 2006: 190; Maree, 1985: 286-7; Friedman, 1987: 40; Maguban, 1979: 321). In view of the literature (both schematic, analytical, popular and scholarly) that lends itself to the histories of the South African labour movement, the current discussion will focus more on the question of spatial strategies, with a special interest on the workerist and populist debate. Attention to the question of spatial strategies is informed by the fact that the phenomena under study straddle the workplace/community divide and as such demands an engagement with the aforementioned debate. (For a general picture of the South African labour movements see for example, Sithole & Ndlovu, 2009; Legassick, 2008; Friedman, 1987; Friedman,

2011; Buhlungu, 2006; 2001; 2004; Ncube, 1985; Lacom, 1986, Von Holdt, 2002; Maree, 1985; Adler & Webster, 2000; Webster, 1988).

### **3.4.1.1 Workerists/Populists debate revisited**

The polemic nature inherent within the workerists/populists debate has, in the words of Sian Byrne (2012), tended to generate more heat than light. This can be accounted for by the fact that over and above being scholarly, the debate was also, fundamentally about the future of South Africa. As a result, the opposing groupings considered one another as hindrances to achieve freedom and democracy for the oppressed black majority.

The two positions were not only ideological, but were also concerned with strategy and tactics. Workers, due to their superior numerical advantage, were at the centre of the workerist/populist debate. What role was South African labour to play in order to collapse the unjust oppressive system, and how must they be organised and how such organisations should be structured? At the geographic level, the aforementioned debate was also concerned with identifying spaces of power. For the purpose here, the geographic angle is an area of focus and interrogation. This approach relates also, to how workers actions were scaled beyond their spaces of power sociological and geographical imaginations.

#### **3.4.1.1.1 Populists**

As the participants in the aforementioned debate, the populists argued that due to the undeniable fact that Africans were oppressed both in the workplace and broader society then the most plausible strategy was for trade unions to be involved in the national struggle. Populists were of the view that workers' struggle in factories and townships were indivisible (Buhlungu, 2010: 23; Southhall & Webster, 2010: 136). Of fundamental concern to the populists was the fact that this oppression was racially motivated and thus workplace freedom without full citizenship rights was inadequate. Therefore, populists were in favour of a mobilisation strategy that went beyond the shopfloor and encouraged participation in broad struggles around housing and education, as well as the struggle for national liberation. Further, alliance formations that included other groupings were viewed as important in order to achieve full emancipation of African people (Buhlungu, 2010a: 23; Southhall & Webster, 2010:



137). This position found favour with general/community unions in particular. For populists, South Africa is unique due to colonialism of a special type (CST) (see Everatt, 1992; Lambert, 1988).

Already outlined above in relations to SACTU, CST is only reiterated here in order to theoretically ground the worldview of those who believed in mass mobilisation. Related to this, Magubane writes the following:

South Africa ... is a capitalist social formation. However, it differs from other such formations in that it owes its existence not only to the full development of capitalism but also to the denial of the majority of the population – the black masses – of the most basic bourgeois freedoms, such as the right to own property, to sell one's labour freely, to organi[s]e trade unions and to vote. The South African state came into existence on the basis of conquest and national oppression, and it survives by virtue of that oppression (Magubane, 1989: 74).

The above assertion by Magubane (1989) is an attempt to advance the convictions of the populists in order to explain the relationship between class and nationalism and ultimately the struggle for socialism (Lambert, 1988: 47; Bryne, 2012: 17-8). The South African state was fundamentally imperialist/colonialist built on racist ideologies. Consequently, the system required a strategic and tactical approach that combined political and economic forms of struggles (Harmel & Bernstein cited in Lambert, 1988: 63-4; Pillay, 2008: 8, 11; Magubane, 1989: 72, 74; Everatt, 1992: 35). The populist/workerist debate shaped both the South African labour movement and popular mass movements. The core of the debate lends itself to broader questions around strategy, tactics and politics (Pillay, 2008: 8, Bryne, 2012: 41).

For populists, it was important for worker organisations such as trade unions to align with the nationalist agenda. The equation was simple and straightforward – by fighting against racial domination, workers were automatically fighting capitalism. This is because capitalism was inextricably linked to apartheid South Africa. For those leaning heavily towards this position, the formation of the United Democratic Movement (UDF) in 1983 underscored the charge against apartheid and its related class structure (Pillay, 2008:8, 11; Bryne, 2012: 38; Seeking, 1992: 93-5; Adler & Webster, 1995: 81; Baskin, 1991: 28-9; Siedman, 1994: 228-9).

The formation of UDF created the necessary space for community unions to align with township civic organisations as worker's factory demands could not be divorced from township problems. Unsurprisingly, MTS is informed by a similar approach (Baskin, 1991: 28-9; Siedman, 1994: 227-237; Pillay, 2008: 8; Magubane, 1989: 92). Magubane (1989: 92) succinctly explains the state-capital alliance that had to be dismantled at both ends:

... [T]he state was revealed to the oppressed more and more as an engine of class despotism ... the police attacking black workers [makes clear] the purely repressive character of the state power in the service of capital ...

Without doubt, the populists believed the aforementioned argument as compelling reasons to advance the race assault to be followed by class demands at the later stage. Contrary to the populists, class struggle was of immediate concern to the workerists grouping. South Africa, a racist society, was also a capitalist society and at the heart of every capitalist system, the class question arises. This is the starting point of the workerists' class privileging approach.

#### **3.4.1.1.2 Workerists**

In a direct opposition to the populists, workerists argued (with the benefits of hindsight after the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was brutalised by the state in the 60s) that the position of the populists was misguided and dangerous for the emerging unions (Southall & Webster, 2010: 136; Buhlungu, 2010a: 22). The workerists, as this group came to be known, preferred prioritising the fight against class exploitation first. The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) under the leadership of Joe Foster was the most vociferous protagonist from this camp (Plaut, 1992: 395). This group believed that, in order to achieve liberation, the class system had to be first abolished thereby challenge the apartheid regime in an incremental way (Buhlungu, 2010a: 22). For workerists, it was important for unions to focus on shopfloor bread and butter issues. With benefits of hindsight, the post-1973 unions consciously and strategically eschewed any political involvement (See Baskin, 1991, Ulrich, 2007; Adler & Webster, 2000, Byrne, 2012; Friedman, 1987).

While aware of the debates around the various strands of workerism, for purposes of the argument pursued here, those debates are of little relevance, (see Byrne, 2012; Byrne, Ulrich & Van der Walt, 2017; Ulrich, 2007; Pillay, 2008).

To be sure, workerists are simply presented here as a homogeneous block grouping that adopted different strategies and tactics to those of populists. One such strategy and tactic was centred on the notion of worker control. Worker control is a strategy that sought to spatially (absolute space) embed the nascent labour movement on the factory floor. Workers were given primacy as the backbone of the emerging unions – thus the need to have workers directly control the unions (Ulrich, 2007: 1; Buhlungu, 2004: 134; Friedman, 1987: 98-9; Baskin, 1991: 21-2; Ncube, 1985: 122; Barchiesi & Kenny, 2008; Lacom, 1986: 186; Adler & Webster, 1995: 79; Von Holdt, 1987: 94; Byrne, 2012: 28-9). This position found favour with unions belonging to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) formed in April 1979 at Hammanskraal. FOSATU brought together some 20 000 workers' organisations in twelve unions. It was a tight federation with centralised decision and policymaking powers. FOSATU successfully pioneered the principle of direct worker control. Furthermore, it was informed by the following: non-racialism, strong shopfloor organisation, strong shop-steward structures, and independent from political organisations (Baskin, 1991: 26; Ulrich, 2007: 1,242; Ncube, 1985: 118; Friedman, 2011: 14; Friedman, 1987: 184; Adler & Webster, 1995: 80; Maree, 1985: 293). The abovementioned characteristics were deliberate strategies and tactics adopted to render the union head office peripheral to the labour movement. Adler and Webster (1995: 79) explain:

The budding movement focused their organi[s]ational efforts in the workplace to develop decentralised structures that could survive when state repression threw the head office into disarray. The strategy dependent on the development of a cadre of shop stewards integrally linked into the constitution and decision-making structure of the unions. Shop stewards were directly elected by shop floor workers, usually through a secret ballot, and were directly accountable to their constituents. They operated on the basis of strict mandates from the membership and were subject to recall.

Spatially, the FOSATU unions were located in the workplace as a key space from which to scale their demands, conceptualised as a resonant place (see Chapters 6

and 7). This approach underlined an understanding that class *was the nucleus around which power operates*. Unions should guard against being used as extensions of political parties. As such, any analysis of the South African situation had to be viewed in class terms. For the populists however, CST was the rallying call. This was in contrast to the workerist positions already mentioned above, that which developed an understanding of the South African society grounded in class analysis (Ulrich, 2007: 1-2; Byrne, 2012: 137; Byrne, et al. 2017: 261; Naidoo, 2016: 52). This approach was therefore at variance with SACP inspired CST, a two stage theory approach.

The workerists' rejection of the two-stage theory was derived from a viewpoint that posits South Africa as class society, therefore requiring class solutions. Accordingly, workerists argued that racism, just like sexism, was the major political and ideological instrument used for the development of the South African capitalism. Workers needed to be aware of the dangers of falling into petty political agendas of those who will continue to mistreat them post liberation. Class was therefore the solution for both forms of oppression, including gender and race. All that was needed was to unify the working class irrespective of race or gender and then mount the assault against capital. The wish was simply to achieve just and fair social order controlled by workers where wealth was democratically produced and equally shared. Workerist's main thrust was therefore anti-nationalist, anti-apartheid and anti-capitalism in its approach to national liberation of the black masses (Von Holdt, 1987: 97; Byrne, 2012: 152-3; Byrne, et al. 2017: 259, 63).

The class-based approach was buttressed by a strategy that combined radical vision with reform, a radical reform (Adler & Webster, 2000). Radical reform allowed the labour movement to use its shopfloor power base to incrementally win concessions and be tactically flexible as well – free floating pragmatism or what the thesis frame as spatial praxis (Adler & Webster, 1995: 80; Adler & Webster, 2000: 2; Byrne, 2012: 149).

More recently also, in an attempt to reposition the workerist's, Byrne et al. (2017: 259) point out that:

FOSATU workerism was not against the nationalist goal of non-racial, majority rule in an undivided South Africa but it saw this goal as *inadequate* (emphasis in original) because it failed to ensure a new

society in which workers controlled not just their own but also 'the production and distribution of wealth' and were centrally involved in 'decision making on the affairs of South Africa'.

Byrne et al. (2017: 263) avers that workerism was not economic nor sectional as its opponents suggested. On the contrary, workerists were ready to participate in community struggles that sought to establish a just and fair society. The only difference was that unlike SACTU, FOSATU engaged the political problems affecting South Africa while rejecting the nationalist and communist tutelage. Its engagement with community politics was based on an approach that eschewed undemocratic multiclass popular fronts. Therefore, the fight against apartheid and workplace exploitation was to be bottom-up and controlled from below. However, it remains unclear how working class movement would relate to a new African nationalist power bloc in government. According to Byrne et al., some of the workerist weaknesses were internal. Tensions between the two discernible strands, social democratic and quasi-syndicalist, remained unresolved (Byrne, 2017: 268).

The antagonistic relations between populists and workerists dominated much South African landscape for a fair part of the 80s (see for example, Plaut, 1987, Von Holdt, 1987, Friedman, 1987; Ritchken, 1987). The workerists' eschewal of political involvement did not sit well with those who sought to overthrow the apartheid state with the assistance of workers. For ordinary workers however, life in apartheid South Africa was experienced in terms of racial oppression. Over and above the organisational form and mobilising strategies and tactics, the aforementioned debate penetrated another aspect of the labour movement, this came to be known as the registration debate.

### **3.4.2 To register or not register**

In essence, the registration debacle is intrinsically linked to the populist/workerist debate. It has much to do with the making of the South African working class and how workers perceived their relations with the apartheid state (see Chapter 2). As a power block, the post 1973 trade unions could no longer be ignored by both employers and the apartheid state. As a result, the government, following the recommendation of the Wiehahn commission, first released in 1979, sought to legally recognise and regulate African unions. According to Forrest (2011: 43), the commission's reforms presented

a bridge of micro-political rights for African unions, catapulting in the process, migrant workers from a condition of profound vulnerability to one of relative security. Additionally, the recognition allowed African workers to join unions without fear of state violence. The reform sought to move from the adversarial and informal relations between African labour, state and employers by modernising labour relations in South Africa (Forrest, 2011: 42; South African Labour Bulletin (SALB), 1987: 138).

However, the reforms proposed by the Wiehahn commission were not positively received by all those concerned. Because of this, labour activists, politicians, and lawyers alike engaged in a debate that sought to distil exactly what registration and non-registration would mean for the black unions in South Africa. On the one side, some unions were opposed to registration and there were those in favour on the other side. The former argued that because the new reforms excluded certain groups of workers from joining unions, most notably, migrants, therefore the apartheid state was accused of seeking to divide the labour movement, not only on the basis of geography but also race. Furthermore, registration was nothing more than a co-option strategy by the racist state (Theron, 2016: 232; Forrest, 2011: 44-5; Lewis, 1987: 171). To this end, the Western Province General Workers' Unions (WPGWU) pointed out that the right of workers to join unions of their choice as well as to retain control of their organisations was non-negotiable.

These principles represented the position of all progressive formations and could not be ceded to the apartheid state:

*Our objections against the violation of workers' control of the union have taken second place to the storm raised surrounding the prohibition of contract worker membership of the unions. In other words, whereas we have stated emphatically that we will not register if contract workers may not join our unions, we have not stated that we will not register if the state insists upon removing control of the unions from the hands of the workers. And yet one is no less serious than the other; we hold the principle of worker control no less sacred than we do the principle of freedom of association (WPGWU, 1987: 179, original emphasis).*

Registration would turn the worker-controlled unions into bureaucratic organisations (Forrest, 2011: 44). It was on this basis, and other factors labelled 'the carrot and the stick' that influenced the decision of unions such as WPGWU not to register. The dangling carrot was meant to woo the unions into registration. Unions stood to enjoy the security of binding agreement with management. Stop order facilities and the right to offer training programmes to their members were also some of the benefits associated with registration. For radical, mostly Cape unions such as African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU), South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), Motor Assembly and Component Workers' Union of South Africa (MACWUSA), there were no tangible benefits to registration (Forrest, 2011: 4).

These unions, referred to as 'boycotters' encouraged the whole labour movement to boycott the attempt by the apartheid state to annihilate their independence. According to the 'boycotters', shopfloor power, and the weapon of strike should force recognition on employers (Fine, de Clercq, Innes, 1987: 201; Lewis, 1987: 171; Forrest, 2011: 45). Unlike the aforementioned unions, most FOSATU unions took advantage of the opened legal space to advance the interests of their members. The National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers (NUMARWOSA) was the first affiliate to register under the Wiehahan reforms (Forrest, 2011: 44).

For FOSATU and its affiliates, registration was a tactical strategy that allowed unions to incrementally promote their interests. Fine et al. (1987: 203) demonstrates how FOSATU affiliates joint in-plant committees and in time transformed them into democratic shop steward committees. These were used to consolidate the union's power on the shopfloor. At a strategic level, FOSATU unions relied on tactical flexibility to manoeuvre and incrementally build the trade unions. The position of the 'boycotters' was misguided owing to the fact, as Fine et al. puts it, that their argument was firstly buttressed by an old shibboleth for oppositional movements in South Africa – that illegality is more radical. Secondly, even while operating within a repressive environment, the unions were allowed some measure of protection because the reforms meant that the state could not brutalise legally registered unions. In addition, employers could not deny unions access to workplaces and other related facilities. Thirdly, they argued that unions must be political vehicles; therefore, the only one correct response to the questions of registration is that of boycott.

This was a populist view that posits the close relations between politics and economics. Narrow economic trade union issues of wages and working conditions should not take precedence over pass laws, influx control and so on (Fine et al. 1987: 205). In the final analysis, however the debate was more about ideological differences if anything else. Fine et al. (1987: 206) took issue with this; strongly arguing that the 'boycotter' therefore existed simply as:

One tendency [that] reflecte[d] the view of those who will try to find any excuse to channel the workers' struggles to their own ends. They do not want the unions – that is, the workers' own organisations – to take up issues pertaining to the state, for they wish to reserve this task for hands other than those of workers. According to them, workers are only useful as a kind of battering ram for a movement they themselves seek to lead ...

They recognise however, that there was a section within the boycotters that were against registration out of genuine concern for the black labour movement. The practical and theoretical issues that the South African labour movement had to deal with were a reflection of the spatial particularities of South Africa (see Chapter 2). There is no doubt therefore, that the registration debate was an extension of the populist/workerists debate and at some point, the two positions had to be reconciled. The aforementioned positions were consolidated into the formation of COSATU in 1985.

### **3.4.3 Formation of COSATU**

The 70s presented an opportunity like never before for black workers. Organised into various unions and having forced both the state, employers and the established white labour movement into a defensive mode. Black workers quickly recognised the value of power in unity. In order to defend the gains made, the emergent labour movement was compelled to mount a united front that can effectively challenge the state, capital and white labour alliance. It is this progressive thinking that led workerist and populist groupings to merge into one strategic compromise in 1985 – Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The federation became a critical vehicle through which to channel black aspirations and anger. For this reason, COSATU played a critical part in the reconstruction process of South Africa. That is to say, unlike other



labour movements elsewhere in the world, the making of the South African working class produced a unique form of labour organisation and expression (Theron, 2016: 341).

However, the road to unity in search of a 'super federation' was fractious and uncertain. Largely, this reflected the South African spatial particularities. In a similar vein, the South African context influenced COSATU both ideologically and organisationally (Southall, 1995: 75-81). According to MacShane, Plaut and Ward (1984: 19), COSATU formation was a hard toil punctuated by fierce debates. These revolved around the character and role of trade unionism, the relationship of the black underclass to capitalism and the apartheid state, and in particular, important and difficult strategies and tactical decisions to be taken with regards the role of whites in the labour movement, the use of labour law, whether or not to register and join the employer dominated industrial councils.

The hurdle to unity was not only linked to the question of strategy, tactics and ideology (as exemplified by the workerist/populist divide) but that there was the third dimension as well – that of race (Southall, 1995: 75-80). The South African spatiality was such that the trade union movement had to formulate and grapple not only with the question of class conflict but also race relations. The competing urgency of these two positions was reflected in the three largest union groupings that were involved in unity talks. These were the industrial unions under FOSATU, the two general unions from the UDF and Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU), of which the latter was heavily influenced by the traditions of the Black Consciousness (BC) movement.

In whose image should the new federation be modelled on was the question that hindered unity. Geographically, the unions wrangled over which social space (factory floor or the township) was most conducive and suited to wage the struggle against worker exploitation and racial oppression. Needless to say, the political question proved difficult to resolve; this was because other unions prioritised racial oppression and black leadership within the labour movement as opposed to class relations (see Southall, 1995, Webster, 1988, MacShane et al. 1984, Freidman, 1987). The fault-lines proved near impossible to bridge, particularly between those unions advocating non-racialism (such as those under FOSATU and UDF) and those espousing multi-racialism (the BC leaning groupings).

To this end, FOSATU and other general unions merged to form COSATU whilst AZACTU merged with fellow BC informed Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) to form the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) in 1986. As a federation COSATU, through marrying together two traditions of workerists (industrial unions) and populists (general/community unions), came to be more dominated by the populists. Consequently, the aforesaid federation adopted tactics that reflected the latter's position. While not neglecting shop-floor mobilisation, COSATU espoused greater affinity with the national democratic movement. Reflecting on his involvement in the labour movement as the first general secretary of COSATU, Jay Naidoo (2017: 83) has outlined the purpose and objectives of COSATU by saying:

Our primary focus was on the shop floor, but we also understood that our movement could not stop there, that we had to travel further, to the gates of parliament. We knew we could not deliver dignity without delivering political change first, because the country's political system was ultimately the main source of every social problem in South Africa. To end the oppression our workers lived under, we had to end apartheid first.

It is clear from the above quotation that the federation came to be dominated by populists, despite asserting that the federation's *primary focus* was on the factory floor. This declaration is betrayed by the inherent need to end apartheid first as the chief source of all forms of oppression. This approach concretised the social movement unionism that came into being as a vehicle through which to challenge apartheid spatiality (see Webster, 1988; Lambert & Webster, 1988). Clearly, COSATU's affinity with the populist position was a reflection of the South African spatial configuration – the making of the South African working class. One labour activist however, seemed to suggest COSATU's affiliation with populist posture fundamentally crippled the federation from its inception. Whilst the organisation was in euphoria, declaring a 'giant' had arisen, Theron (2016: 301) notes that critical aspects of worker organisation proper were neglected in the process.

#### **3.4.4 Social Movement Unionism**

According to Webster (1988: 194-5) social movement unionism comes about as a result of a recognition that labour is not a *commodity to be bargained over* but that

labour is both a *social and a political force*. This point is further elaborated and vividly captured by Sitas' argument that:

It is wrong to suppose that trade unions equal economics whereas the community equals politics. Firstly, there is much in community mobilisation that is economics (e.g. rents, bus fares, prices etc) and not qualitatively different from wage struggles. Secondly, there is much that is *assumed* to be political because it confronts state institutions regulating township life (again, rents, buses, infrastructural issues, etc) (Sitas, 1985: 399 italics in original).

This kind of unionism is peculiar to specific places, with authoritarian regimes exemplified by apartheid South Africa, Brazil and the Philippines (see Webster, 1988; Lambert & Webster, 1988; Hirschsohn, 2007; Seidman, 1994; Scipes, 1992). The authoritarian industrial strategy adopted by the abovementioned countries gave rise to a ubiquitous form of oppression (both in the workplace and community). Thus, working class communities have had to package their demands as citizenship rights, defined in both political and economic terms (see Chapter 6) (Seidman, 1994: 3, 17).

It is perhaps worth noting that mobilising for full citizenship rights requires (at the geographic level) mobilising both the factory floor and the community; that is to say, an organisation in MTS's mould (see Chapter 6). The state-capital alliance such as the one that operated under apartheid South Africa required a strategy that sought to challenge state power at both ends. Through domination and oppressive laws, the South Africa state controlled the supply of black labour and governed where black South Africans had to live and work (absolute, relative and relational spaces). In the workplace, capital then relied on these very laws to render workers rightless and exploitable. Arguably, the state-capital alliance moulded the South African blacks into a homogeneous grouping – the oppressed people. Because of this, the multiclass alliance that is SMU, almost always found resonance with black South Africans in race if not in class terms.

Consequently, deploying workers as foot soldiers, COSATU was able to agitate for participatory democracy, egalitarianism, societal transformation, worker rights and dignity (see Buhlungu, 2010a; Seidman, 1994; Hirschsohn, 2007; Sitas, 1985; Fine, 1992; Wood, 2002; Dibben, Wood, & Mellah, 2012; Webster, 1988). The

aforementioned context and consequently COSATU's achievements against state oppression requires that I highlight key characteristics of SMU. This is important because by clearly delineating SMU we will simultaneously explore differences with orthodox unionism. Lambert and Webster (1988: 20-21) discern three types of unionism, namely orthodox, populist and political or social movement unionism.

Orthodox unionism [refers to] a form of trade unionism which concentrates almost exclusively on workplace issues; fails to link production issues to wider political issues; and finally encourages its members to become politically involved without necessarily engaging itself in the wider political arena, believing that this is best left to other organisations more suited to the task (Lambert & Webster, 1988: 20).

Lambert and Webster (1988: 20-1) acknowledge the fact that the political content of orthodox unionism differs but that this kind of unionism pivots around institutionalising industrial relations conflict and reinforces divisions between economic and political form of struggle. Unlike orthodox unionism:

[For] populist unionism ... trade unionism and struggles in the factory are downplayed. [This type of unionism] neglects struggles over wages, supervision, managerial controls of the workplace and job evaluation. It places in its stead a political engagement that only serves to dissipate shop floor struggles (Lambert & Webster, 1988: 21).

In contrast to the two approaches discussed above, Lambert and Webster (1988: 21) characterise social movement unionism:

... [as a union strategy that] link[s] production to wider political issues. It is a form of union organisation that facilitates an active engagement in factory-based, production politics *and* in community and state power issues. It engages in alliances in order to establish relationships with political organisation on a systematic basis (original emphasis).

Within the labour literature, there exist points of convergence and divergence around the concept of social movement unionism. As an ideal type, the concept lacks consistency (see Lier & Stokke, 2006; Von Holdt, 2002; Siedman, 2011; Scipes 1992). An argument can be made that, the differences can be accounted for by contextual particularities and spatial strategies. Based on a three pronged scaler strategy

(townships, schools and factory floor), the South African labour movement was able to achieve democracy by deploying SMU inspired tactics. However, post-Apartheid South Africa has proved challenging to COSATU in maintaining its image as an exemplar of SMU. Following the adoption of neo-liberal policies by the ruling ANC, the ability of COSATU to remain a militant SMU has recently come under sharp focus. However, as the findings chapter will show, MTS might offer a glimmer of hope in rescussitating SMU. Not only is MTS concerned with worker education, but is also involved directly in elections of local councillors (see Dibben et al. 2012; Lier & Stokke, 2006; Wood, 2002). I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

### **3.5 Summary**

The study has adopted a three-pronged theoretical approach, namely, sociology of space; geography of labour and labour geography. These three theoretical frames explain the existence and the centrality of the train to workers' daily experience and also allows the study to probe for labour mobilising opportunities and constraints (see Chapters 6 and 7). In addition, the theoretical framework adopted permits an interchangeable usage of the terms, place, space, and geography. This is advantageous in that the thesis is able to historically embed the South African labour; recognise opportunities and limitations, while at the same time demonstrating the extent to which workers are active agents capable to effect changes against the current neoliberal spatial configurations. For historical and contextual reasons, this chapter has drawn insights from geographers such as Harvey and Soja. This was necessitated by the need to show how our understanding of the South African working class cannot only be limited to the workplace. The work of the abovementioned authors is illuminating because it spatially interrogates the relationship between social action and social structure. Harvey's uses of the concepts sociological and geographical imaginations as well as Soja's socio-spatial dialectic are instructive in this regard.

This is important because the kind of labour movement to emerge in South Africa was not only shaped and influenced by class relations but reflected a racial dimension as well. Moreover, adopting Harvey's matrix of spaces is useful when exploring ways in which workers actions can be theorised. Further, this approach allows for a conceptualisation of opportunities with a view to contribute towards labour revival

theme that has come to occupy labour scholarship globally. The three-pronged approach provides an explanation and interrogation of workers actions at three levels, absolute; relative and relational. The trilogy is insightful in linking the personal and the collective to its context. For this reason, MTS is successfully grounded not only as a phenomenon occurring in Pretoria, but also a South African one, in general. The weakness inherent in this literature is its failure to conceptualise workers as active agents who consciously and purposefully engages in certain social actions beneficial to itself. This weakness, in the work of Harvey in particular is addressed by reference to labour geography. Labour geography sharpens our understanding of how workers try to navigate the rupture of workplaces and the fracture of solidarities. Labour geography is central to enriching our understanding of workers and their actions, that is to say agency. Whilst the Marxist geographers privilege capital's spatial fixes, for labour geography, workers are not conceived of as passive instruments of production. Workers, much like capital have a vested interest in how economic landscapes are produced. To this end, workers deliberately encourage the production of landscapes in a particular way whilst resisting others.

This labour centred-approach is instrumental to our understanding of MTS and its related activities. Tied to this interpretation of labour and its actions, labour geography allows for an analysis that theoretical embed MTS and its chosen site of operations. This is ventilated by reference to the notion of scale. This concept permits the thesis to map workers' actions and account for the need to upscale their organisations. I use the metaphors of scale as a ladder and concentric circles to demonstrate the various geographic stages at which workers can organise. The areal nature of the aforementioned metaphors has presented some conceptual limitations. These were addressed by reference to scale as a network, illustrated by tree roots and earthworm burrows. The train, more than just a transportation system, is a strategic location that seeks to articulate worker agency as an embodiment of its spatial context.

Anderson refers to this as a resonant place. Adopting a position that seem to turn Harvey's argument on its head, Herod projects such actions as labour's spatial fix. Importantly, MTS and its use of the train are considered as scaler actions. In addition to the above, the chapter also paid attention to the history of the formation of South African labour movements. Historically, the South African literature on trade unions was concerned with outlining the strategies adopted by the budding labour movement

in its quest to both win workplace rights and defeat the apartheid state with a view of achieving universal citizenship rights. For purposes of this thesis, the gaps identified in the literature surveyed are filtered through geographic/spatial lenses. This means that where discussions were framed by reference to place and geography, this study expands on such place/geographic informed analysis by adding the 'space' dimension. This allows for a theoretically enriching interpretation of workers actions and inactions. Starting with in ICU 1919 to the formation of COSATU in 1985, the chapter presents the story of the South African labour movement in its space-time dimension. Consequently, successes and failures are read as nothing more than spatial reflections of a particular time period, in light of the workerists/populists debate.

The chapter concludes by considering SMU and how it has become weakened in post-apartheid South Africa. The process of work restructuring has, without doubt, rendered some of the erstwhile strategies ineffective thus putting the labour movement on the back-foot. A number of studies have addressed this problem with a particular focus on why the unions are ineffective while also proposing new strategies to resuscitate the labour movement to its former glory. My current focus is on locating the labour movement within its historical processes in order to illuminate some of the most important spaces carved out by the labour movement during apartheid years with a view to demonstrate the organisational potential inherent in some of those spaces. This chapter is an attempt to highlight, through spatial lenses, constraints and opportunities explored by the labour organisations starting with ICU all the way to 1973 and beyond. Some of the notable debates that came to dominate the labour movement around this period (populist/workerist and the registration debate), are presented in the thesis as spatially informed tactics and strategies rooted in the making of the South African working class.

Whilst the study accepts and acknowledges workers' ability to construct geographies conducive to their social positions, the thesis is however cautious of how such stories are represented. Worker agency cannot be understood outside power relations. To this end, there is a need to sociologically ground such actions in their social milieu. Taking cue from the theoretical framework, the next chapter discusses the methodologies and methods of data collections. The chapter takes care to link the theoretical underpinnings of this study to its tools of data collection.

## Chapter 4

### Ethnography: Methods and Methodology

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#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter emanates from, and is also in conversation with the previous three chapters. Chapter 3 outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this study and therefore constitutes the mainstay of this thesis. To restate, the chapter sought to show how the concept of space relates to and the manner in which it has shaped what is discussed in Chapter 2 as the 'making of the South African working class'. As such, space is presented as an active agent, heavily involved in how workers relate to, understand and marshal their identities in relation to capital, the state and communities from which they come from through the socio-spatial dialectic, sociological and geographic imaginations. This approach, calls forth specific tools of data collection. The kinds that will situate not only workers, but their actions as a response to and an attempt to shape space and how it is experienced (see Chapter 2, 3 and 5). The suitability of ethnography to this exercise is therefore indisputable. With the above in mind, this thesis is an ethnographic study aimed at detailing individual and collective identity formation on the Mamelodi trains. This section outlines the methodological and data collection methods informing this study. In the first instance, the choice and use of ethnography will be justified. Linked to this, a detailed description of the extended case method will follow. Subsequently, as per the rules and regulations of the University of Pretoria, a reflection upon ethical dilemmas as they relate to ethnography and this study in particular will be identified.

#### 4.2 Research Design: An Ethnographic Approach

To understand workers in South Africa is arguably dependent on an approach that appreciates the importance of space. This can be linked to the fact that apartheid was not only a racial system but also a system that reorganised the geographical patterns of this country. To this end, a methodological approach that privileges explicating links between workers' struggle and the geographical configurations of this country is best suited for this study.



According to Brewer (2000: 57), research design is the strategic plan of the project that sets out the broader structure of the research. Thus, the design for this research study takes the form of an ethnographic case study with a view of understanding the identified worker's activities as playing out on the trains. This is because, as Van Maanen (1995: 3) explains, "ethnography is a storytelling institution". It carries unparalleled status and legitimacy based on its ability to get closer and live among those studied. The ethnographer has the added advantage to write about those studied *in situ*. Equally important and as it relates to this study, ethnography provides an opportunity not only to observe MTS members and their activities, but also to be immersed in their space, to appreciate the feel, setting and emotions it expresses (Hammersely & Atkinson, 1983: 1). This means, as a basis of departure that:

Instead of collecting data from the informants about what ... [it means to be a member of MTS and occupy the comrades' coach] ... [one begins to diarise] ... accounts of what ... [MTS as an organisation and its members] actually ... [do] with accounts of real events, struggles, and dramas that ... [take] place over space and time (Burawoy 1998: 5)

Despite its virtues, ethnography, much like any other method of social research has its own shortcomings. These can be located broadly in the debates around quantitative and qualitative research approaches on the one hand and or within what Hammersely and Atkinson (1983: 14) refer to as the 'politics of ethnography'. It is generally accepted that the world of academia has moved beyond this fruitless and futile exercise of trying to convince each other about the existence of a better model of science. For this reason, it is unnecessary to delve into such outdated debate. For detailed analysis of these see for example, Hammersely and Atkinson, 1983 and Maanen, 1988. The guiding principle here is simply premised on the extent to which a particular method adequately addresses the problem identified as opposed to delineating its superiority in relation to others. For this reason, the thesis embraces the extended case method and its related techniques of empirical investigation, namely interviews and participant observations (Burawoy, 2009: 23). Notwithstanding its weakness, the strengths offer more for our current endeavour than the choice being about that it is better than other available methods.

The thesis is chiefly concerned with studying and elucidating, the practices, ways of behaviours, language and the culture of MTS as a workers organisation. Culture, for purposes of this study is approached as an amorphous term, and thus will be given shape and form by the findings of this study as they relate to the phenomena under investigation (see Chapters 6 and 7). It is this kind of task that ethnography is generally well suited to execute. It is a research approach aimed at developing a complex and detailed descriptions of the practices of a given group (Creswell, 2013: 91-2). In the next section, I link these to the central pillars of the extended case method as a method of research/execution.

#### **4.2.1 Extended Case Method**

The choice of research methods in this study is premised on the argument that Harvey's matrix of spaces are not only analytical tools as currently deployed in this research endeavour but that are also methodological in nature (Harvey, 2006: 126). This means, as will be discussed below, that the researcher entered the field guided by a particular theoretical framework (see Chapter 3). According to Creswell (2013: 92) and Burawoy (1998: 54), theory guides the ethnographers' interventions. It helps in focusing attention during the research process. Given the need to explore and understand train coaches as sites of worker mobilisation, an ethnographic approach is best suited to collect the relevant data, but that such data cannot be collected *tubular rasa*. As will be shown below, comrades coach, when approached as a relative space away from the workplace and other coaches on the train, give rise to particular relational space/s, thus needs to be located within a wider field of social relations – absolute and relative space (see Chapter 3) (Burawoy, 2009: 25). It is on this basis that participant observations were employed as data collection methods.

The abovementioned method serves a number of important purposes in relation to the research question central to this study. Firstly, to the extent that this is arguably a green area, the chosen data gathering tools are best suited to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the role trains play in the life of South African workers travelling on the Tshwane- Mamelodi rail corridor. Put differently, the methods will explicate the role of comrade coaches in maintaining collective worker identity beyond the workplace (Creswell, 2013: 94). Secondly, collecting data in this way permitted a rare opportunity in terms of understating why these workers lay claim to that particular

space and its symbolic meaning/s. Finally, the interest of this study, as embodied by the research question, can arguably be located at the relational space-time of Harvey's matrix. Thus calling for a more qualitative methods approach:

The decision to use one or other conception certainly depends on the nature of the phenomena under investigation. The absolute conception may be perfectly adequate for issues of property boundaries and border determinations but it helps not a whit with the question of what is Tiananman Square, Ground Zero or the Basilica Sacre Coure (Harvey, 2006: 126).

Furthermore, Harvey makes clear the fact that:

... [W]e cannot understand the shifting terrain upon which political subjectivities are formed and political actions occur without thinking about what happens in relational terms (2006: 129).

It is therefore, on the basis of the abovementioned argument that the more positivist informed data gathering methods such as surveys comes to a fail. This is however, not to suggest qualitative methods are more superior to quantitative methods, but merely that the current phenomena under study, arguably, privileges the former. Both methods suffer from inbuilt limitations (see Burawoy, 2009: 63 for a condensed discussion of these). Burawoy (2009: 36), with reference to his Zambianization study convincingly points out that positivist informed methods suffer from context effects in the form of: interview effects, respondent effect, field effect and situation effect. On the one hand, the extended case method suffers from its own weakness – power effects embodied in domination, silencing, objectification and normalising (Burawoy, 2009: 56). On the other hand, domination works both ways, here the social scientist can dominate and at times be dominated by the subjects of the study.

Burawoy points out entry into the field as the main phase of power struggle between the intrusive outsider and the resisting insider. This researcher was exposed first hand to domination during the process of negotiating entry. It took about one and half years for permission to be granted by the powers that be at MTS during which time there were suggestions that the research might be a “counter revolutionary agent” sent to destroy the organisation from within. In a highly charged political environment in which the newly formed ANC break-away party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) had

just entered the political arena (see Chapter 6), all this was understandable. To this end, I was required to disclose my sources of funding, the amount of monies received and ordered to join the organisation and be a “member in good standing”. Following this, the second aspect of domination unfolded by virtue of my education. My presence on the train coaches was always announced and almost celebrated because as one member of MTS made known one day, educated people were also starting to develop an interest in the organisation:

So comrades don't be surprised to read about MTS in the newspapers because we have comrade Mpho with us in this coach (Observations, 20 Oct 2015).

In this way, my background was viewed in a particular way and nearly instrumentalist in which I would add MTS to academic and popular discourse around workers in South Africa. This view, I suspect, stemmed from two publications that I had to show the organisation's executive committee as “proof” about how genuine I am as a researcher devoted to worker issues. These publications were from my previous Master's degree focusing on taxi drivers and their working conditions. Silencing refers to a situation in which the dominant ideologies are presented as the interests of all involved. To address this shortcoming, Burawoy suggest we look for repressed and new voices to add to ongoing discourses. It can be suggested, that the focus of this study is to bring to the surface the ‘hidden side’ of the South African labour movement. Objectification is the third power dimension of the extended case method:

... that hypostatizing social forces as external and natural, is a inherent danger of this approach (Burawoy, 1998: 59).

For this purpose, this was counterbalanced by the thesis' attempt to project workers as active agents with abilities and power to change their conditions (see Chapter 3, 6 and 7). This is however, grounded in its context to guard against overzealous projection of workers and their agency. The final weakness finds expression in normalising. Burawoy (1998: 60) contends that reconstructing theory is a coercive process. This happens at two levels, on the one level, complex situations are tailored to fit a preconceived theoretical framework. On the other level, theory is tailored the other way round – to fit the case in order to swallow up any anomalies emerging from the research process. Suffice to say that the study attempted to offer new ways of

conceptualising workers, which is theory extension. These inadequacies are however not to suggest an abandonment of science all together. Simply that as researchers we need to reflect upon, openly confront and critically engage flaws inherent in research processes in the way of reflexive science.

Burawoy (2009) refers to the methods of employing interviews and participant observation in order to investigate an empirical phenomenon as the extended case method. This method is premised on the following four extensions: 1) extending the observer to the participant. The observer joins a community/ group to be studied either as merely an observer or participant observer. For this study, I employed the latter. The first extension provides an opportunity for closer proximity, which both allows and encourages entry into the comrades' coach, which meant joining the participants over time and space (Burawoy, 1998: 17, 44-5). This proximity is important for a closer and in-depth interaction with the occupants of this particular space, something interviews cannot adequately cater for. This is the locus of multiple dialogues in which I rely upon the sociological and geographic imaginations to sociologically guide my involvement.

2) Extending observations over space and time. This can be successfully linked to Harvey's notions of relative and relational spaces, as Burawoy argues:

Situations involve relations of [co-presents], providing the conditions for practices that reproduce relations (2009: 47).

By extending over space and time, one hopes to get an understanding (on a relative level) of the comrades' coach as a particular distinct space, located and physically attached to a mode of transport. On a relational level, as the above quote from Burawoy seem to suggests, the space time extension is intrinsically linked to understanding sub-questions A and B, that is, to what extent are train comrade coaches as workers' spaces, engine rooms for workplace militancy and who rides to and from work in these coaches? This is because, the existence of comrade coaches as particular forms of space assumes individualised social situations that give rise to a collective political identity (social process) (Burawoy, 2009: 48). By studying and interacting with the chosen group long enough, a pattern has emerged which is the basis upon which the findings chapters are built (see Chapter 6 and 7).

3) Extending out from process to force. The third extension involves locating social processes at the site of research in relations of mutual determinations within a field of social forces – structuration (Burawoy, 1998: 17, 49-59; 2009: 51). As already implied in the theory section, the phenomena of comrade coaches on the trains can only be understood in relations to the history of this country and its current spatial configuration (Absolute space) (see Chapter 3). This is elucidated by reference to key concepts such sociological and geographic imaginations, socio-spatial dialectic, spatial praxis and resonant place (see Chapter 3). According to Burawoy, theory is an important part of these extensions. As such, labour geographers and geographers of labour's theoretical insights are central to this study. This leads to the fourth and final extension.

4) Extending theory. The envisaged contribution to this latter extension is a matter of academic debate. Below I expand on the actual execution of data collection.

#### **4.2.1.1 Collection and Recording of Data**

This study relied on participant observations as the main method of data collection. This is a process that started formally on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2015 and ran over 13 Months ending January 2017. I simply travelled on the train to and from work. Taken at face value, this would mean 396 days of active research and data collection.

However, as I will explain below, my presence on the train did not always mean I was able to collect meaningful data. Therefore, in essence I spent less than the 396 days of active data collection. This was because at times there were no comrade's activities on the train. Some months, such as December and January, data collection was affected by the shorter length of those months. For example, most companies close for the festive season from December 16 to January 15 the following year. Further, the study was disrupted by rail upgrades from April 2016. This became severe from the month of May 2016. This process complicated data collection as rail upgrades gave rise to train scheduling problems. This resulted, amongst others, in comrades using taxis to travel to work. This also gave rise to overcrowding. Overcrowded coaches make it difficult to conduct normal organisational activities because of the challenges related to order and discipline in the coach. On such days, and this was the hallmark of 2016, only singing is possible. The researcher spent time traveling to and from work with workers on the Mamelodi trains. This was a morning and afternoon exercise that targeted specific trains and a specific train coach – number 3 and or 4,

these are the spaces of interpellations (see Chapter 6 and 7). I carried with a notebook in which I noted all the 'important' events taking place in the coach. This is the first step in the ethnographic process called 'writing down' (Atkinson, 1990: 61). This was done immediately when I arrive at work for the morning observations or when I arrive back home in respect of evening observations. Informal conversations held with comrades on the platform whilst waiting for the train to arrive were important sources of information. These were helpful in clarifying some of the political speak that took place in the coach.

In addition, observations took place during monthly meetings organised at a local primary school, Mahlasedi Masana primary school in Mamelodi East. These meetings were always held on a Sunday from 09am-12:00 midday. The meetings are mostly chaired by the president and/or or the deputy and the general secretary. The meetings afford the various train leadership an opportunity to update the Executive Committee with respect to developments in their respective coach. A rollcall of various trains is taken to account for attendance by train chairpersons, their deputies and treasurer. Train chairpersons or their deputies are expected to provide updates on membership recruitment and the treasurer provides the financial statements in respect of new members' dues and renewals. Due to delays, these meeting, at times, lasted until 14:00pm in the afternoon. Meetings provided a different opportunity and assisted the researcher in identifying important documents such as the founding constitution and how they are understood (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, it is from these documents that I was able to compile a list of most train coach chairpersons and their teams of leaders.

Equally important, I carried a digital recorder. This was done in order to capture what can be referred to as the feel and essence of the comrades' coach. This is data is packaged and contained in a Universal Serial Bus (USB) accompanying this thesis. This method of data collection was only reserved for the singing aspect of comrades' daily activities. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 187) have raised concerns around some of the disadvantages associated with audio-recordings in an ethnographic setting (see also, Fielding, 1993: 162). They make reference to the fact that audio-recording can distort the field by focusing the data collection process only on what can be recorded. Their reservation is applicable to this study, but data collection was not negatively affected as audio-recording was for a specific pattern of behaviour

displayed by comrades – song and dance (see Chapter 7). The observations were supplemented by 6 interviews in order to fill in some gaps in the information collected. These were audio-recorded formal interviews arranged and carried out in bounded settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983: 139). These lasted between 40 minutes to 2 hours long. All formal interviews were transcribed.

#### **4.2.1.1.1 Selection for interviews**

When the study was initially conceived, the plan was to do nonparticipant observations and to interview about 20 participants. The former was changed following the researcher being dominated during the access negotiations phase and over time it became clear that the latter was also no longer necessary. The decision to discard interviews as a key component of the study was influenced by 3 factors.

First, as I reviewed most of the available literature on workers and their movements in South Africa, it became clear that what was happening on the train was not considered a major part of the South African working-class culture. Thus, the phenomenon has remained peripheral in the South African labour scholarship (see Chapter 6). This elevated the ethnographic aspect of the study such that the thesis placed a heavy emphasis on detailing MTS and its activities through active participation than interviews. Second, the challenges that followed the introduction of the new model trains limited access and contact with MTS members (see Chapter 6). These two reasons led to the researcher changing tactics. In line with this, the third reason to use interviews to fill in gaps in respect of the information collected. Interviews were also useful as a means to gauge moods and feelings around new developments in the South African political landscape (see Chapter 6 and 7).

Based on the above, the study made a conscious decision to target particular individuals for interviews. This was based on an assumption that they might possess the required knowledge around certain issues. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 137) point out that obtaining a representative sample is not always a requirement for ethnographic studies. This is especially so, (as in this case) when the primary concern is with eliciting information as opposed to documenting perspectives of discursive practices. Also, Burawoy, (2009: 32-5) details how reflexive science violates the 4R's – reactivity, reliability, replicability and representativeness – of positive sciences. The weakness of this study is the failure to find a female participant among those selected



for interviews. This was compounded by reason number two above than a conscious decision to exclude the female voice. Most of the interviews took place between August and October 2017. Only one interview, – targeting a former leader of MTS – took place in August 2016. Most other former leaders showed little interest in the study or were difficult to track down. All interviews took place in the homes of participants over weekends, except one that was conducted in the parking lot of a local shopping centre. The table below shows the basic biographical data of those interviewed. In terms of political affiliation and workplace union membership, those interviewed reflect the broad church that MTS is. Its membership composition is made up of unionised and un-unionised workers. This is also reflected in the educational sessions held in the coach, of which most are didactic in nature.

In addition, it is MTS's objective to recruit unionised workers into COSATU unions and the alliance broadly (see Chapter 6). The one common denominator among its members is the affiliation to the ANC and SACP. The following key informants were interviewed:

**Table 4.1: Participant demographic data**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Political Affiliation</b>	<b>Workplace Union Affiliation</b>	<b>MTS Membership</b>	<b>MTS leadership role</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>
Comrade Maphila	57	Married	ANC and SACP	Not applicable	Former	None	Local Councillor Mamelodi West ward 28
Comrade Segoa	47	Married	ANC and SACP	NUMSA	Yes	Secretary General	Employed
Comrade Moela	29	Single	ANC	None	Yes	Train Chairperson	Employed
Comrade Mmotong	46	Married	ANC and SACP	SAPWU	Yes	President	Employed
Comrade Mafa	57	Single	ANC	None	Yes	Train Chairperson	Lost job during the research period
Comrade Dinakanyane	31	Single	ANC	None	Yes	Train Chairperson	Employed

Below I outline the data analysis process that guided the 'writing-up' phase of the study.

#### **4.2.1.2 Data Analysis and Representation**

There is no single formula to analysing qualitative data, more so for an ethnographic study. It is an accepted fact that data analysis and interpretations are intrinsically intertwined. For an ethnographic approach, this is a process in which the researcher is personally involved. This stems from the role of participant observation, in which the researcher is actively involved in the meaning making process. This active involvement has therefore heavily influenced the analysis and interpretation process. Importantly, the analysis for this thesis was guided by the four extensions of the extended case method (see Section 4.2.1). The extensions outline a meaning making process grounded in theory. Extending out emanated from a recognition that MTS activities had to be given meaning beyond the train as a locus of organising. After a careful engagement with field notes collected, a pattern emerged providing themes under which the raw was organised and processed

LeCompte and Schensul (1999: 33) acknowledge the fact that ethnographic data analysis is a process that starts in the field. It is not, therefore a deskwork/office activity. Elsewhere, this process is actively encouraged as it helps make the post-field work analysis less cumbersome (Hammersely & Atkinson, 1983: 206). This is called analytic writing and it stems from the recognition that field-notes provide the first step for the researcher to reflect on what is happening, which gives rise to a critical and interpretive approach to such exercises (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001: 361). This was an on-going process grounded in both the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the literature reviewed, in particular those around social movement unionism.

According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999: 2), analysis permits ethnographers to tell a story regarding whatever it is they research. Because the study departed from an established theoretical framework, the collected data was analysed deductively, or what Lofland (1971), cited in Hammersely and Atkinson (1995: 211) calls "observer-identified" analysis. Deductive analysis entails the choice of themes and then the sorting of the data into the themes which the data best fits. The themes of this study were derived largely from participant observations. Each theme was represented by extracts and field notes observations that presented a rich and in-depth description of

the theme. The same analytic approach was applied in respect of recorded songs. These were grouped as per the meanings contained in the lyrics. Hammersely and Atkinson (1995: 210) and LeCompte and Schensul (1999: 46) qualify this approach by recognising that ethnographers work from a conceptual framework. However, Hammersely and Atkinson (1995: 210) caution against pre-judgments which might force the interpretation of the data into preconceived themes. This is an acknowledged weakness of the extended case method called normalising (see Section 4.2.1).

The manner in which the data was analysed also had a bearing on how the collected data is currently represented. Van Maanen notes three representational styles in which ethnographic field work account can be organised. These are: (a) realist tales. This style of textual persuasion is characterised by the almost complete absence of the author from the events and stories presented. This is informed by a desire to present the world as objectively as possible and not have the researcher contaminate the field. (b) Confessional tales, here the researcher's personal experience is deliberately provided a platform. Lastly (c), impressionist tales dramatically present events by selecting and focusing on rare events rather than what usually happens (Van Maanen, 1988: 45-120). Where the findings chapter has made a pretentious affiliation to any of the above, such were necessitated by the need to amplify and drive home a particular point. The thesis does not subscribe to any of the aforementioned styles of presentations. If anything, it can be suggested that the extended case method has some affinity to what is called critical tales. This is informed by the fact that critical tales take into account how ethnographic studies fit into broader political and economic machinations of capitalist societies (Van Maanen, 1988: 128).

In the next section I reflect upon the research project. This reflective exercise can also be read as part of the studies' findings.

### **4.3 Vibrations from the field: Choo-chooo!**

The process of data collection for this study has not been without its fair share of frustrations and discouragement. Over and above taking more than a year locked in negotiations with the national executive committee of MTS over access, I also helplessly observed as MTS was being undone by forces external to the field. These came to constitute the internal and external dynamics that negatively affected data collection.

### **4.3.1 Internal Dynamics**

The data collection processes have revealed the uneven nature of MTS and how it is organised. This internal dynamic affected participant observations greatly. Some of the chairpersons are greatly knowledgeable and some are good singers. These are the basic characteristics needed to keep a specific carriage mobilised and engaged. Those coaches under the leadership of chairpersons with the above traits were most times engaged in lively discussions if not engaged in an emotionally charged song and dance. Such coaches made data collection easy. The downside was in respect of those carriages with charismatic leaders who work closer to Mamelodi. As soon as they disembark along the corridor, more often than not discussions would fizzle out and die before reaching Bosman station in central Pretoria. This was the same for when such leaders were on off days, sick leave or annual leave. These internal dynamics impacted on establishing concrete patterns and consolidating rapport. It is for this reason that I decided not to implement visual ethnography as part of data collection tools. External forces exacerbated this.

### **4.3.2 External Forces**

As a service provider, Metrorail provides poor quality services; local newspapers are replete with stories of torched trains as commuter frustrations boil over due to lack of consistent, reliable services. Partly this is why there is a song about this state entity (see Chapter 6 and 7). Trains are perennially late, and this leads more often to overcrowding. This affects MTS' programme because it is generally not easy to coordinate large numbers of people thus the coach becomes a khetšheng (I discuss khetšheng in Chapter 6). At times, trains are late to arrive, while at other times, train pull into stations and remain there for anything between 40 to 60 minutes.

In such cases, commuters simply disembark to go catch taxis whilst others simply walk. These kind of scheduling problems sometimes occur for lengthy periods ranging from a week to two. This could be due to technical problems or stolen overhead electrical cables as Metrorail would occasionally announce. These disruptions presented challenges to follow ups on interesting developments and resulted in unpredictability. The most seismic of disruptions came in the form train upgrades and the introduction of the new model train in 2016 (see Chapter 6 and 7).

#### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

To the extent that social research almost always involves human subjects mean that the importance of ethical issues cannot be overemphasised. According to Fine (1993), social researchers do not always adhere to ethical and moral principles of social research. In a rather provocatively titled article: *Ten Lies of Ethnography*, Fine (1993: 271, 275-77) shows how social researchers sometimes lie their way through research. Humphreys (1970) presents a well-documented case of deceptive research (Cassell, 1978: 173). For the purposes of this study, issues around informed consent and protecting participant's identity are deemed crucial and were strictly adhered to. The researcher does not envisage, nor were possibilities of any risks resulting from participation in this study observed.

I would, however, like to indicate that all ethical requirements of the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities were adhered to. This is because ethical requirements of the University must be strictly met during the proposal phase of the intended research project and to be followed and thoroughly applied during fieldwork phase following approval. The globally recognised need to protect human subjects against abuse by researchers has prompted the institutionalisation of research ethics. According to Thorne (1980: 284), the institutionalisation of research ethics was originally motivated by the need to protect patients from abuse by medical researchers. Consequently, informed consent, protection, voluntarism and confidentiality became non-negotiable prerequisites for social research (Thorne, 1980: 285-86; Cassell, 1978: 134-37).

The notion of informed consent means:

... [T]he knowing consent of an individual or his (her) legally authorised representative, so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress or other forms of constraints or coercion (Anna et al. 1977 quoted in Thorne, 1980: 285).

Accordingly, researchers are expected to offer a 'fair' explanation relating to the purpose, procedure, risks and benefits of the intended research. 'Fair' explanation requires the researcher to adapt the information to be understandable to participants (The Belmont Report of 1979 quoted in Guide to Research Ethics, 2003: 35). Such an

explanation should take into consideration different abilities, intelligence levels, maturity and language needs (The Belmont Report of 1979 quoted in Guide to Research Ethics, 2003: 35). This is in line with the three dimensions of informed consent: knowledgeability, voluntary participation and competent choice (Thorne, 1980: 286). The former relates to the information to be shared with participants so their able to confidently make well-informed choices to voluntarily partake in research activities i.e. the second and third dimensions (Thorne, 1980: 286). The protection of human subjects is however, not limited to the attainment of informed consent. Concomitantly, researchers must strive to achieve an acceptable level of confidentiality.

Broadly speaking, confidentiality relates to:

.... [T]he principle of respect for autonomy and is taken to mean that identifiable information about individuals collected during the process of research will not be disclosed without permission (BSA, 2004 quoted in Wiles, Crow, Heth & Charles, 2008: 417).

To ensure anonymity of participants' identities, pseudonyms instead of participants' real names were used in this study. However, the researcher felt it was important to keep the familiar reference to the term 'comrades'. This is a term of endearment and friendship. Therefore, to maintain some resemblance to the field and some of its key cultural markers, it was important to make use of the term.

Moreover, the term comrades can be linked to notions of identity politics, so used to distinguish MTS members from the rest of the commuting workers. Furthermore, the data collected for purposes of this research will be used solely for this study and will only be available to the researcher and the supervisor. The above speaks to ethical data management. Ethical data management reference three issues – the ethical and truthful collection of reliable data, the ownership and responsibility of collected data and retaining and sharing collected data with colleagues and the public (Guide to Research Ethics, 2003: 22). Ethical data management guides the way social researchers utilise and presents their findings. Practically, obtaining consent from participants as per the requirements of ethics institutions has always proved difficult in ethnographic studies (Murchison, 2010: 61). This study is no exception. The problem was compounded by the fact that the study's target is a large group of people who

converge in the said place at various stations along the Mamelodi-Pretorial rail corridor. According to Murchison (2010: 79):

One exception to the requirements for obtaining consent comes in the form of public events. When an event is truly open to the public, there is no expectation of privacy ...

In relation to this study, the comrades' activities are generally open to everyone and are conducted on a public transport medium. However, this is not to suggest that participants' permission to subject them to a research study was not sought. The researcher presented the objectives and purpose of the study to the organisation's leadership collective. It was agreed (though this did not always happen) that chairpersons in charge of specific coaches must announce the presence of the researcher to those concerned. Overall, I came to the conclusion that this did not matter because I also was an MTS member in good standing. For purposes of one on one interview however, individual consent forms were provided and thoroughly explained in participants' language of choice given the fact that the target group is mostly Pedi and Pretoria Tswana speaking. Language as a barrier was not an issue, as the researcher speaks both languages fluently.

As already stated, the researcher does not envisage any form of risks that might be emotional, physical, material or otherwise that can be directly linked to partaking in this study. Generally, coming together to sing and discuss issues of concern in a group setting is not considered socially unacceptable in South Africa (Murchison, 2010: 60). Moreover, there is no material or otherwise benefits that will accrue to individual participants as results of participating in this research project.

#### **4.5 Summary**

This chapter was concerned with explaining the methods of data collection and their related methodological underpinnings. Ethnography, as both a process and outcome was explained. In addition, the reasons for this choice were outlined and related to both the research question(s) and the theoretical framework. For data collection purposes, the technique of participant observations and one-on-one interviews were utilised to seek out the required information. This process was buttressed by the extended case method and its virtues. However, as with every research method,



extended case method has its own weakness, and these were outlined in greater detail.

In addition, the chapter discussed the data collection process and its associated analysis. The data was grouped into emerging themes and patterns, these were used to organise the activities of MTS beyond its locus of organising – the train. Lastly, the chapter reflected upon ethical dilemmas. These are contextualised within ethnographic studies and some of the difficulties around certain research practices.

## Chapter 5

# COSATU and the Post-Apartheid Regime

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### 5.1 Introduction

Beginning in 1973 when African trade unions re-emerged following a period of relative labour peace and stability, the South African labour movement became one of the most powerful segments of civil society vis-à-vis, an oppressive and exploitative state-capital alliance (see Chapter 2 and 3). This power was translated into real gains both on the shopfloor and society at large. Starting with the Wiehahn Commission of 1979, the collapse of Apartheid in the early 90s and the adoption of progressive legislative framework such the Labour Relations Act of 1995 (LRA), the South African labour movement truly had a positive impact transforming this country. Amongst others, the key aspect of the LRA was to bring all employees within the private and public sectors into one industrial relations system. The LRA ensured the promotion of collective bargaining and secured organisational rights for workers within the workplace. In addition, it paved the way for the formation of dispute resolution mechanism by establishing a Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA); and clearly spelling out rules around dismissals to be managed by the creation of the Labour Court.

The LRA has since been supplemented by the passage of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 and the Skills Development Act of 1998. These were aimed at further extending protection of the vulnerable section of the labour force as well as to provide the much-needed skills. The aforementioned acts and many more intended to provide the basis for institutionalising industrial conflict and give voice to the marginalised in an institutional forum such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). For its part, NEDLAC is meant to facilitate dialogue and serve as a consensus building mechanism around issues such as economic and social policies.

As a space for dialogue, NEDLAC brings together labour, business, government and civil society with a view to be inclusive in realising South Africa's developmental agenda. This is not surprising given the fact that some of the relations, for example between COSATU and the ruling ANC date back to the days of apartheid. Therefore, labour and the ruling party ties and partnerships are not necessarily new (Friedman, 1987; Webster & Adler, 1999; Adler & Webster, 2000; 1995; Buhlungu, 2010b; 2001; Satgar & Southall, 2015, Craven, 2016; Webster 2017).

At some level, it can be suggested that the aforementioned labour achievements contributed to its decline whilst also fostering labour's influence in some quarters. For example, employers have managed to identify gaps in the institutional regime through which to circumvent the South African industrial relations system. Webster (2017) observes a disconnection between trade unions' associational (organisational) power and the very institutions that labour helped to establish. With that said, this chapter interrogates some of the reasons accountable for the South African labour movement's decline. Firstly, I look at what can be considered the neoliberal labour regime's most effective weapon against organised labour, what Theron refers to as a trinity of interlocking processes. Secondly, the relationship between COSATU and the ruling ANC comes into sharp focus. By problematising and critically evaluating the relations between the two organisations, the chapter hopes to diagnose areas of weakness in terms of how COSATU's alliance with the ANC has, at times, been a hindrance to its objectives. These as stated in the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) refer to, namely, to fight against racial, class and gender exploitation and oppression (Craven, 2016: 9), notwithstanding the historical ties between South African labour movement, ANC and the SACP as outlined in the previous chapter (Bezudenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017: 6; Craven, 2016: 7). Thirdly, the chapter pays attention to institutionalisation as a form of worker power and addresses some of the limitations around this. Institutionalisation is analysed in relations to other forms of worker power and in addition, the chapter challenges the teleological approach that is so often adopted in respect of analysing and understanding workers' action. This has the potential to limit our understanding and appreciation of workers' strategic use of whatever power resources are available at their disposal in particular spaces – spatial praxis (see Chapter 3).

Drawing from the findings of this chapter, it can be suggested that MTS possesses associational power or a variation of it. I argue for a need to broaden our engagement with power resources in order to understand and appreciate creative ways in which workers try to self-reproduce under exploitative capitalist conditions (see Chapter 6). In addition, and lastly, the chapter casts its gaze far and beyond the South African borders with a view to frame the declining labour movement trends as a global phenomenon, and also takes a cursory look at proposed revival strategies and set these against traditional forms of worker power.

## **5.2 Trade Unions, Party Political Relations and Trade Liberalisation**

As a vibrant, militant power block, the trade union movement has been extremely effective in fighting economic exploitation whilst promoting social reconstruction. Understood against this backdrop, the South African social movement unionism has been confronted by what Webster & Adler (1999) call a double transition – countries that are simultaneously consolidating democracy while grappling with economic reconstruction. The latter, as embodied by the post-apartheid ‘new work paradigm’ has presented a challenge for the South African SMU. Motivated by globalisation as both a process and a condition, the new work paradigm is a key component of neoliberal labour regime. This regime is tied to global forces of economic liberalisation characterised by the predominance of market despotism and loss of state authority over economic matters (see Webster & Buhlungu, 2004; Buhlungu, 2001; 2010a; 2010b; Bezuidenhout, 2000; Paret, 2015; Kenny, 2004; 2005; 2007; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Theron, 2005a; Mosoetsa, 2005; 2011; Webster & Von Holdt, 2005; Satgar & Southall, 2015).

A corollary of the aforementioned labour regime is casualisation and outsourcing, referred to as labour flexibility (Buhlungu, 2010a: 3, 6; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 230; Satgar & Southall, 2015: 7-8; Paret, 2015: 56). This process has been most devastating in the auto, mining, retail, clothing and textile industries (see Mosoetsa, 2005; 2011; Kenny, 2005; 2004; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; 2008). Employers have come to rely on labour flexibility, or ‘spatial entrapment’ (this is discussed in Chapter 7) as a means to erode and fragment the militant and powerful trade unions. Theron (2017: 340) observes how this process widened the gap between workers in

jobs and those unemployed and that COSATU has made a half-baked attempt to bridge this gap by setting up national trade union for the unemployed.

Because of these challenges, fissures started to develop around the question of how the labour movement should relate to the new democratically elected ANC led government. Unpacking this question is important to inform one's understanding of the current problems within COSATU and resultant expulsion of NUMSA from the union federation, the so-called 'NUMSA moment'. Engaging this question can also help shed light on why the process of work restructuring has devastated the former militant social movement unionism characteristic of South Africa in the 80s. This can be accounted for by the fact that the neoliberal labour regime has generally manifested itself as job losses and a general trend of employment insecurity. Whereas this process has had negative consequences for other sectors of the economy, public sector employees have continued to enjoy employment security and upward mobility (Buhlungu, 2010a: 162; 2001: 68; Satgar & Southall, 2015: 7-8; Pillay, 2015: 116; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 234; Mosoetsa, 2005: 322, 324, 333; Kenny, 2005: 226, 233-4; Von Holdt & Webster, 2008: 337-9).

Perhaps before discussing the impact of trade liberalisation on the South African labour movement and workers in general, there is a need here to detail some background on labour regimes. This is motivated by the need to contextualise and historicise the successes of the South African trade unions in both democratising workplace relations and engineering a process of societal reconstruction (see Chapter 3). Furthermore, this helps situate COSATU and its relations with the governing party in the broader African context. Trade union choices around party political relations in Africa were shaped by prevailing ideas of economic development (Scully, 2015: 36; see also Beckman et al. 2010). The question of union party relations, in the African context, is much more complex due to the continent's history in dealing with colonialism and subjugation. Therefore, some of the relations between labour and political parties were forged during the aforementioned period and have remained to this day.

In his book: 'A Paradox of Victory: Cosatu and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa', (2010a) Buhlungu identifies three labour regimes, namely: colonial labour regime; developmental labour regimes and the neoliberal labour regime. These

regimes have shaped both strategies and the character of labour movements to emerge both in South Africa and in the entire African continent. Drawing on the work of Beckman and Sachikonye (2009), Buhlungu argues that the concept of labour regime is important to understanding trade unions in Africa (Buhlungu, 2010b: 2). The significance of labour regimes as a concept highlights the complexity of institutions, rules and practices thorough which relations between labour and capital are regulated at the workplace and in society in general. The concept further relates to the ways in which the state and organised interests interact (Beckman & Sachikonye, 2009 cited in Buhlungu, 2010a: 2). This is because these various groupings have vested interests in the form, character and shape of the existing economic landscapes. By locating the labour movement within the previously mentioned labour regimes, one hopes to demonstrate the continued importance of the train as a worker space with roots in the colonial regime, *yet an important space of consciousness that can serve as a buffer against the neoliberal regime* in the current historical epoch. Perhaps this is also a painful reminder about continuity with change in the South African context. This speaks to the broader theme of the making of the South African working class (see Chapter 2).

The colonial labour regime operated at the level of national economy and within individual workplaces. This labour regime was heavily reliant upon coercion; violence and subjugation of the indigenous people (see the making of the South African working class in Chapter 2). Related to this, colonial labour regime also restructured the participation of the subjugated in the national economy, thus adversely affecting their social and economic advancement (Buhlungu, 2010a: 2).

Not surprisingly, then, the kinds of labour movements to emerge during this period were not only concerned with workplace relations, but also attached to this, the question of liberation (see the workerists/populists debate in Chapter 3). Much like Magubane (1989) observed, Buhlungu also notes the following:

Indeed, the emergence of unionism itself cannot be seen as a purely economic impulse, as it represented a challenge to a labour regime which was intrinsically political...the distinction between the economic and political was blurred by the fact that capital accumulation was almost always entirely depended on the continued existence of a despotic political system ... [O]pposition to the colonial labour regime

implied, as a minimum, the search for an alternative development trajectory (Buhlungu, 2010b: 2-3).

Following the colonial labour regime was the statist developmental labour regime, a post-independence approach. This regime was characterised by an authoritarian state, which played an active role in the economy and was motivated by the need to achieve social reconstruction and to speed up economic development. The developmental labour regime was underpinned by the following key characteristics: authoritarianism, trade-offs between labour and the state, and a social wage, which ensured labour's quiescence. This was important in order for the state to champion the twin goals of liberation and development (Buhlungu, 2010b: 3; Scully, 2015: 36). However, the 80s brought sweeping new changes to the world economic order. 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA), public figures such as Margaret Thatcher declared triumphantly as the developmental labour regime was replaced by the neoliberal labour regime.

Market despotism is the key marker of this era, in which the state simply retreats while the market takes over. In such an environment, Theron laments that not only does capitalism take reign, but also unfettered form of capitalism takes charge despite the fact that, by its very nature, it cannot provide employment for all those who needs it. The fragmentation that follows, leads to other kind of social problems associated with high levels of unemployment (Buhlungu, 2010: 3b; Scully, 2015: 36; Theron, 2016: 365; Craven, 2016: 14; Naidoo, 2016: 78). The era of neoliberalism has undoubtedly swung the pendulum in the employers' corner as the gains of the 70s and 80s were quickly eroded by the 90s<sup>6</sup>. One author refers to this, as a paradox of victory (see Buhlungu, 2010a & 2001). The aforementioned labour regimes are important in as far as they help show that, generally, the history of labour is a history of toil and struggle (see Chapter 2 and 3). The market vagaries that workers are exposed to have posed an organisational challenge to the South African labour movement. Labour's ineffective and ad-hoc response to the neoliberalism labour regime can be explained by reference to three factors: the persistence of the industrial union model, a trinity of interlocking processes and COSATU's affiliation with the ruling ANC. The above are

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion on South Africa, see *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace Regime: Studies in Transition*. Edited by Webster & Von Holdt, (2005).

by no means exhaustive. I pay attention to the abovementioned merely because they relate to the current discussion – that is, they allow us to interrogate the extent to which the train can become a worker space and source of union power (see Chapter 6). Moreover, the interlinkages between the aforementioned make for a complete picture that allows us to contextually frame the current challenges (see Buhlungu, 2010a; 2001; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004; Von Holdt, & Webster, 2008; Kenny, 2005).

The labour process characteristic of the South African industries (manufacturing, mining and retail) encouraged the emergence of industrial model unionism. This structural condition allowed a large number of workers to gather in factories, which then became spaces of choice for worker mobilisation (see Bonner, 1978). In this place, workers found meaning; identity and forged solidarities (see Chapter 6 and 7) under conditions of monopoly capitalism, workers could effectively disrupt production and bring whole factory to a halt in a manifestation of structural and associational power (Buhlungu, 2010a:187; 2010b:171-3; Theron, 2005a: 307). However, the industrial model in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world has shown itself to be the Achilles heel of the labour movement.

This is embodied by the South African labour movement's failure to respond adequately and cope with changes in the labour market (Buhlungu, 2010a: 173). This is related to the second problem afflicting the labour movement's response to the neoliberal labour regime, what Theron (2005: 305) refers to as a trinity of interlocking processes. This trinity of interlocking processes refers to the interwoven workplace restructuring process represented by casualisation, externalisation and informalisation (Theron, 2005a: 305). This trinity speaks to a process of workplace differentiation identified by Von Holdt and Webster (2005) in which workers can be grouped into three major zones. First, there is a group of core workers who are employed under the standard employment relations contract (SER). It is noteworthy that the majority of COSATU's membership are concentrated here (Satgar & Southall, 2015: 28, see also Bezuidenhout & Tsoaedi, 2017). The second zone represents the non-core workers made-up of casuals and externalised workers. The third zone is the periphery, where individuals make a living through informal sector activities.

All of these worker groupings are spatially (absolute, relative and relational) interconnected and yet spatially differentiated and belonging to silos in the form of



'spatial entrapment' (see Chapter 7). Some of these informal sector activities such as homework are linked to the formal sector. This practice is particularly prevalent in the textile industry (Von Holdt & Webster, 2008: 338; 2005: 5, 7, 17-9, 22-3). Casualisation, externalisation and informalisation have fractured worker solidarities. As a result of these processes, the trade union movement is currently faced with a crisis of representation (see Section 6.2) (Webster & Buhlungu, 2001: 234; Kenny, 2004: 486-7, 488). It can be said that in some quarters, amongst others, the labour movement's failures lie in its relations with ruling alliance in South Africa.

Unlike a traditional union, MTS has managed to bring all the abovementioned groups under one organisation. The common denominator being that they are train commuters. In other words, MTS has managed to bridge the gap between formal and informal workers (see Chapter 6). The question of union-party relations in South Africa has been a subject of rigorous scrutiny. To be sure, this is not a problem unique to South Africa, this has received attention throughout the continent as well (see Buhlungu, 2005; 2010a; Beckman, et al. 2010; Pillay, 2015; Scully, 2015). According to Southall and Webster (2010: 135) union-party relations can be traced back all the way to the 1920s with the Communist Party of South Africa (as it was then called) playing a leading role in organising black workers into the 1940s. However, it was only in the 1950s, with the formation of SACTU that labour began to engage the question of nationalism in a much more pointed manner. This approach was adopted as a means to transform South Africa (see the workerist/populist debate in Chapter 3).

To this end, SACTU affiliated with the congress alliance, giving rise to the so called political unionism. It is clear, therefore, that union-party relations have a long history in South Africa and it is on this very alliance that national liberation has been achieved elsewhere (see Chapter 6) (see Beckman et al. 2010; Siedman, 1994; Adler & Webster, 1995; Buhlungu, 2010a). What concerns me here is the extent to which the tripartite alliance has hamstrung COSATU's and its affiliates' ability to challenge the neoliberal labour regime that has in many ways demanded a break with the industrial union model. The continued relations between COSATU and its allies can be explained by the fact that COSATU's relevance currently rests on its political influence than as a militant and effective union federation. This Buhlungu (2010: 162) refers to as gaining influence but losing power. In fact, Theron (2017: 360) has argued that COSATU has relied on its political relations to address the deteriorating conditions of

workers than use strike weapon. This can be read to mean that, South African trade unions are on the defensive. More significantly, the ANC led government has adopted and implemented market liberalisation policies detrimental to its alliance partners – workers. This is premised on the notion of national development in which labour is expected to drift into a position of a subordinate to the ruling party (Southall & Webster, 2010: 140; Buhlungu, 2010a: 4; 2010b: 193, 202; 2005: 703; Lier & Stokke, 2006: 810; Bezuidenhout, 2000: 23; Scully, 2015: 43).

In some cases, such as South Africa, the labour movement has remained loyal to the ruling ANC despite the clear negative consequences this alliance is having on ordinary workers (see Section 6.7). More problematic is the fact that the loyalty referred to above has become a hindrance to COSATU's ability to form coalitions with other social groupings representing the marginalised (Buhlungu, 2010a: 97, 176; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 241-42; Lier & Stokke, 2006: 819; Paret, 2015: 55). Amongst others, Paret (2015: 57) observes that the incompatibility between COSATU and other social formations stems from divergent resources, styles and target of protest actions. Whereas unions typically single out employers as targets, community struggles are geared towards the state as a target of grievances. Compounding the situation is the fact that COSATU is focused more generally on issues of policy and governance. According to Buhlungu (2010a: 162) the federation has managed to use its political sway creatively. He records that COSATU continues to ameliorate the impacts of its decline by engaging at the political level:

For example, the clout that COSATU is able to exercise through its involvement in national statutory and other forums makes it difficult for certain kinds of legislative protections to be eroded by employers. In this way, even the weakest sections of the workforce that COSATU has patently failed to organise, such as domestic workers and farm workers, are able to benefit from institutions and rights conferred on them by legislation such as a ...LRA of 1995 and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act ...of 1997.... (Buhlungu, 2010a: 162-3). The aforementioned argument by Buhlungu shows how COSATU has managed to carve out a space to navigate some of its challenges. Clearly, the federation is benefiting from its historic relations with the liberation movement (Bischoff & Tame, 2017: 69). On the contrary, drawing on his comparative study of postcolonial labour movements in Africa, Scully (2015: 51) points out that it is difficult to argue that union-party relations have been a successful long term strategy

anywhere on the African continent. Reading between the lines, Scully suggest that at some point, the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance will collapse. It is now a historical fact that South African workers attained workplace democracy before political liberation. This can successfully be linked with the making of the South African working class that resulted in worker and citizenship issues being inseparable (see Chapter 2).

On the flip side, this reliance upon historic relations with the governing party exposes the fact that COSATU has been found wanting by the changes brought about by the neoliberal labour regime. This trend has its own dangers, notably the fact that the marginalised workers are left to fend for themselves while COSATU protects the interests of those in SER. Bezuidenhout, Bischoff and Nthejane (2017: 48-60) have suggested this fact. Bischoff and Tame (2017: 62-3) has sought to dispel the argument that COSATU represents a labour aristocracy by arguing that whilst the federation organises highly paid, securely employed workers, it also organises low paid workers. Drawing on the work of Pnina Webner's concept of 'marginal labour elite', the authors take issue with those who label COSATU members aristocratic. This is because, as their data reveals, most of those surveyed, whilst in stable jobs and earning stable salaries, use their income mainly to support dependents (Bischoff & Tame, 2017: 63; 67; 82; see also, Satgar & Southall, 2016: 27). Furthermore, the federation's members support the youth wage subsidy. Therefore, they cannot be referred to in those terms. For this purpose, it is clear that COSATU currently represents a small group of privileged workforce.

Labour aristocrats or not, these are workers in SER who carry a veneer of privilege when juxtaposed against those that COSATU does not organise – marginalised, casual and temporary workers. Others, however portend that the notion of labour aristocracy might carry currency when used within the union movement itself where the class divisions in terms of job security, competitive salaries and comfortable working conditions differentiates union officials from ordinary workers (Satgar & Southall, 2015: 27). The emerging dominance of the public sector unions, with all the employment benefits enjoyed, as provided by the state for state employees make it increasingly difficult to argue against the notion that COSATU represents the privileged few. The situation, as Bischoff and Tame acknowledge, is compounded by the high levels of unemployment, inequality and poverty (2017: 63; see also Satgar & Southall, 2015: 27).

What has not been explained is the failure by COSATU to pressure its alliance partners into securing the interests of its members, particularly those, whose livelihoods have been devastated by globalisation and its related processes. An inference can be drawn that this failure clearly demonstrates that COSATU's focus has been somewhere else. As such COSATU has, arguably failed to penetrate 'new' worker spaces. This failure can be linked to its inability to form coalitions with other social pressure groups. Thus, this failure has limited COSATU's ability to effectively mobilise against neoliberalism meaningfully. Its failure to defend the marginalised is reflected in the language that COSATU uses. For example, it speaks of the 'poor and the working class'. According to Theron (2017: 363), this kind of language, reflects the fact that COSATU is only willing to defend the 'working class,' those employed in standard jobs. With the devastating impacts of the changing nature of work that took place in 1990s, Theron (2017: 343) has indicated that if COSATU was not able to organise those at the receiving end of restructuring, it will represent a relatively privileged section of the workforce located mostly in the public sector.

Theron's observations have come to pass and more recently, Bezuidenhout et al. (2017: 48-60) asked a pertinent question: 'is COSATU still a working-class movement? Relying on the empirical data provided based on the Taking Democracy Seriously survey, and COSATU's household-based survey, Bezuidenhout et al. (2017: 48-9) suggest that the federation is currently dominated by public sector unions with an average income of R12 361.26. This is explained by reference to the changing composition of union membership in which more and more workers acquire the necessary educational qualifications advancing salary earnings and benefits. These are typically nurses, teachers and managers in the public service.

On the other hand, the authors acknowledge the fact that this also epitomises the crisis of representation within COSATU:

We argue that this is explained, at least in part, by the public sector unions with their teachers and nurses joining C[OSATU]; by upward mobility of C[SATU] members...and by casualisation of elementary work and the difficulty in organising the growing precariat – those in non-standard employment who are subjected to new forms of workplace despotism and informalisation (Bezuidenhout et al., 2017: 57).

It is clear that informalisation and casualisation have impacted negatively on the livelihoods of those workers who can be referred to as the lowest hanging fruit. This process has been aided by COSATU's inability to defend this section of the working class to the extent that the federation is displaying labour aristocratic characteristics. The dominance of well-paid, securely employed public servants, coupled with the departure of NUMSA has certainly changed the image of COSATU. Over and above this, it would seem the factors discussed above have the impact of usurping union's traditional forms of power. The section to follow will briefly touch on the notion of power and how it relates to union decline.

### **5.3 Union Power and Levels of Decline**

As the preceding section has demonstrated, unions and other forms of worker organisations can employ a number of strategies and tactics to achieve their objectives. Amongst these, and as is the case with COSATU currently, relations with the governing party can be used just as effectively. Despite this however, a number of authors have lamented the fact that COSATU is losing power and as a result, has failed to arrest some of the worrying trends eroding its membership base. The power referred to in this context resides at the organisational level; that is the extent to which the federation is able to use its organisational muscle to push back against the impacts of the changing nature of work.

Such a push back will rely heavily on the old age source of worker power – the strike action. Many conclusions can be drawn from COSATU's failure to put in motion industrial action aimed giving voice to the marginalised. This suggests that the federation has seen declining levels of power. In this case, that is, in the context of class analysis, power simply refers to the:

... capacity of individuals and orgin[s]ations to reali[s]e class interests  
(Wright, 2000: 962).

According to Erik Wright (2000: 962) power, insofar as it relates to class interests comes in two forms; associational and structural power. The former refers to the various forms of power that emanates from formations of collective workers organisations. These can be unions, political parties and a plethora of other forms of organisations. MTS, at an organisational level can be grouped in this category and will

therefore be analysed as such. The latter is power that results from workers embeddedness within specific economic systems. In this situation, power resides in individual workers due to their strategic locations (space) within locus of power such as tight labour markets. Structural power has massive influence upon associational power. This takes account of the fact that structural power at times is itself influenced by skills levels and how labour markets are structured.

Silver (2003) has made use of Wright's distinction in her own analysis, but she has added a much more nuanced element to it. She teases out the notion of structural power further by showing how it operates at different levels. Firstly, she outlines what she terms "marketplace bargaining power" and secondly, "workplace bargaining power" (Silver, 2003: 13). The former results from one's position within the labour market, say those possessing skills in high demand. Workplace bargaining power is based on strategic location within the process of production – socio-spatial dialectic (see Chapter 2). An important point to be made and this is generally overlooked by the literature on labour movements is the fact that power as suggested by Silver's nuanced approach need not only be collective.

In addition to the traditional forms of power as developed by Wright and elaborated on by Silver, more recently there has been suggestions around new forms power. These are innovative ways to challenge capital's almost untrammelled powers. These forms of power operate at the individual, collective, shopfloor and societal levels. The chief aim is to circumvent capital led strategy around fragmentation and union emasculation. For example, Fine (2006, cited in Von Holdt & Webster, 2008: 336-7) talks of "moral power" which is about recasting worker struggles with an aim to project them as struggles of right and wrong. For those workers without any form of structural economic power such as undocumented migrants, this strategy is about appealing to the moral consciousness of society and other social pressure groups within society (Von Holdt & Webster, 2008: 337). Also, and closely related to Fine's moral power, Chun (2009: 13; 102) develops the concept of "symbolic leverage," defined as the vehicle through which to engage the classification struggles by those affected by amongst others, the process or state of "legal liminality". Symbolic leverage incorporates and intertwines the intersection between race, gender, citizenship and class – absolute, relative and relational spaces. The repertoires associated with

symbolic power targets actors beyond the factory gate such as communities, students, churches etc.

Chun (2009) has shown how communities can be effective as pressure points against corporates, particularly, for workers without union representation, conceptualised through the sociological and geographical imaginations. Lately, it has become clear that workplace organisation, by itself, is not adequate to push back against exploitation and abuse. Strategies and tactics employed have to take into account a number of factors. These refers inter alia, to forms of solidarities forged, existing relationships between unions and communities, between workers in SER and those labouring under the unfavourable conditions as brought about by the changing nature of work. The findings chapter reflects on these and shows how MTS has managed to bridge some of these artificial divides between the working class. I refer to these divisions as artificial because generally they are imposed upon the working class by capital. Therefore, this requires new strategies to overcome them.

The effectiveness of workplace organisation is highly dependent on the innovative and strategic use of power and the extent to which workers tap various forms of power resources – in short, organisational flexibility. Employing the power resource approach (PRA) I demonstrate how MTS, as a train-based organisation challenges commonly held views around associational power. Especially in relations to the traditional trade unions.

This is because, the PRA is informed and interested in how labour makes:

*Strategic choice* in responding to new challenges and changing contexts (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2018: 113, italics in original).

The PRA departs from the basic premise that labour can successfully defend its interests through collective forms of mobilising available power resources in the structurally asymmetric and antagonistic relationship between capital and labour. According to the authors, power is understood, in the first instance as the power to do something. This is referred to as *power to* and not as power to determine the rules of engagement, which is *power over* (Schmalz, et al., 2018: 113, Lévesque & Murray, 2010, cited in Schmalz, et al., 2018: 115). This recognises the fact that PRA is a relational concept because employers are also able to mobilise power resources in

order to undermine labour efforts or reach certain agreements. Furthermore, and most importantly, the PRA is not only concerned to analyse structural power relations but that it is also interested to understand the ability of wage earners to assert their interests within particular general contexts. Accordingly, labour power operates at different levels – what the thesis couches in the language of labour geography as scale.

**Table 5.1: Levels (scales) of labour power**

	<b>Structural power</b>	<b>Associational power</b>	<b>Institutional power</b>	<b>Societal power</b>
Applied in the form of	Disruption of the valorisation of capital	Formation of workers' associations	Referring to legally fixed rights	Interaction with other social actions
At the level of the workplace	Labour unrest Changing jobs	Grassroots works groups Works council Shop-steward bodies	Works constitution	Coalitional and discursive power by their very nature transcend the boundaries between the levels
At the industry wide level	Economic strikes	Trade unions	Collective bargaining autonomy	
At the level of society	Political strikes	Workers' parties	Constitution Law and legislation	

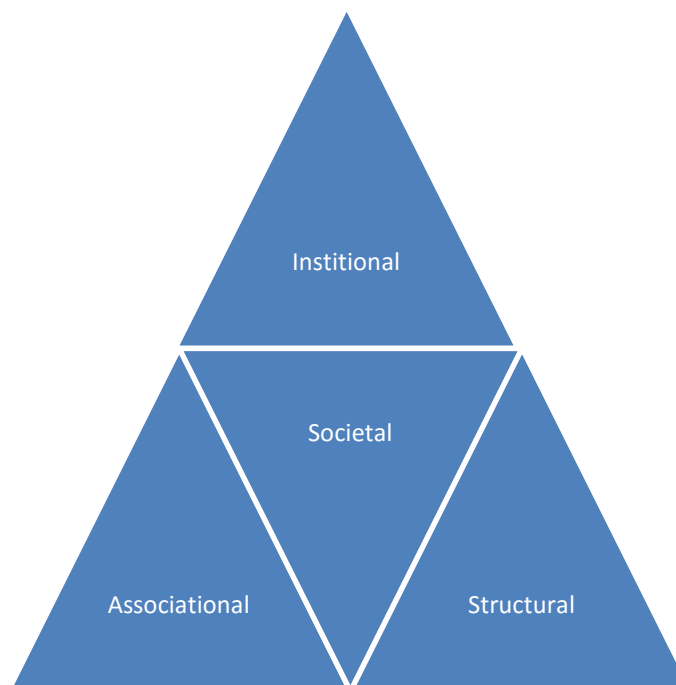
Source: Schmalz, et al., 2018: 119)

Below I pay attention to institutional power as it has important implications for understanding South African workers and MTS in particular. For a detailed discussion of PRA see Schmalz et al. (2018). According to Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey (2009: 37-8), institutional power is characterised by the fact that institutions incorporate social compromises that were agreed upon in the past and records them for future economic cycles. These are also useful during times of altered societal power relations. Institutionalisation can at times take legislative form, in this way, structural and organisational power are embedded into societal institutions as a secondary form of power (Brinkmann and Nachtway, 2010: 21, cited in Schmalz et al., 2018: 121).



This institutionalisation results in rules and resources that govern, influence, and limit actors' actions in relations to each other. This may come in the form of social dialogue forums such as NEDLAC and the LRA of 1995 in the case of South Africa. This is a typical example of the rights-based labour relations approach in which the interactions between labour, business, government and civil society groupings are governed (Webster, Britwum & Bhowmik, 2017: 15). In some quarters, institutional power represents the pinnacle of worker power. Webster et al. (2017: 16) refers to what is called a pyramid of workers' power with institutional power at the summit of the pyramid:

**Figure 5.1: Pyramid of worker power**



Source: Webster et al. (2017)

Debatably, this represents a problematic teleological reading of workers strategies and organisational forms (see also Webster, 2017: 150). As the question of party-union relations have suggested, COSATU is heavily reliant upon institutional power, by drawing on its influence in the alliance, to keep in place some of the gains achieved post-1994.

This is despite that fact that the federation is to some extent organisationally weak. Thus, it can be suggested that its institutional power is currently not necessarily

buttressed by a strong associational and structural power; rather the other way around. Then the pyramid can be flipped on its head. By this, I seek to propose that workers power is spatially informed through spatial praxis, and as such, power resources should not follow a predetermined, almost linear trajectory. Relatedly, workers need not possess associational, structural and or societal power as a means to access institutional power. It is this teleological approach and institutional bias that has confined and forced innovative uses of power to fit into preconceived forms of worker power resources.

For example, reflecting on the formation of new independent movements to emerge in Ghana and India, Webster et al. (2017: 20) states, as a matter of fact that:

These spontaneous movements can be seen as healthy outburst against oppression. However they *must* develop institutional power to be sustainable or they will soon fizzle out (emphasis added).

In what can only be described as an apt response to Webster et al. (2017: 20)'s advocacy for institutionalism, reflecting on the Marikana<sup>7</sup> situation, Sinwell and Mbatha (2013: 33) have argued that:

... [power] exists when workers and communities unite and fight on their own terms as they did on the mountain – not within the formal bargaining structures or elite legal frameworks that determine when people can or cannot strike or protest and also what and how much they are allowed to demand.

This forceful argument in favour of institutionalisation fails to interrogate how the neoliberal labour regime has developed effective measures to circumvent the organisational capabilities of trade unions, as well as established regulatory bodies. It has been shown in the case of South Africa how capital, through usage of labour brokers, workplace fragmentation and other strategies have managed to weaken labour's institutional power. The South African government has also tended to bypass

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<sup>7</sup> Marikana is in the North West province of South Africa. The province is mineral rich in platinum and the informal settlement of Marikana made international headlines in 2012 when the South African police shot and killed 34 miners for demanding a R12 000,00 monthly minimum wage. Workers were engaged in an illegal strike organised outside of the union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

important corporatist institutions such as NEDLAC, particularly on matters of macroeconomic policy. This trend has also been observed across the entire Southern African region. Furthermore, Krein and Dias (2018) have noted the ambiguous effects of institutional power in the case of the United Workers' Central of Brazil (CUT) (Buhlungu, 2010a: 6-7; Bischoff, 2015: 235; Satgar & Southall, 2015: 8).

This emphatic stress upon institutionalisation overlooks the fact that institutions can, at times, become straightjackets. Furthermore, institutionalised power has a tendency to be both inclusionary and exclusionary. That is, it produces outsiders and insiders. The expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU is partly due to this class divide. According to Satgar and Southall (2015: 25) workers in the South African manufacturing and service sector have borne the brunt of government policies around outsourcing and workplace fragmentation. On the other hand, workers in the public sector have enjoyed employment security buttressed by COSATU's institutional power. In his criticism of PRA, Alexander Gallas argues that in certain situations:

... union strategies may be geared to a small minority of workers and obstruct working-class formations in the sense of a process in which the collective agency of workers as a class and an antagonistic of capital is strengthened (Gallas, 2018: 349).

In his study of the 2012 Marikana strikes in the platinum belt, Chinguno (2015: 249-50) differentiates between two forms of violence in order to situate strike violence in the South African context. The first refers to physical violence. This can either be carried out or be a threat thereof.

The second form of violence speaks to social structure, which harms people by prohibiting them from meeting their most basic needs. This kind of violence is rooted in institutional practices and is associated with social injustices. This argument is applicable to those workers who cannot access some of the institutional power that came into being post-apartheid. This can take a variety of forms, for example, only a registered trade union may organise a protected strike (Chinguno, 2015: 265). For this reason, workers in the platinum belt operated both in and outside of the institutional framework. Clearly, this institutional bias effectively excludes worker driven organisations such as MTS for the mere fact that they do not subscribe to the traditional workplace-based trade unionism. This is, despite the fact that they empower workers

as a class on a daily basis (see Chapter 6 and 7). Overall, the thesis is not making a case against institutionalisation as a form of worker power, it merely problematises the hierarchical nature of this power resources.

The pyramid's suggestion that institutional power is the apex for which workers should strive to achieve is ultimately flawed and perhaps sociologically unsound. Worker's agency should not be forced to fit into a predetermined framework of engagement, because, for reasons already outlined, this framework is used, more often than not to usurp the same worker power. Elsewhere, Webster (2017: 141, 154) has observed how associational (organisational) power has been disconnected from institutional power. He fails to interrogate however, how institutions that are meant to empower and encourage associational (organisational) power have been used much more effectively to isolate and emasculate trade unions. For this reason, others have argued that trade unions should not substitute the independent working-class power on display at Marikana in 2012 (Sinwell & Mbatha, 2013: 33, see also Gallas, 2018).

What is noteworthy is perhaps the fact that, in the case of South Africa, capital has not managed to completely dismantle labour's institutional power but has simply made it inaccessible for sections of the working class. In so doing, it has debatably managed to dismantle, in the process labour's associational and structural power, leading to what Webster aptly refers to as a "crisis of representation" (Webster, 2005: 23). This can be linked to COSATU's need to safeguard its ultimate achievement – institutional power. Without a doubt, this has stymied innovation, this despite workers in the Western Cape farms showing the rewards of innovation and willingness to tap other forms of power (see Wilderman, 2017). In the recent special edition to the *Global Labour Journal*, Schamalz et al. (2018: 126-8) acknowledges some of the shortcomings raised above.

It is clear that the power resource approach privileges worker power in its collective form. It must, therefore, be acknowledged that collectivist approach presents serious limitations to the power resource approach, particularly in a context where many workers cannot access collective forms of power and harness them in the workplace. To address this weakness, I draw from feminist discussions around notions of individual forms of power and agency in particular from Naila Kabeer's work (Kabeer, 1999; 2001). Arguably, Kabeer's notion of empowerment provides an opportunity to draw

links between MTS's associational power and the power resource approach. According to Kabeer, power is about the ability to make choices. Being empowered she argues, is intrinsically linked to conditions of disempowerment and thus refers:

... to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability (Kabeer, 2001: 18-9).

To be empowered, however one needs to have been disempowered in the first place. For most workers who are without workplace unionisation, being members of MTS arguably empowers them. It can be said the existence of MTS presents such workers with choice without which they would have remained powerless (Kabeer, 1999: 437). However, most importantly, the presence of unionised workers (some are in union leadership positions) on the train can be said to be the clearest indication of how unionised and individual workers benefit from those embedded within the power resource approach. To the extent that MTS exists as an organisation means that it is an extension of associational power, however not in its traditional sense (see Kumar & Singh, 2018; Spoor & Mwanika, 2018).

MTS exists outside of places of work; this leads one to conclude therefore that its members do not reap any of its organisational power upon disembarking from the train. For what purpose are workers joining this organisation then? Organising six trains (see Chapter 6) is clear evidence that this organisation is popular with commuters. I suggest that MTS is useful *inter alia* in as far as it is able to empower un-unionised workers. Schmalz et al. (2018: 125) refers to organisations such as MTS as:

... hybrid organisations ... [that] assist unions [bridge] the divide between formal and informal workers ... Taken together, informal ... workers with low structural power tend to create new forms of associational power, which diverge from traditional trade unions.

For Kabeer (1999: 436-7), empowerment allows individuals to make choices. Being able to make choices is a source of power. This choice, Kabeer makes clear, it is mediated through three interrelated dimensions, namely (1) resources. This becomes the basis upon which choices are made. Resources can be material, social or human. These are easily possessed by most members of MTS in the sense that this is a train based organisation and at the material level is accessible to all commuters who affords a train ticket and the required membership fee (see Chapter 6). At the human and

social resource level most of the workers on the train understands and are aware of the exploitative conditions under which they labour. (2) The second dimension relates to agency. This refers to meaning, motivation and purpose that drive individual's actions. That is 'power within'. According to Kabeer agency is much more than just 'individual decision making'. It also encompasses wide range of purposive action such as bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance and protest. As Chapters 6 and 7 will show, MTS members ask and acquire specific forms of information and knowledge that allow the individual to operationalise the abovementioned purposive actions (Kabeer, 1999: 438; 2001: 21). Clearly, this form of agency allows them choice of alternatives in relations to other forms of power. (3) Lastly, resources and agency are geared towards specific achievements.

The ability to realise certain achievements or failure thereof constitutes the third dimension of choice (Kabeer, 1999:438; 2001: 21). Where failure to achieve valued ways of 'being and doing' is because of individual attributes such as laziness or incompetence then the issue of power is not relevant. The next section is concerned with detailing labour revival strategies, most of which have links with the PRA. The advent of neoliberalism requires of labour to explore new worker spaces, but also in addition, necessitates fresh approaches to scale (see Chapter 3, 6 and 7). In light of the aforementioned union shortcomings, below I pay attention to labour revival strategies and assess the usefulness of such strategies in South Africa.

#### **5.4 Union Revival Strategies**

The theme 'labour movement revival' reverberates throughout the entire world as labour scholars from both the north and south grapple with the aftermath of globalisation on organised labour. This has seen an increase in poverty, unemployment and inequalities in countries such as South Africa (see Webster & Von Holdt, 2005; Buhlungu, 2010a; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004; Silver, 2003; Chun, 2009; Bezuidenhout, 2000; Dibben et al. 2012). Labour revitalisation as a theme arose in contemporary literature because, as Beverly Silver correctly observes:

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was an almost complete consensus in the social sciences literature that

labo[u]r movements were in a general and severe crisis. Declining strike activity and other overt expressions of labo[u]r militancy, failing union density and shrinking real wages and job insecurity were among the trends documented (Silver, 2003: 1).

Reacting to the reality as described by Silver (2003), labour scholars, activists and likeminded individuals set about to rescue the once militant labour movement from its perpetual decline. Drawing on case studies from various countries, author after author sought to offer new ways in which the erstwhile flourishing trade unionism could be restored to its former glory. Below I outline revival strategies and tactics.

The strategies and tactics discussed here can be grouped into three scalar levels: first, the international level; here the strategy and tactics pivot around what is called labour internationalism or global social movement unionism. The second level relates to the national. That is, intra country strategies; and thirdly, the local scale. Here strategies and tactics that can be employed to mobilise and recruit in particular workplaces are discussed. I outline each in turn.

#### **5.4.1 Labour Internationalism / Global Social Movement Unionism**

Almost invariably, social movement unionism (and this is true for both local and international/global levels) is presented as a panacea for labour problems (Bezuidenhout, 2000: 26-8; Buhlungu, 2010a: 177, Webster & Von Holdt, 2005: 37-8; Dibben et al. 2012: 505-8; Lier & Stokker, 2006: 821-22; Wood, 2002: 44-7; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 241-43; Scipes, 2014; Waterman, 1993: 268-9). The appeal to social movement unionism as a key ingredient for union revival is premised upon a linear analysis that sees globalisation as fragmenting the unity of the working class. This process leads to the core/ non-core divisions that place a particular demand on communities and families as shock absorbers (see Mosoetsa, 2011). The neoliberal regime has eroded the traditional union base. In addition to this, neoliberal macro-economic policies have encouraged cost recovery programmes that have overburdened poor households, especially in light of high unemployment rate and job insecurity – generating a crisis of social reproduction (Webster & Von Holdt, 2005: 31). This decline requires of labour to actively campaign not only locally, but regionally and globally as well.

This calls for participation in global union federations (GUF) such as the International Chemical, Mineral and Energy Federation (ICEM) and the International Transport Federation (ITF). COSATU's involvement in the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and the Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) was hailed as innovative and progressive in this regard (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 242). This approach also posits the global as the ultimate achievement to aim for if labour is to mount any respectable challenge to the footloose multinational corporations. It erroneously assumes that workers have similar interests globally. However, Herod (1997) has shown for example, how US worker organisations have deliberately undermined Mexican trade unions in collaboration with US capital (see Chapter 3). In addition to the labour strategies with a global outlook, local orientated strategies and tactics are also suggested. These range from organisational restructuring, membership recruitment and establishing links with local social movements.

The proliferation of single issue social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation forum (ATP), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) provide an opportunity for the labour movement to build local specific forms of social movement unionism (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004: 241-2). The previously mentioned revival strategies suffer from two fundamental limitations. Firstly, they are nostalgic. For example, in the case of South Africa they fail to recognise the inter-class divisions that exist post-apartheid. During apartheid, where class differences existed, race solidarity was the rallying message (see Section 3.2.4 in Chapter 3). As a result, the privileged few (those in the core zone) are not motivated enough to align with those most affected by cost recovery programmes (see Lier & Stokke, 2006). Thus, local SMU revival remains a challenge. This is because single issue social movements such as those mentioned above do not automatically find resonance with workers in the core zone. Drawing on the South African experience in particular, the tendency to invoke SMU of the 70s and 80s is highly problematic. Arguably, this can be accounted for by lack of engagement with Guy Siedman's work.

Comparing labour movements in Brazil and South Africa, Seidman (1994) makes it poignantly clear that the SMU of 80s came about as a product of peculiar conditions such as authoritarian regimes (socio-spatial dialectic). The authoritarian industrial strategy pursued by both the South African and Brazilian governments made organising beyond the factory gate (scale) not a choice but a necessity, in an exercise



of spatial praxis. To this end, workers had to articulate their demands as citizenship rights (Seidman, 1994: 2-3). The qualitative change in conditions have arguably demobilised SMU (see Von Holdt, 2002; Seidman, 2011; Lier & Stokke, 2006). Currently, the concept is nothing more than an ideal type (Seidman, 2011: 94; Lier & Stokke, 2006: 806). As Seidman (2011: 100) points out:

*Social movement unionism remains a descriptive term rather than a strategic prescription (emphasis added)*<sup>8</sup>.

Put differently, SMU cannot easily be mobilised, rather, it is a particular form of militancy/organising that arise out of certain socio-political conditions (sociological and geographic imaginations). That is to say, the conditions of those affected have to naturally converge and be mutually reinforcing. Secondly, the strategies proposed seeks largely to reverse the almost juggernaut process/condition that is globalisation.

Drawing on Harvey's spatial fix and Anderson's resonant place, this study proposes ways in which labour can create new spaces and strategies (see Chapter 3, 6 and 7). Furthermore; there is a need to propose strategies that encourage the labour movement to assimilate into processes associated with neoliberal workplace regime. Revitalisation strategies such as membership recruitment and international links are unhelpful in a context where traditional union members are being attacked by a globalisation process that is fragmenting workers both at the local and international scale. The international division of labour suggests that workers of the world will not necessarily find common ground simply because they are the working class. There is a need to embed this discourse in its spatial context (see Chapter 6).

As this study will show, there is a need to incorporate strategies that are both *collective and simultaneously individual* in approach (see Section 6.6 and 7.2.3). The comrades coach is an embodiment of such an approach (see Chapter 6 and 7). This position is informed by the fact that, arguably the train brings together workers' relative and relational space into a singular absolute, albeit a mobile space (see Chapter 3). This is despite accentuating the voice of those like Seidman (2011) who holds the view, that SMU cannot be revived. This study will demonstrate that the train is a space of

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<sup>8</sup> For a counter argument on this, see Dunbar Moodie, 2012. Social Movement Unionism: From Enthusiasm to Delivery –A response to Gay Seidman.

possibilities, including a site from which SMU can be relaunched. However, the approach adopted here is not informed by nostalgic notions of worker militancy. Rather, I draw from the train as a site to launch SMU based on the fact that it does possess some of the historical building blocks that helped give life to SMU in the first place. I return to this point in the findings chapter.

To present a full picture of labour's fluctuations, the next section pays attention to international case studies with a view of understanding how labour movements in other contexts have responded to the neoliberal labour regime. Comparatively, this will allow us to gauge the extent to which the suggested revival strategies and power resources fare internationally.

#### **5.4.2 Global Cases**

Whilst acknowledging the challenges currently facing the labour movement globally, Silver (2003) however adopts an approach that is both sympathetic and optimistic. This is an approach buttressed by belief in human agency. She posits that labour will always find ways and strategies to revive itself and fight back. As a result, she observes a process in which labour is being "unmade"; "remade" and "made" (Silver, 2003: 19). She argues, and this thesis will contribute to this point (see Chapters 6 and 7), that adopting this nuanced reading and analysis of labour permits an identification of new agencies and sites of contestations that emerge alongside new demands and forms of struggle. This reflects the changing terrain on which capital-labour relations develop (Silver, 2003: 5, 10, 20, 64, and 69).

In many respects, Silver's (2003) argument finds common ground with many other writers seeking to make a contribution to the labour movement revival theme. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work, Chun (2009) provides a comparative analysis of classification struggles by workers in the United States of America (USA) and South Korea. These are marginalised workers employed in precarious and irregular jobs (Chun, 2009: 45-6). It is understood that these workers have no access to trade union sources of power (Chun, 2009: 10-12; Silver, 2003: 13). Due to this sense of powerlessness (at least in as far as the traditional sources of worker power are concerned), these workers have had to devise new forms of struggles. Chun refers to this as "symbolic leverage" (Chun, 2009: 13, 102).

Symbolic leverage becomes the vehicle through which to engage the classification struggles by those affected by amongst others the process or state of “legal liminality” – what the thesis refers to as ‘spatial entrapment’ (see Chapter 7) (Chun, 2009: 103). For workers in this space, the struggles centre on arenas of culture and public debates about values. At the spatial level, this means workplace struggles are geographically (absolute space) taken out of the place of work and into the public arena. Also, in relative and relational terms, these struggles are framed in a language of justice and fairness (Chun, 2009: 102). Broadly, and in keeping with Chun (2009) and Silver (2003), globally there has been an acknowledgement and recognition of the labour upsurge (see Clawson, 2003; Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Bieler & Lindberg, 2010). All of the abovementioned literature seems to suggest (perhaps with the exception of Silver, 2003) that there is a need to think and engage differently with how workers organise and make use of power tactics against capital. The collection by Bieler and Lindberg (2010) is interesting in this regard.

In recognising the need for new sources of power and strategies, the crux of the collection’s argument is developed by Richard Hyman and he argues for new ways to redefine and reinvent solidarity (Hyman, 2010: 25-7). Rather than a conception of solidarity that is based upon common interests and identity, which will generally manifest as associational power, Hyman proposes solidarity that is informed by and recognises “mutuality despite differences” (see Chapters 6 and 7). This kind of solidarity privileges heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity:

In many respects, the malaise afflicting labour movements in much of the world today stems from the exhaustion of their old model of collectivism. In its traditional form, ‘solidarity’ was a slogan which easily matched a conception of a working class, which was not recognised as differentiated by gender, skill, ethnicity or other significant characteristics.

He further asks:

How do we understand the idea of solidarity if the old notion of undifferentiated proletariat is abandoned? (Hyman, 2010: 27).

Drawing on transnational union initiatives, the collection attempts to answer this question. Drawing inferences from the findings of this thesis, it can be argued that in

the South African context, workers have managed to build solidarities despite differences. Such differences include some, if not all those already identified by Hyman (2010). In addition, the differences are also spatial; however, it is the function of the very same spatiality (absolute, relational and relative) that can account for this form of solidarity (see Chapters 3, 6 and 7). Granted, the book is aimed at transnational forms of worker relations and their solidarities and struggles. However, the train as an extra-factory worker space is illuminating in displaying this form of solidarity (see Chapters 6 and 7). The comrades coach has demonstrated how the “strong [can] support the weak” (Hyman, 2010: 26). The thesis, amongst others, is interested in interrogating how this support is taken forward. That is, beyond the train as a physical space within which solidarities and comradery are forged (see Chapter 6 and 7).

## **5.5 Summary**

There is a strong case to be made in favour of labour revival. This point is accentuated by the findings of this study (see Chapter 6). There is ample evidence that point out that where labour has suffered serious defeats vis-à-vis capital, it is due to labour’s failure to change tactics and strategies. However, were revival strategies rely upon old approaches; these have also been unhelpful to labour movements across the world. In the case of South Africa, this is demonstrated by the reliance upon old industrial model unionism. This organising model has effectively been challenged by the changing nature of work as driven by the trinity of interlocking processes. Over and above the challenges brought about by the neoliberal labour regime, the chapter has also considered the problems presented by the labour movement’s association and formal linkages to ruling political parties. At some level, there exist suggestions that not only has the alliance weakened the labour movement, but that it led to its implosion in November 2014.

The ideological difference, together with the divergent understanding of union’s roles gave rise to a conflictual relation between NUMSA, ANC and SACP on the one hand; and NUMSA, COSATU leadership collective on the other. However, COSATU has remained relatively loyal to the alliance. This can be explained by reference to the fact that the federation has utilised its political proximity to win gains for the working class. However, this has become problematic in view of the fact that government macroeconomic policies have affected workers unequally. For example, those workers

belonging to COSATU affiliates in sectors such as mining, retail, manufacturing and auto industries have had to bear the brunt of workplace despotism. This is in contrast to public sector employees who are enjoying employment security and high salaries. The alliance has ensured that COSATU's institutional power remain almost intact, but for the benefit, largely of public sector employees leading to questions around whether or not COSATU is still representative of the working class, and whether or not, it represents the privileged few labour aristocrats. As a power resource, institutional power has gained favour with labour scholars as a strategic and stable form of protection. Whilst largely in agreement, the chapter has problematized this institutional biasness and pointed to areas of weakness with regards the PRA in general. However, where weakness was detected, the chapter has incorporated feminist inspired approaches into our discussion with a view to ground the individualistic aspects of MTS as an organisation.

Against the aforementioned backdrop, the chapter also considered proposed labour revival strategies such as global social movement unions; organisational restructuring and membership recruitment. The thesis has pointed out the limitations associated with some of the proposed revival strategies. Amongst these, is the failure to properly ground and contextualise social movement unionism and the particular conditions that necessitated its existence. While critical of the proposed strategies, the chapter has also acknowledged labour revival successes globally. These are precedents of hope and possibilities. I relate current state of the labour movement as detailed in this chapter to the findings of this study. Chapter 6 explores the story of MTS and reflects on how MTS can alleviate some of the shortcomings discussed above.

## Chapter 6

# Stimela: The Space between Home and Work

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### 6.1 Stimela in Context: Transport, Workers and Politics

Within South African sociology, and perhaps industrial sociology in particular, there is yet to be a major study that focuses attention on transport as central to workers' daily experiences. A number of geographers however, (see for example, Pirie, 1993, 1986, 1987, Khosa, 1995; McCarthy & Swilling, 1985) have concerned themselves with what can broadly be referred to as transportation politics. Whilst analysing different modes of transportation (Pirie focuses more on trains and McCarthy & Swilling on buses), a common thread running through their work is the fact that they both make an attempt to understand working class Africans' response to and how they experienced the travail of travel. Due to a number of reasons, which include fares, relocations and facilities, transport was always been a site of mobilisation and protest action during the apartheid era (McCarthy & Swilling, 1985: 381,383, 389, 390; Pirie, 1986: 43-4, 46).

In reference to bus boycotts that took place in East London from 1983 through to 1984, McCarthy and Swilling highlight bus transportation as a site of working class struggle and continue to say that:

It is possible that by taking up issues such as transport within their programmes, worker organi[s]ations such as COSATU could develop an objective site of struggle that links up the conditions of oppression in black townships with the nature of exploitation in the workplace (1985: 389).

For geographers such as Pirie and Khosa (1992: 283) this is not surprising because transport is not a minor element in workers' daily lives. Transport networks, argue Pirie and Khosa, help give form to space because they can be deliberately engineered to influence space and how it is experienced (see Chapter 2 and 3).

This point gives impetus to Castree's (2010) argument that we need to first understand geography as way into understanding workers' actions (see Chapter 3). Furthermore,

Von Holdt (2001: 289) observes how in Witbank, militant youths had to burn down company (Highveld Steel) buses to prevent township dwellers from going to work. For purposes of this thesis, two publications, one by Khehla Shubane titled: 'Emzabalazweni! There is politics on the trains' (1988) and second one by Gordon Pirie called 'Travelling under apartheid' (1992) are of special interest to this thesis. These texts are important for two reasons; firstly, these are the only known available scholarly works that have attempted to detail organising efforts by workers on the trains. Secondly, the two are important in as far as filling the gaps in this narrative. This is because these scholarly works were produced during a particular historical period in the making of the South African working class. The weakness in the aforementioned contributions is that they are largely descriptive. Yet, this weakness is also their strength in respect of reason number two listed above. In augmenting my findings, the two also helps construct a picture of working class transportation in South Africa.

It can be suggested that whilst for the apartheid state, trains served as an instrument of control and facilitative of a particular spatial engineering, for black commuters, trains played an important role in various cultural, political, social and economic expressions. In this mobile space, violence, abuse, oppression, political mobilisation, friendships, hardships, worker power, and religious worship existed side by side (see Pirie, 1992, Shubane, 1988; Themba, 1985a; Themba, 1985b; Okeowo, 2016). All of the above can decisively be linked to the apartheid spatiality. Unfortunately, some of the descriptions have persisted into the new post-apartheid South Africa. The salient nature of some of these features point to the fact that the train has continued to shape the South African economic geographies in important ways (see Chapter 2).

More recently, this can, perhaps, be explained by reference to the 2006 security guards' strike organised by South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). The union demanded an 11% wage increase and the employer only offered 8%. SATAWU rejected the offer and vowed to push ahead with its demands. However, other smaller unions organising in the industry accepted the employers' offer and returned to work. This presented problems for SATAWU because its position was weakened in relation to the employer (Sunday Tribune, 2006: 8). Consequently, SATAWU members adopted violence as a strategy to deal with security guards who observed the employers' call to return to work. It is noteworthy that the

abovementioned violence strategy was not targeted and implemented at the point of 'production'. Rather, it was deployed upon public transportation system – the train. Unlike workers in manufacturing and mining, security guards do not generally converge in one workplace in larger numbers. They are dispersed across a vast area in groups (usually) of 2 or more. Unlike the compounds observed by Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011), it is arguably difficult to enforce workplace discipline in respect of security guards during labour disputes. For historical reasons already outlined, it is unsurprising that the train became the site of discipline during the 2006 security guards' industrial action.

Strike violence however, has a long history in South Africa (See Simpson & Webster, 1991; Webster, 2017; Chinguno, 2015; Von Holdt, 2010) and what is of interest here, was the *site* of the said violence, together with the accompanying protest action. Non-striking security guards were targeted on the trains en-route to and from work. Media reports showed that non-striking security guards were thrown off moving trains (often to their deaths) by striking SATAWU members (of course SATAWU denied that it was their members committing these acts). The extent and seriousness of the problem was such that Metrorail declared it a "national crisis" (Citizen, 2006: 8; Sowetan, 2006: 5; Sunday Tribune, 2006: 8; Cape Argus, 2006: 1). The national death figure was reported at 23 people nationally; 18 of these deaths took place in Gauteng province alone (Sunday Tribune, 2006: 8; Sowetan, 2006: 5; Citizen, 2006: 8).

In addition to the killings, scores more were paraded naked and or assaulted on the trains. Without a doubt, the security guards' locus of discipline demonstrates the centrality of the train as workers' convergence point. This was a true embodiment of what Chinguno (2015: 265) refers to as "violent solidarity". For a period, therefore, the train was a site of 'strategic-terror' during the year 2006. This was a context specific use of space as a response to lack of other forms of power. This links to an argument already developed in Chapter 4 and to be taken further in Chapter 7. Comrade coaches constitute what Adler (1997: 110) refers to as extra factory relations. Much like the rugby fields, which were turned into workers' spaces by African and Coloured workers in the Eastern Cape, train coaches can be understood in a similar fashion as a way to fathom how workers build and sustain solidarities. In addition to Adler, many scholars do acknowledge extra factory social spaces (see for example, Buhlungu, 2010a, Von Holdt, 2002, Barchiesi & Kenny, 2002) but these spaces are never



systematically studied and brought to the centre of analysis. These has seen the exclusion of comrade coaches as playing a facilitative role in the multi-scalar workerists (local) and populist (national) scales.

According to McCarthy and Swilling (1985: 393), solidarity is an emotionally explosive atmosphere, thus comrades' coaches can be said to provide the space required to motivate each other whilst oscillating between the world of work and residence. With its roots in apartheid South Africa, en-route mobilising continues to be important for both factory-floor based actions and service delivery protests in many African townships. This can be linked to a broader structural question: to what extent are places such as Mamelodi and formerly oppressed African workers been incorporated into white South Africa of the apartheid era? This is an important question for consideration because it is political, geographical and structural, thus can be used as a way into understanding comrades' coach. To do this, it is important to adopt a historical role of Stimela (train) not only as a mode of transport, but a significant and integral part of apartheid spatiality (see Chapter 2 and 3). This is because for the social engineers of apartheid, the train was nothing more than a "lumbering and strictly functional" form of travelling between two points. Black commuters however, were not "just units of unconscious freight" (Pirie, 1992: 173, 176).

The weakness inherent in the South African scholarship on apartheid spatial engineering is the almost exclusive focus on the number of legislations enacted to give effect to geographic separation. The train, as a cheap and state-controlled mode of transport and its role in aiding mass relocations is excluded from the analysis. Without a cheap mode of transport, able to ferry large numbers of cheap labour without workplace rights and benefits across the economic landscape, it is inconceivable that the apartheid state would have implemented spatial apartheid at the scale it was implemented. Taken to its logical conclusion, the argument presented here suggests that the existence of MTS on the train is not a coincidence. Rather, is an elaborate outcome of particular historical processes (see Chapter 3). This, Soja (1985) refers to as socio-spatial dialectic (see Chapter 3). For these reasons, the train reflects a distinct class politics that can be linked to race and residential areas. Therefore, it is not simply a 'container' of commuters. On the contrary, it is imbued with class, racial and political meanings (see Pirie, 1992; Shubane, 1988; Chapter 6 and 7).

As the aforementioned 2006 SATAWU strike makes clear, the relationship between the South African working class and transport is manifestly complex and multi-layered. To a larger extent, the almost exclusive focus on the shopfloor and the community as spaces of organising has arguably left the story of the South African working-class incomplete. According to Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011: 237):

... [a]t the core of the colonial and apartheid social engineering was a spatial strategy based on institutions and infrastructure linking together rural homesteads and villages, and mining centers and towns.

Key to this spatial strategy is the ability to perfect and implement an elaborate form of control. Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011: 238, 241) identify four forms of control, namely, spatial control, reproduction control, associational control, and political control. For current discussions and as it relates to the focus of this study and this section in particular, spatial control will come into sharper focus. Understood as part of the institutional and infrastructural arrangements at the centre of apartheid spatiality, transport, particularly the train was an important element of the aforementioned control strategies (see for example Pirie, 1986). To this end, as Pirie aptly points out:

... [A]ssessment of the significance of railways to [workers' daily lives] needs to be probed beyond the mechanical role that the railways perform as a provider of mobility. Migrant miners were often treated as animals, or worse, as pieces of cargo, but they were not *unconscious* (Pirie, 1993: 729 emphasis added).

Read with Harvey (2006), Pirie (1986) suggests that the train was not merely a tool to navigate and traverse absolute space. Rather, when understood in relative terms, the relational is an important element of workers' experience. In his song, 'Stimela' (the coal train) from the album *Still Grazing*, Hugh Masekela eloquently captures the feelings and emotions that migrants often associated with the train:

The train carries young and old, African men who are conscripted to come and work on contract in the golden mineral mines of Johannesburg and its surrounding metropolis, sixteen hours of work or more for almost no pay...They think about their lands, their herds that were taken away from them with a gun...And when they hear that choo-choo train, a chugging, and a pumping, and a smoking, and pushing,

and a *crying* and steaming, and a chugging and a whooo whooo! *They cuss, and they curse the coal train ...* (emphasis added) (Masekela, 1974).

The particular social experiences of train journeys to and from work provide a window through which to understand the genesis of comrade's coaches. This is to say, Stimela (train) was and continues to be a key ingredient in the making of the South African working class. While Pirie (1993) failed to interrogate the train as a site of worker mobilisation, he however observes that railway wagons were incubators of new social identities and solidarity formations. In addition, Shubane, (1988: 43) points out that during the state of emergency in the 80s, mass meetings were banned; the train emerged in this context to fill in the political gap. This had the added advantage of conscientising workers not organised into trade unions. He notes how the close proximity between Khotso House (later to become COSATU House), helped facilitate this process. At some level, this was a seamless process because:

... It was normal for striking workers to walk together to the [train] station after a meeting, board the same train, and continue discussing issues from the meeting (Shubane, 1988: 45).

Understood in a context of race and class solidarity, this is a clear outcome of the making of the South African working class (see Chapter 2 and 3).

This can be explained in relation to the impact of economic and geographic apartheid that led not only to race or class-based forms of solidarity, but importantly, geographic forms of solidarity. Therefore, whilst monitoring and having workplaces and townships under surveillance, the apartheid landscape provided another site of contestation and solidarity – the train. Most significantly, in the 1980s, this space was able to facilitate spillage of issues and in a way coordinate programmes of action. According to Shubane (1988: 45), this was reflected by two big strikes, one in 1986 and another 1987. These were facilitated and coordinated en-route to and from work. The 1986 strike involved the then retailer, OK Bazaars; most of its customers were black, and as such, the train was used to promote boycotting the store among commuters. Because commuters are at the same time residents, the message gained traction quickly in black communities as well. In this manner, the train helped build and coordinate organising strategies between workplace based workers movements and

community organisations (Shubane, 1988: 45). Drawing on the findings of this study, I elaborate on this below. First though, the history of the railways in South Africa is outlined.

## 6.2 The Mamelodi-Pretoria CBD Railway Line

The South African railway system dates back to the year 1850, when the concept of rail transport was first proposed and subsequently realised with the building of a 92 kilometre (km) line from Cape Town to Wellington and the Durban Point line (Metrorail, 2016). Passenger commuter rail only came much later in 1860 with a 3km line between Market Square and the customs Point in Durban. Following the Durban railways, the first passenger railways were introduced on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1890 as a 20km line servicing Braamfontein (Johannesburg) and Boksburg. In the same year, and central to this study, was the rail passenger service between Lourenço Marques (present day Maputo) and Pretoria (Metrorail, 2016). The mineral discovery heightened the need to develop a well-integrated and functioning railway to cater for the mining industry, particularly in terms of industrial inputs and labour.

Furthermore, and related to the current discussion, railways were used to effect the apartheid government's segregated residential areas.

Commuter railways have been a transparent and significant force shaping and articulating South Africa's racially segregated cities. Offering mass transport, railways have played a crucial role in making viable the enforced *residential separation of African from their places of employment* in designated white city (Pirie, 1987: 283 emphasis added).

The significance of the train as a facilitative tool to effect racial zoning and the separation of residences and workplace is demonstrated vividly, by the fact that there is a rail line connection between most of South Africa's populous townships and the nearby city centres. The majority of South Africa's major townships, Soweto, Alexandra, Mamelodi, Atteridgeville, Mabopane, Soshanguve, Daveyton, Tembisa, Katlehong, Gugulethu, Nyanga, Langa, Kwa Zakhele, Kwa Mashu and Umlazi are generally linked to the nearest industrial area and or city centre with a rail line (see Pirie, 1985; 1986; Lemon, 1982). This is arguably not coincidental. Being this central to workers' daily work lives, trains and buses were used as pressure points to highlight

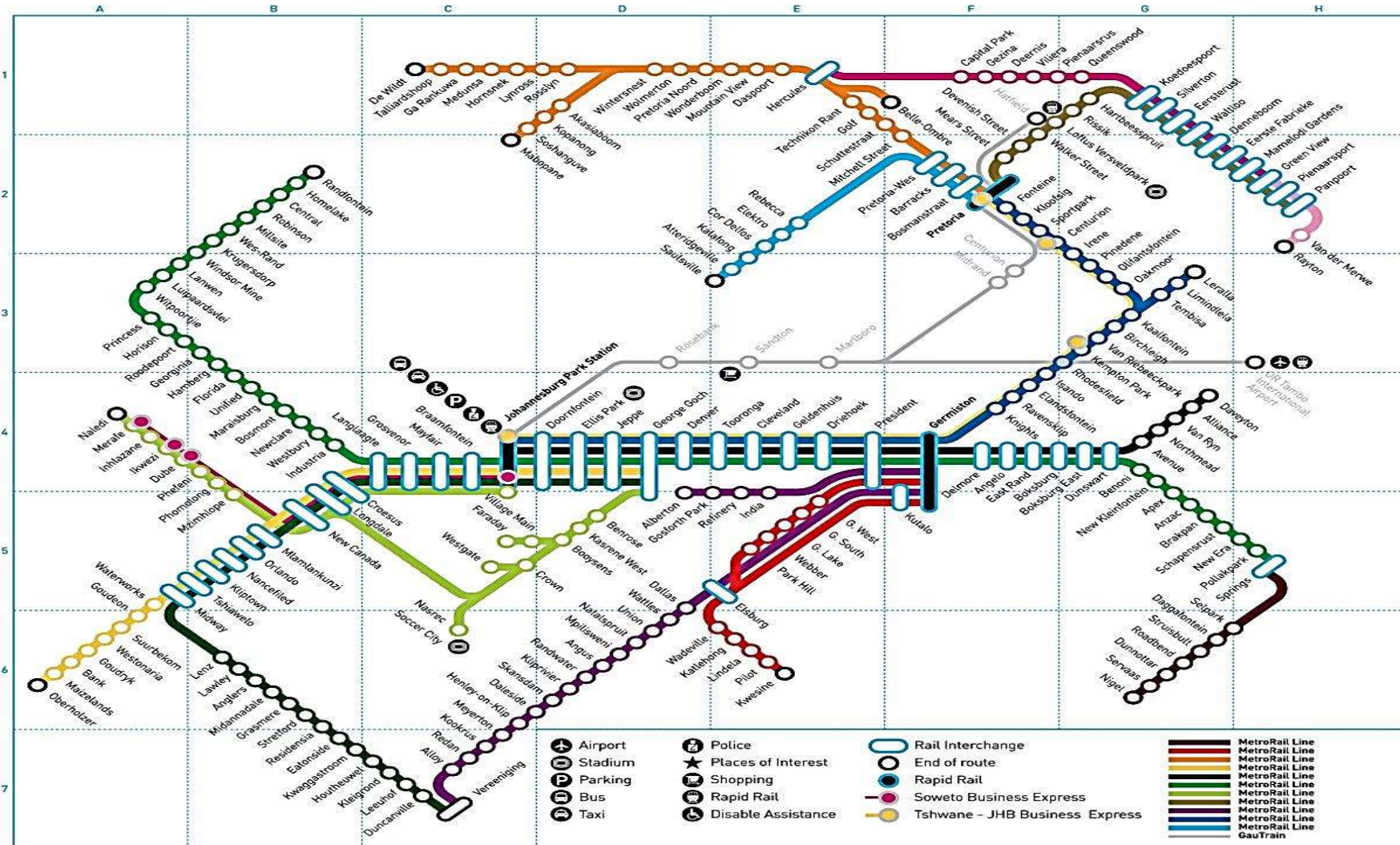
workplace exploitation, e.g refusal to pay higher fares (see Lodge, 1983; 2011; McCarthy & Swelling, 1985; Staddler, 1979).

In Pretoria, trains travelling between the Tshwane metropolitan and the surrounding townships have become important worker convergence sites. The significance of the train in this process can be explained by reference to its rigidity. Unlike other modes of transport such as taxis, trains are regulated by a time schedule controlling departures and arrivals. Because of this, commuters are compelled to congregate at designated departure/arrival sites. It is this need to converge at a particular place at certain times that allow workers the space to socialise and share workplace and community related concerns. By its very nature, the train encourages and facilitates the comradeship and neighbourly identities displayed by the activities associated with the comrades' coach as observed on the Mamelodi train.

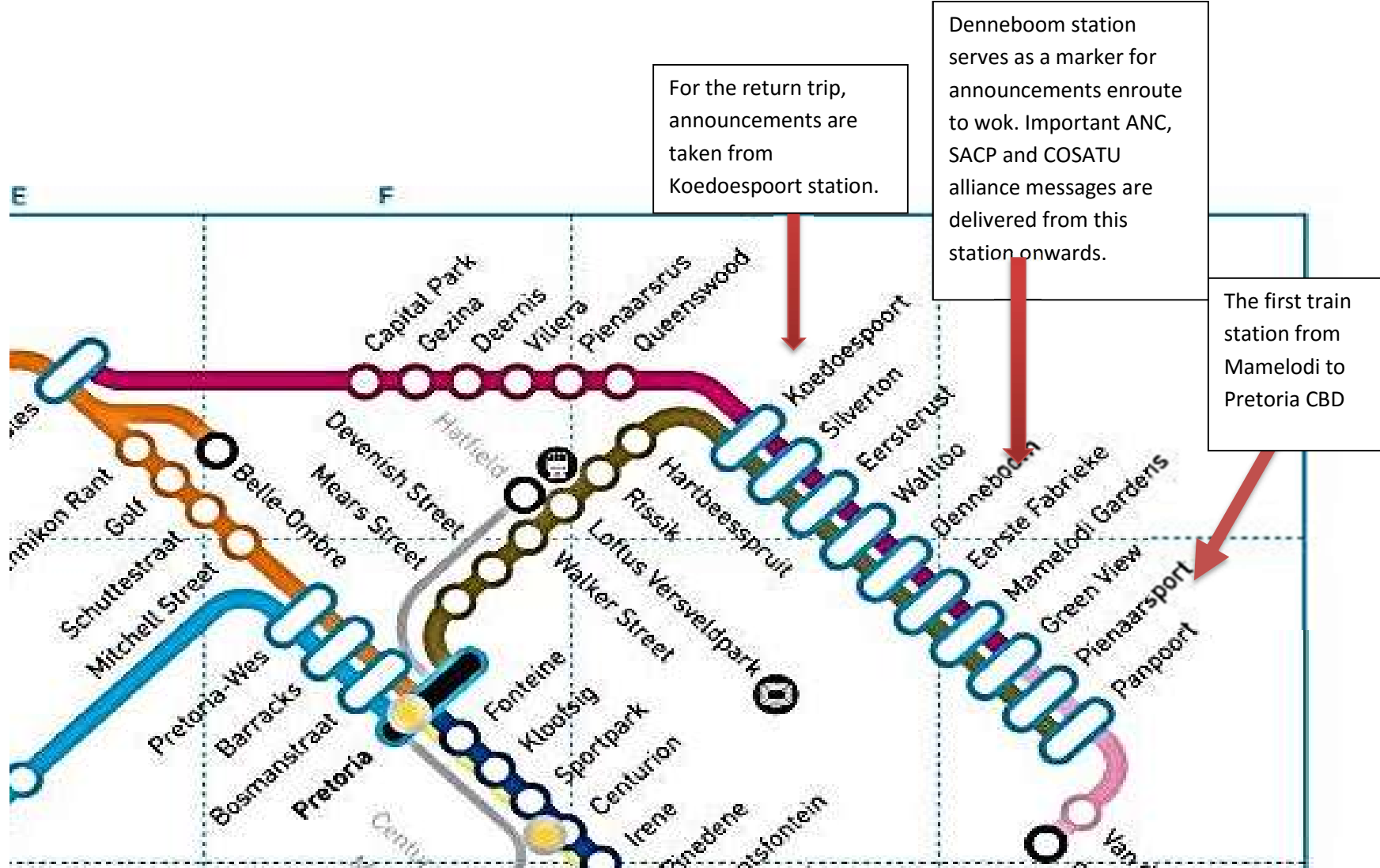
As a township, Mamelodi falls under the City of Tshwane jurisdiction. Of Tshwane's approximately 2.9 million populations, 344,577 reside in Mamelodi. This makes Mamelodi the second biggest township after Shoshaguve with a population of 403,162 (Stats SA 2016). The Mamelodi rail line comprises of the following commuter train stations (from Mamelodi to Tshwane CBD in order of appearance): Pienaarsport, Green View (still under construction), Mamelodi Gardens, Eerste Fabrieke, Denneboom, Watloo, Eersterust, Silverton, Koedoespoort, Hartbeesspruit, Rissik, Loftus Versveld Park, Walker Street, and Pretoria (Bosman) station (Metrorail 2016). The second line diverges from Koedoespoort through the following stations: Queenswood, Pienaarsrus, Vilieria, Dearnis, Gezina and Capital Park (see the attached Map).

The aforementioned stations are not merely geographic spots in the universe, as seen through Harvey's absolute space (see Chapter 3). These commuter train stations are sites of contestation imbued with meanings. To further situate Mamelodi train travel and the findings of this study, I draw from the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) with a view to give meaning to workers' travel experiences. Sociologically, the findings of the NHTS conducted in 2013 (revised and released in 2014 by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) will not only ground the findings contained in this thesis, but will also, graphically amplify the impact of the apartheid spatiality on workers in modern South Africa (see Chapter 3). Linked to this, the abovementioned national study helps

in justifying the chosen theoretical frameworks, that is, labour geography and geography of labour (see Chapter 3). This is because the former is useful in understanding the current geography of travel and the centrality of the train to workers commuting requirements; whereas the latter provides the tools necessary to assess the extent to which en-route mobilising is a strategic choice (refer to the research question and Chapter 2).



Map 1: Mamelodi-Pretoria CBD commuter railway map



Map 2: Magnified section of the Mamelodi-Pretoria CBD commuter railway map.

This section highlights the research's area of focus as represented from blocks E 1-2 to H 1-2.



### 6.2.1 Commuting geographies in perspective

The sociology of commuting, is generally a taken for granted daily norm. This is most likely due to the fact that transport is generally not analysed beyond its functional and mechanical importance. Also, where transport patterns are interrogated, such as the NHTS has done, such exercises are not interested in the experiences of commuting itself. Therefore, commuters' experiences are analysed by such technical questions such as distance between home, workplace and the nearest taxi rank or train station. A number of times commuters transfer between different modes of transportations to and from work. For the purpose of this study, I draw from such technical findings in order to understand the subjective, individual and collective experiences of actual commuting. As Chapter 3 has attempted to illuminate, traveling is an expression of Harvey's trilogy of spaces, more so in a context of a racially slanted social engineering process of geographies of commuting. The particular form of travel landscape to emerge in South Africa therefore deserves a closer inspection in respect of how workers relate to the travail of travel. As the findings of the NHTS (StatSA, 2014) will show, there are variations in terms of modes of transportation usage and preferences. This can be accounted for inter alia by reference to the history of South Africa (see Chapter 3).

Of the 3 modes of public transportation offerings in South Africa, the NHTS notes that the minibus taxi industry is the preferred mode of transportation at 69% of the national share, followed by buses at 20% and lastly, the trains at 9,9 % (StatsSA, 2014). Despite minibus taxis being commuters' preferred mode of travel, the NHTS makes a very important observation:

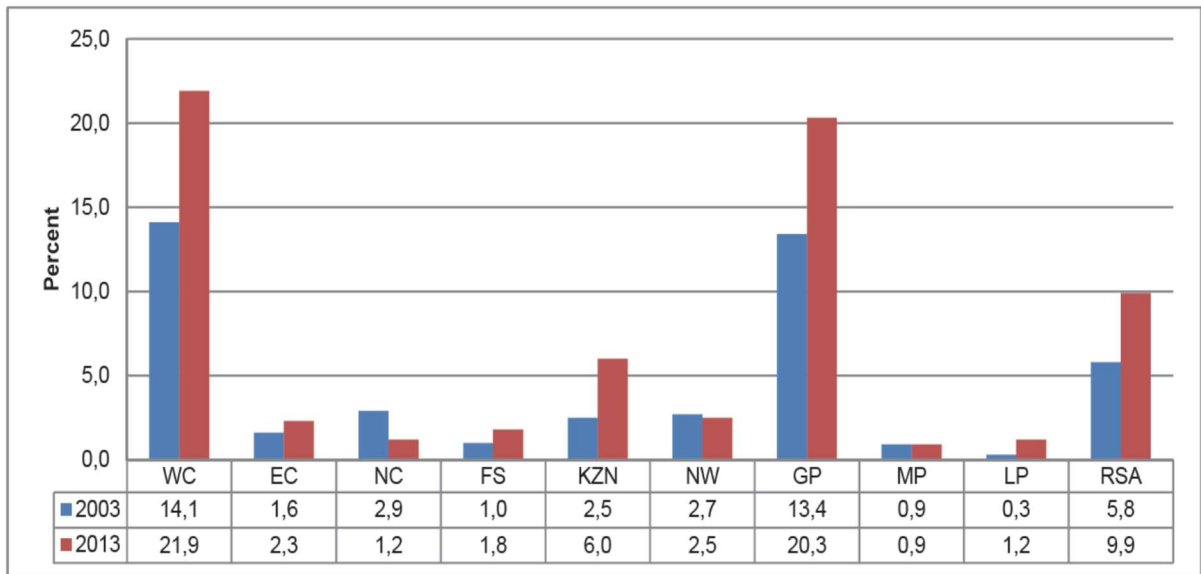
Trains are primarily used for work and education related travel in Western Cape and Gauteng (StatsSA, 2014: 1).

This is a key observation, not only in respect of the geographical particularities of South Africa, but also as it relates to the continued exploitation, and wage inequalities that have to some extent worsened under the neoliberal labour regime (see Chapter 5). This is made even more poignant by the status of the two provinces mentioned in the quote above.

It is a well-known fact that Gauteng is the economic hub of South Africa. This is accentuated by the following statistics that note: about 33, 1% of the 15, 2 million workers in South Africa are located in Gauteng, 16, 0% in KwaZulu-Natal, and 15, 2% in the Western Cape. Most importantly, workers' travel preference should not be understood in isolation. The survey has also pointed out that trains remain the preferred choice of public transportation even for households in both Western Cape and Gauteng province (StatsSA, 2014: 98). This speaks to the significance of the train to the daily mobility of workers and general travel in South Africa. I make this argument, notwithstanding the survey's findings that taxis and buses are the two most dominant modes of travel. The thesis contends that it is because the statistics suffer from the old age weakness about stats – revealing just as much as concealing. This is not, however, to suggest that the findings of NHTS would read different were all things to be equal, but merely to suggest the developmental inequalities resulting from the apartheid spatial planning (see Chapter 2). Indeed, not all of South Africa's nine provinces have a relatively well-developed and integrated rail infrastructure as found in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Thus:

... metro[politan] workers were more likely to use trains than buses as their main mode of transport, and rural workers more likely to use buses than workers of any of the other geography types. Even though similar proportions of metro and urban workers used buses, significantly fewer urban dwellers than metro dwellers used taxis (24,1% compared with 29,6%) and trains (0,8% compared with 9,2%), while significantly more urban dwellers made use of private transport as passengers than metro workers (9,6% compared with 6,4%) (StatsSA, 2014: 39).

This is further elaborated by provincial household usage of the train. The table below reflects percentage of households who used trains during the calendar month preceding the survey by province, for the year 2003 and 2013:

**Table 6.1: Household train usage by province**

Source: NHTS (StatsSA, 2014: 109)

A critical question that sought to probe reasons for low levels of train usage revealed that, in all nine provinces, except the Western Cape and Gauteng, non-availability of the train was the primary reason. It is clear therefore, that the making of the South African working class was uneven process that produced unequal economic and travel geographies across the country. Embedded within the four main historical periods (colonialism, mineral discovery, segregation and apartheid) that fashioned the modern South Africa, these spatial variations are not surprising (see Chapter 2 and 3). Critically, what the NHTS shows, is that in as far as the Gauteng province (location of this study) is concerned, the train has continued to serve its historic purpose as envisioned by the apartheid state, which was to shuttle large numbers of migrant workers from the peripheries into the economic hubs of South Africa. This also explains why the train has continued to be a site of organising for those whose material conditions have not seen any significant improvements post-apartheid (see Chapter 5). The next section pays attention to the Gauteng profile in order to focus much more closely upon the provincial particularities. Of interest is the City of Tshwane profile as one of Gauteng's metropolitan municipalities and location of the study (see Section 6.2).

### 6.2.1.1 Gauteng Profile: City of Tshwane

The National Household Travel Survey, Gauteng profile focused on all of the province's district municipalities, namely; Sedibeng; West Rand; Ekurhuleni; City of Johannesburg and City of Tshwane. This allows the thesis to embed its findings much more concretely. Of course, the survey only looked at the municipalities broadly rather than focus on spatial variations within the municipalities themselves; however, this is still significant as it will demonstrate that workers actions and daily travel experiences do not happen in a vacuum. This is made evident by the survey's target population, which is all private households and residents in workers' hostels across the nine provinces in the country. In seeking to understand the Mamelodi train commuters (MTS members); invariably the study is also a reflection upon the broader community and households.

As the preceding section has already alluded to, the significance of the Gauteng province lies, amongst others, in the fact that the bulk of the country's workers reside in this province (see Section 6.2.1). In as far as the picture we aim to construct is concerned, this section is going to amplify two points in respect of the Gauteng province as a whole and the City of Tshwane in particular. The study zooms in on the following findings by NHTS; first, the number of transfers that train commuters have to make on road to and from work. Second, I pay attention to the amount of time spent travelling to work. These two focal points avail an opportunity to concretise the argument presented in Chapter 3 but also links to the findings presented herein. Amongst others, Chapter 3 attempted to present a narrative that privileged geography/space/place as having played a fundamental role in the making of the South Africa working class. To this extent, it can be expected the aforementioned geographic manipulation will influence, not only on the so-called the 'commutarisation' of the black working class, but also on the distance required to travel between two points. This finds expression in Harvey's matrix of spaces, which include absolute, relative and relational space. In addition, this discussion permits the thesis to link these spaces and the kind of agency and worker power they produce to the broader South African context (see Chapter 2, 3 and 4).

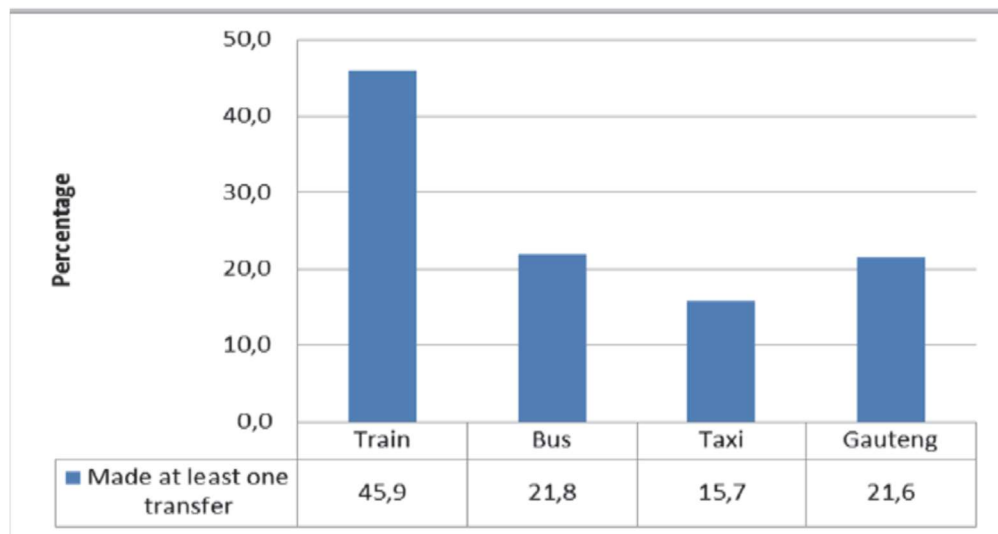
For Burawoy (2009: 203), the kind of commuting to emerge out of apartheid South Africa and persists post-1994 is the outcome of macro forces that have shaped and

influenced workers political views of train travel, an example of structuration (see Chapter 4). For this purpose, and the findings will confirm this, the number of transfers made by train commuters require inevitably, an excellent transportation services and a well-coordinated train arrivals and departure times. This can be linked to MTS's consistent unhappiness about Metrorail and trains that are generally late. For example, a number of workers who reside in the City of Tshwane work in some of the other municipalities listed above, therefore from Pretoria (Bosman) train station they still need to connect with trains to the City of Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni etc. (see train routes map below). The amount of time required to travel to and from work as resulting from the 'commuterisation' process can be suggested, it provides MTS an opportunity to carry out its activities. This might explain why MTS divided its programme as per specific train stations in both directions. For example, observations reveal that travelling from Pienaarsport station in Mamelodi to Pretoria, Denneboom station is the marker for announcements (see train routes map below). In the reverse direction, Koedoespoort serves the same purpose.

Regarding transfers, NHTS (StatsSA, 2014: 41) notes the following:

... approximately 22% of workers who used public transport made at least one transfer in the province. Workers travelling by train (45, 9%) were more likely to make transfers than workers travelling by bus (21, 8%) and taxi (15, 7%).

**Table 6.2: Commuter transport transfers**



Source: NHTS (StatsSA, 2014: 41)

The percentages displayed by the table above clearly show that train commuters have a higher propensity to switch between modes of travel compared to buses and taxis. As already suggested above, this is likely to present problems if not well managed. Also, this points to the fact that, in addition to workplace related angers (these includes amongst others the low wages that these workers are paid, as a result of which they have to rely on trains for transportation), MTS members are also affected by service delivery provisions such as lack of quality transportation. This shows that MTS and its members are confronted by both capital and state constructed geographies (see Chapter 3). In drawing connections between Chapter 2 and 3, this section seeks to weave the everyday travel experiences into the intersection between class, race and geography (see Chapter 2 and 3).

Observations carried out for this study evidently shows that train disruptions such as delayed departures and or arrivals tend to have a ripple effect due to the geography of rail transportation as currently laid out. This can be related to Posel's (2012) "geographies of distance and proximity" (see Chapter 3). The amount of time required to travel to work is shockingly high, for the City of Tshwane in particular, it is clear that train commuters are the most affected by this. To this extend, the survey notes:

... that train users needed more time than users of any other mode to reach their workplaces. They needed on average 102 minutes to travel to work and about 72% took more than an hour to reach their workplaces. In City of Tshwane, those who used trains needed on average 100 minutes to travel to work and about 73% took more than an hour to reach their workplaces (StatSA, 2014: 50).

It is, without a doubt, that the abovementioned evidence of time utilised to traverse the landscape to and from work is undesirable. For MTS however, this time is being used to forge new forms of solidarities, space and comradeship with positive spinoffs for worker organising. With this background in mind, below I turn attention to what participant observations reveal. I start by detailing the history of organising on the trains and offer a descriptive sketch of the organisation under study and how it is structured.

### 6.3 Mamelodi Train Sector

The history of workers organising on the trains dates back to the 70s, at the height of the labour unrest in South Africa. Organising on the trains came about as a:

Defensive unit in Pretoria as a result of what was happening on the East Rand with Inkatha (Interview with comrade Maphila, 27 Aug 2016).

This is in reference to the violence that broke out in the so-called KATORUS – Katlehong, Thokoza, and Vosloorus – region (for a detailed analysis of the violence and its consequences see Bonner & Ndima, 1999; Sitas, 1996; and Segal, 1991). This defensive unit was founded with the aim of keeping workers updated with developments from various workplaces but also to provide protection. In as far as protection was concerned, dialect was a key identifier of those who were not from Pretoria. This was because:

Pretoria Zulu is different (Interview with comrade Maphila, 27 Aug 2016).

The violence was perpetuated by Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters. Thus, as the above quote by Mr Maphila makes clear, Zulus were a threat to the security of fellow workers. Significantly, geography was used effectively to build solidarity. In this case, those who were not from Pretoria spoke a different Zulu dialect. Arguably, the formation of the ‘defensive unit’ was not only concerned with protecting human lives against the said violence, but also to protect the *Pretoria space*. As a distinct group of workers who occupies a specified space, migrants and hostel dwellers, the Zulus triggered a sense of purpose and a display of agency by workers based in Pretoria who needed to protect the economic space against a particular form of threat. Most Mamelodi residents travel to and work in municipalities such as the City of Johannesburg, West Rand and Ekurhuleni hence the exposure to the violence in the KATORUS area. The amounts of time spend by City of Tshwane commuters travelling to work attest to this fact. For those in Pretoria, it was important to guard against outside infiltration that could potentially destroy the working class. Put differently, place was used to protect space embedded in geographic demarcation, resulting in a socio-spatial dialect (see Chapter 3). In other contexts, as much as in Pretoria, train organising has also been attributed to the apartheid spatiality. Gordon (1992: 178)

finds that the train provided the legal loophole to navigate against the apartheid state's restrictions on political activities. For example, following the declaration of the State of Emergency in 80s, the train assumed a very significant role as a point of convergence (see also Shubane, 1988). As outdoor gatherings were banned, the train was utilised to subvert apartheid and its security apparatus:

Train rallies ... [became the] new expression of the way in which public transport has long been used, both literally and figuratively, to mobilise political resistance in South Africa (Gordon, 1992: 179).

Indeed, the apartheid engineered geography of travel, race and class relations coalescence on train platforms, giving expression to a humanity of those oppressed and exploited as cheap and exploited migrants. This can be linked also to the economic conditions of those who ride on trains who are predominately lowest paid wage-earners (Shubane, 1988: 46). Because of this, Shubane (1988: 45) seems to suggest the train was most convenient as a meeting place for those politically inclined. This can be explained with reference to the train's centrality in the lives of commuters.

This reflects Harvey's trilogy of spaces and Soja's socio-spatial dialect (see Chapter 3). Interestingly, this also speaks to Posel's 'geographies of distance and proximities' (see Chapter 3). The distance that workers travelled together to work allowed them the much-needed space to forge new identities and forms of community, resulting in geography of proximity. A number of spaces therefore, found articulation on the train. To restate, Shubane notes the close proximity between COSATU House (formerly Khotso House) and train stations as having facilitated the process of spillage. The spatial planning that produced the commuterisation of black workers inadvertently led to class, race and geographically intertwined form of community and closeness. This suggests that to some degree, the train was utilised in subverting the logic of apartheid spatial planning and state machinery on the one hand and capital's instrument of controlling labour supply on the other. As Gordon has pointed out, the journeys to and from work were not undertaken by units of cargo. This is attested to by the formation of organisations such as MTS which were formed in pursuit of workers' interests.

With the advent of democracy, the defensive unit was formally constituted into the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2001 with the following aims and objectives as spelled out in the constitution:



- To encourage workers to join trade unions that are COSATU affiliates
- To encourage the working class to join the ANC, SACP, and SANCO
- To discuss workers' problems and adhere to the policies and programmes of the tripartite alliance
- To educate workers and share information in the carriages with a view to promote issues of national interests and to align with government programmes
- To build solidarity by striving for a united working-class movement regardless of race, gender, religion, colour, creed and sex
- To support and promote the struggle for the right of the working class and finally
- To promote safety and security on the trains.

It is clear that MTS took on a new role to that was referred to by comrade Maphila. It was no longer concerned with subverting the logic of the state of the emergency of the 80s as observed by Shubane (1988) and Gordon (1992). Those who joined the organisation post-1994 were motivated by different reasons:

I joined MTS in 2004, and by then remember the organisation was 3 years in existence because it was only officially launched in 2001. And I will explain some of the reasons that motivated the formation of this organisation. The organisation was formed because workers did not have a place to meet as workers only, except at the workplace. So, they started using the train as a meeting space where they can discuss workplace related problems. Then now it happens that because of the frustrations from work, they started to organise themselves in an organisation. That is why it was called a sector on the train. And one of the important elements of this, which I seek to bring to your attention and emphasize, is that when the organisation was formed because, ehh it was formed by members of the ANC, Communist party and ... COSATU so they said ... because of the frustrations let us organise ourselves and begin to engage on issues that serve as challenges at various workplaces. If your employer is giving you problems, you share that problem with comrades in the coach (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

I joined MTS a long time ago. It was officially launched in 2001, but I joined while still a hostel dweller located at B3. I became a hostel

dweller from 1994, so I joined from 1996. So, by 1996 I was with MTS. We had an alliance with Mabopane, Ga-Rankua and Atteridgeville and by that time they were very strong. They were having these alliance meetings to discuss issues to do with Mabopane, Atteridgeville, Ga-Rankua and Mamelodi ... we all belonged to Tshwane Train Sector (TTS) as an upper structure...MTS is a train based structure focused on commuters. It is not a union and it is not a political organisation ... its purpose is to mobilise workers that are inside the train and commuters. We'll touch issues that are work related and will touch issues that are concerning us in terms of our transportation (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 9 Sep 2017).

Clearly, organising the train is arguably strategic. However, it is important note that it was, in some respect also out of necessity.

Comrade Maphila reflects on how it difficult and risky it was to organise in the 80s:

In fact, you remind me of something important to mention. That in all the companies that we were trying to organise. We only discovered later on, that all males, who were introduced as foremans turned out to be special branch. Most companies, where we organised, we had special branch, which is why the state was so highly informed. Because their method of infiltration was classical, you wouldn't notice it. Because of the infiltration, for most workers who were employed in companies that where located at Watloo, we met at the Mamelodi hall for our meetings as workers (Interview with Comrade Maphila, 27 Aug 2016).

The interview extracts quoted above are an elaboration of MTS members' understanding of its role and purpose as advanced in the founding constitution of 2001. Clearly, the organisation can be said to be a broad church (open to all workers) with an aim to provide workers a platform from which to discuss, educate and provide guidance in relations to workplace challenges. However, workers' identity is presented as being inherently intertwined with that of being a commuter. In some way, this is also a commentary on the workerist and populist debate presented in Chapter 3.

This suggests that the geography of capital and the geography of the state have certain obligations in respect of the citizenry on the one hand, and workers on the

other. Chapter 3 outlines how the racist capitalist system that took place in South Africa from 1800 required an approach that embedded workers' agency at the intersection between these two forces (see also Chapter 2). In the next section, I pay attention to MTS's organisational structure. Observations indicate that the leadership collective is elected by workers on the train. The elected officials take decisions based on the so called "democratic centralism" as stipulated in Section 3 of the constitution (MTS 2001). Based on the number of trains that MTS organise, there is to be an elected leadership per train.

### **6.3.1 Organisational Structure**

As per the constitution, MTS leadership structures are constituted in the following manner:

1. The President – who is the political head and the chief directing officer of MTS and thus has the powers to (a) preside over meetings; (b) conduct meetings as per the provisions of the constitution; and (c) shall be the ex-officio member of all structures.
2. Deputy President – exercises the powers and duties of the president in his/her absence and is the head of the disciplinary committee (DC).
3. General Secretary – is the chief administration officer of MTS.
4. Deputy General Secretary – Deputise for the general secretary where necessary.
5. Treasure General – chief custodian of the funds and property of MTS (MTS, 2001).

In addition to the top five positions, five additional members are elected to form the top ten, constituting the Executive Committee (MTS, 2001). The term of office for all elected positions is a maximum of two years. Train coaches are also governed in a similar fashion:

1. Train chairperson – elected from the floor and is in charge of the specific coach on the specific train.
2. Deputy Chairperson – elected from the floor and exercises the powers and responsibilities of the chairperson in his/her absence.

3. Train treasurer – is in charge of members joining fee as collected with respect to the specific coach. Expected to present complete financial statements to the executive committee in respect of the monies collected from members.
4. Train secretary – administrator of the coach. Expected to assume leadership responsibility in the absence of both the chairperson and deputy chairperson.
5. Deputy secretary – exercises the powers of the general secretary in his/her absence (MTS, 2001).

Moreover, the aforementioned are expected to recruit members on behalf of MTS and the tripartite alliance as a whole. Train chairpersons, together with the leadership collective, are expected to brief the Executive Committee meetings about developments in their respective coaches. The organisation is, to some extent, modelled around the ANC and its structures as the leader of the alliance. As the constitution makes conspicuously clear, MTS is an organisation dedicated to the needs of workers, but also workers as citizens. Furthermore, membership is also open to students/pupils who travel on the train. Individual workers join MTS for a membership fee of R50.00 and R20.00 for students/pupils and thereafter a R20.00 yearly renewal for workers and R10.00 for students/pupils (MTS, 2001).

The aforementioned monetary amounts, together with the trains that MTS organises, underline the fact that the organisation is a working-class movement. Recruitment of students/pupils is a strategic political exposure that is likely to ignite a particular kind of political consciousness. This is substantiated by the information collected during one-on-one interviews. Asked to provide reasons why they joined MTS, most participants draw from early influences and exposures in their lives:

... ehh, why ke feditse ke ba le comrade? Kefeditse ke e ba le comrade basically while I still young at home. Ehh, Ke tswa ko Limpopo<sup>9</sup> area in the name of Tatisano, surround ehh, Skhukhune area, next to Jane Furse. So basically, what happened, from the village where I come from, ke plak ye go tletšeng ntho e re e bitsang gore ke maComrade. Ge ke gopola gabotse the last national rally in the province, the last

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<sup>9</sup> Limpopo is one of South Africa's nine provinces. Located to the northern part of the country and inhabited mostly by Pedi, Venda and Tsonga speakers.

national rally that was organised before this democracy ebe e le kua motseng wa geshu ... (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

Translation:

... ehh why I ended up being a comrade? I ended up being a comrade basically while I still young at home. Ehh, I come from Limpopo area in the name of Tatisano, around ehh, Skhuhune area, next to Jane Furse. So basically, what happened, from the village where I come from, it is an area populated mostly by the so-called comrades. If I remember correctly the last national rally in the province, the last national rally that was organised before this democracy took place in my village (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

The labour sociologist, Sakhela Buhlungu (2010a) has highlighted how early experiences in churches, self-help societies etc. played an important formative role in the re-emergence of the 1973 unions. These, combined with early experiences of unionism, date back to the 1950s. Therefore, the contact with MTS activities by those without workplace organisation and the school going pupils is likely to influence decisions to join civic and workplace based pressure groups. Comrade Moela had this to say of his early exposure:

... let's start by why ke le comrade, back to my roots! See when I was young; ke goletše ko plekeng ye bareng ke ga Mashabela, lining ya Jane Furse. Ge ke gola this thing ya di COSAS<sup>10</sup> ne dise teng ko ga borena kua. Ne dise teng kabaka lagore ke ko dinaga magaeng. Mara re gotše mo e leng gore ne relebeletše di conditions tše di ne di feisa motse ...setšaba sa ga Mashabela. Yaba gore go na le batho ba ebeng ele maComrade kwa gaborena kua, some be ele gore ba tšwa bo Zambia under the military wing of the African National Congress ...after 1994 these people ne ele gore ge o dutše fase lebona ba re hlalošetša dilo tše ne diriyega. Yaba gore le rena re tšeya that mentality wa bona regola ka ona. So I became a comrade at the age of 11 years. It was a time where I started to engage in politics ... (Interview with comrade Moela, 09 Aug 2017).

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<sup>10</sup> COSAS stands for the Congress of South African Students. It was established in June 1979 to champion the interests of black students.

## Translation:

... let's start by why I am a comrade. Back to my roots! See when I was young; I grew up at a place called Mashabela near Jane Furse. When I was growing up we were not exposed to organisations such as COSAS because we did not have them in the rural areas. But we grow up in an era in which the community of Mashabela as a whole was faced with particular kinds of social conditions. So because of those conditions we had the so called comrades at Mashabela, some of which had been to Zambia under the military wing of the African National Congress ... after 1994 we spent a lot of time with them and they explained our past. So we adopted their mentality and grew up thinking in that mode. So I became a comrade at the age of 11 years. It was a time where I started to engage in politics ... (Interview with comrade Moela, 09 Aug 2017).

It can be inferred from the extracts above that political consciousness is influenced by a number of conditions. At the very basic level, key amongst these is exposure. It is for this reason that MTS's role should be broadly understood. Kabeer's work is instructive in this regard. This is because its influence is likely to permeate across spaces (scale). Whilst its activities are scaled at the body, such bodies traverse space regularly and as such can easily spread influence (see Chapter 3). Below, I amplify this point further with a focus on the trains MTS organises.

#### **6.4 Mzabalazo on the move!**

The title of this theme refers to a literal description of MTS. Mzabalazo is vernacular for struggle and or to organise/mobilise (see also Shubane, 1988). Thus, 'mzabalazo on the move' describes the fact that MTS as an organisation, is organising and mobilising on a mobile space. This description is important for how I conceptualise the train. The existence of MTS is revealing of the train as a worker space (refer to section 6.1 and Chapter 2). Significantly, this space opens up the possibility of the comrades' coach as a substitute for the erstwhile meaning laden workplace. I draw on David Harvey's concept of 'spatial fix' in order to concretise this line of argument. Harvey (2001: 24) describes spatial fix as capitalism's ability to resolve its internal crisis tendencies by geographic expansion and or restructuring. By drawing parallels with

'technological fixes', Harvey points out that his use of the concept seeks to highlight capitalism's continuous and innovative ways through which to ensure profits.

With the trains as a reference point, this study is an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the comrades coach can be positioned as a particular form of spatial fix, albeit workers'. This labour centred spatial fix arguably runs parallel to Harvey's capital centred spatial fix, yet in an opposite direction. That is to say, capitalism centred spatial fix is deployed as a strategy to weaken labour, while labour centred spatial fix is employed to achieve the reverse (see Herod, 1997: 26 and Chapter 3). Below I provide a detailed descriptive picture of the comrades' coach with a view to highlight opportunities and constraints associated with this space as a 'fix'.

#### En-route to work

The findings of this study point out that MTS organises six trains from Pienaarspoort to Pretoria, viz:

**Table 6.3: Train departure times from Pienaarspoort train station**

<b>Train No.</b>	<b>Departure Time</b>	<b>Coach No.</b>
9166	04:31 am	Could not observe activities due to train disruptions
9121	04:50 am	Number 3 from front
9110	05:34 am	Number 4 from front
9112	05:52 am	Number 3 from front
9116	06: 18 am	Number 3 from front
9168	06:34 am	Number 3 from front

Train number 9168 is the last organised train of the morning rush. It can be interpreted that this train is used by workers who work in and around Pretoria and are generally not expected at work before 08:00 am in the morning.

#### En-route home

The following are afternoon to evening trains travelling from Pretoria to Pienaarspoort station in Mamelodi.

**Table 6.4: Train departure times from Pretoria/Bosman train station**

Train No.	Departure Time	Coach No.
9147	16:40 pm	Could not observe activities due train disruptions
9197	17:00 pm	Number 4 from the back
9153	17:15 pm	Could not observe activities due train disruptions
9155	17:35 pm	Coach number 4 from the back
9191	17:37 pm	Coach number 4 from the back
9157	18:00 pm	Coach number 4 from the back

Observations reveal that issues discussed in the coaches seem to be influenced by the geographical direction. This has motivated the need to delineate the two directions. To this end, the study finds that morning trains (from Pienaarspoort to Pretoria) generally pay attention to community/alliance related topics. In contrast, afternoon trains tend to focus more on shopfloor/legislative education. In the subsequent section, I provide an ethnographic discussion on issues addressed en-route to work and en-route home.

En-route to work: train no 9121 19 May 2016

In coach number 4, and as is customary, the day's proceedings are opened with the singing of the national anthem: Inkosi sikelela' iAfrika. During the singing of the national anthem, all present rise and men take off their hats. Once completed, the chairperson opened his address by greeting fellow workers with the traditional and struggle inspired Amandla! (Power), followed by Awethu! (Power is ours). "Comrades rekgopela ditsibiso" (comrades can we have announcements). With no one having anything to announce, he proceeded.

*Okay 'MaCom'11 nna kena le ditsibiso tše tharo (I have 3 announcements to make). 1) Comrades please be reminded the 23rd of May is the last day of voter registration and comrades must thus make an effort to register in order to be eligible to participate in the*

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<sup>11</sup> 'MaCom' is shorter version and colloquial/slang of saying comrades in plural.



*upcoming local elections. 2) The ANC will be hosting its regional manifesto launch in Atteridgeville (one of the biggest townships in Tshwane) on the 29th of May 2016. Comrades are encouraged to attend the event in numbers and show support for the ruling party. 16 buses will leave from Mamelodi on the day and details around departure points will be communicated soon. 3) On the 4th of June, ANC will be launching the provincial manifesto at the First National Bank (FNB) stadium. Again, buses will be organised to ferry comrades to the stadium.*

Following the announcements, the chairperson appealed to his fellow commuters to bring issues forward so that they can be discussed, and solutions proposed. “So maCom sebaka se ke salena, bolelang” (Thus comrades this is your platform to raise issues and concerns). With no one taking the stage, the chairperson proceeded to point out the problems associated with current train disruptions. Trains are always late, and of concern to the chairperson is that comrades will end up losing their jobs if the rail upgrades are not completed quickly (Metrorail started with rail upgrades in April 2016 and the project is expected to be finished in September of same year). He shared with the coach that MTS was busy organising a community meeting to deal with this issue and that it was important for workers to attend such a gathering so that metrorail can be made aware of problems affecting workers:

Maabane ke tšaišhitše mmerekong ka 15:30 mara ke fihlile ko gae ka 7pm ka baka la problem ye ya di terene. Maabane ranta e wele gape lekga la boraro mo ngwageng o. Bjale peterolo e tlo e ketšwa ka 50c beke e tlang ka la boraro. Dilo tše ka moka digodimo g arena rele ba bereki. Kgwedi e tlang, Metrorail le yeno e tlo nametša ditikite, mara kamo diterene ga di sepele ga botse (Observations, 19 May 2016).

Translation:

Yesterday I knocked off work at 15:30 and only arrived home at 7pm due to this problem with the trains. Yesterday the rand plunged yet again for the third time this year; therefore, petrol will go up by 50c next week Wednesday. All these problems affect us as workers. Next month, Metrorail is also planning to increase train fares, yet currently the trains are disorganised. We need to organise comrades! People

always expect comrades to do something about transport problems, yet when we call out a community meeting they don't attend (Observations, 19 May 2016).

As can be gleaned from the activities described above, the train provide workers with an important space to discuss and strategies around workplace and community issues. Most important, train is also used as a campaigning platform by the ANC and its alliance partners. This is a space for education, friendships and to mobilise for community issues. In contrast to the above, the following was observed on train number 9157 from Pretoria to Pienaarspoort.

*En-route home: train no. 9157 20 October 2015*

Following the singing of the national anthem, the chairperson greets all present and start to outline 'house rule:

MaCom rena le melao kamo le coaching kage kamoka le tseba. Rule no. 1 ke gore gare bolele kamoka kamo coaching. Rule no 2 mabati a terene a swanetšwe go tsalla. Gare nyake batho mo mabating ge terene e sepela. Rule no. 3 kamo gare je ebile gare nwe. Re nwa fela meetsi a sedisa maCom. Rule no. 4 di peke redibeya mo go dulang merwalo. Rule no. 5 kamo gare bale di newspapers.

Translation:

Comrades we have rules in this coach, as I am sure most of you are aware the rules are as follows. Rule no.1 is that there is no chatting in this coach. Rule no. 2 all the trains doors will remain closed when train is in motion. Rule no. 3 no drinking and eating is allowed in this coach. You are only allowed to drink water in this coach and nothing else. Rule no. 4 bags must be placed in designated luggage areas. And rule no. 5 is that we don't read newspapers in this coach.

With rules outlined, the chairperson encourages the workers to proudly occupy coach no.4 on train 9157. He declares that today is Tuesday and that Tuesdays are complaints day for all work related matters. It just so happens that both the president and general secretary of MTS are on board this coach today as such the chairperson invites both to address the workers and take charge of proceedings. Noticing the researcher's presence, the president invited the

researcher to greet workers and talk a little bit about his presence on the train for the benefit of those who might be seeing me for the first time. I used the opportunity to greet workers and talked about how excited I am about the daily worker activities on the train and why such activities must be documented.

After I sat down, the president invited workplace related grievances. There was none from those present in the coach and the president took this opportunity to point out why MTS and political organisations such as the ANC are important. The train pulled-up into Koedoespoort station meaning it is now time for announcements. Announcements were as follows 1) there is a national executive committee meeting at Mahlasedi Masana Primary School (in Mamelodi) on Sunday the 25th of October 2015. 2) Are tsebaneng (let's get to know each other; it's an end of the year function hosted by MTS with the aim of building unity among comrades. Further the event is hosted in order for comrades to get to know each other) is to be held at Nellmapius (date to be confirmed). Lastly 3) there is an employment opportunity at the Union Buildings (the seat of the South African government). Those interested must bring certified copies of their South African identity document (ID) and hand it to the chairperson who will deliver to the relevant people.

Because it's October, the president makes a plea to fellow workers who are parents to allow matric pupils time to study for their final examinations. Once again, the floor is opened for workplace related complaints to cater for those workers who got on to the train along the railway corridor. A question is raised from the floor around the fact that there are train fare increases but that workers do not see any improvements in train services from Metrorail. The chairperson stood-up to answer this one question and pointed out that MTS have raised this issue before with PRASA (Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa) management and that more engagements was required on this matter. The president indicated that comrades must come up with tomorrow (Wednesday)'s big issue (Wednesday is big issues day).

“Comrade Mama”<sup>12</sup> the president called out as one lady stood up to take the floor after having put-up her hand. She asked a question regarding her colleague who was given a suspension letter after a physical altercation with another colleague at work. Her grievance was that it would seem as if the employer’s decision (to suspend her colleague) was biased. She emphasised the significance of her question especially because most of the workers in the coach are un-unionised. She and her colleague are NEHAWU (National, Education, Health and Allied Workers Union) members but that unfortunately her colleague was outsourced from NetCare to Campus – luckily that she has retained her union membership.

The problem however, was that the union was reluctant to represent her colleague at the hearing because she is outsourced despite her being a member in good standing. Meaning she is technically un-unionised. In response the president indicated that NEHAWU has a duty to represent her colleague because she is still a member in good standing. NEHAWU shopstewards must assist the president insisted.

So, this will be tomorrow’s big issue the president declared: “When an employee is faced with a disciplinary hearing (DC)”. The president pointed to one of the comrades (whom he made known that he was a shopsteward) to come prepared tomorrow and educate fellow workers on this particular issue. The MTS president cautioned against self-representation in disciplinary hearings. He pointed out the importance of being represented in order to avoid getting emotional and making mistakes during DC proceedings. Also, he said if you are alone in a DC it means you have no witnesses. Thus, in the event of a dispute, it will be your word against that of the employer and such a scenario weakens the employee’s case. At this point the train pulled-up into Pienaarspoort station.

In some way, the above allows me to unpack the research question informing this study i.e. who travels on the train and to what extent can trains be used as worker spaces? Related to this is a question requiring much urgent attention – to what extent

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to female comrades. Mama is a culturally respectful term meant to acknowledge women and their role as mothers or as elders.

can the train address some of the labour movement's short-comings such as the weakness emanating from the destruction of the workplace as a site of worker identity; solidarity and militancy? While the above passage indicates that workers are being emansculated by capital led strategies such as outsourcing. For MTS members, the information provided in these coaches can be used as a resource (Kabeer, 1999: 436-7). The manner in which some of the discussions around worker education are phrased and framed shows clearly that most of the workers in the coach are un-unionised. Despite this, they are able to benefit from MTS as a power resource, organisationally speaking (See Chapter 5).

Conceptually, drawing on Harvey's 'spatial fix' and Anderson's concept of 'resonant place, to what degree can the train be used to bring into the fold, those workers most affected by what Theron refers to as a 'trinity of interlocking processes?' (see Chapter 5). In trying to answer these questions, I draw from the findings of this study. The findings speak directly to some of the above questions.

The sections to follow are organised into themes and sub-themes as dictated largely by the data collected. Themes are however; drawn more from the observations as the main source of information, whilst one-on-one interviews are used to fill in the gaps (see Chapter 5).

## **6.5 Union Locals?**

The following are highlighted in the literature reviewed in relations to the South African labour movement. Firstly, the existence of hierarchical class relations between union leaders and ordinary members. This hierarchy has, in fact, widened the gap between leaders and rank and file, thus subverting democratic participation by members in decision making. Secondly, the South African labour movement has been bureaucratised with union leaders emerging as bureaucrats. A causality of the foregoing trends has been, amongst others, the negligence of local level structures (See Buhlugu, 2010 and Chapter 4). The abovementioned signalled the weakening of the labour movement as capital ascended into power through the informalisation of work.

Contrary to the picture painted above, Silver (2003) presents a much more nuanced analysis as opposed to a juggernaut process of weakening and waning union influence

(see Chapter, 5). Silver (2003: 19) discerns an intricate process through which labour is 'unmade', newly 'made' and 'remade' in different geographic contexts. The findings in this study affirms Silver's argument as South Africa's working class is faced with new challenges that have, to some extent, fractured old identities and sources of power (see Chapter 3 and 5). The fracturing of the workplace as a worker space has surely encapsulated the unmaking and remaking of the South African working class.

The comrades' coach is a meeting place for both elected leaders and the rank and file membership of MTS. Furthermore, the participation of members is actively encouraged. For example, the weekly activities are structured in the following manner: Tuesday and Thursdays are '*complaints*' days, conversely 'MaCom' are encouraged to bring complaints for discussion. Wednesdays are '*big issue*' day. Workers are expected to raise topical issues that speak to workplace and or community concerns. As such, the following were observed on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2015:

*The chairperson complained about train schedules being late particularly in the afternoons. Trains are fewer in the afternoon and as such commuters' complaint about the space occupied and reserved for comrades and their activities.*

Linked to this, another complaint was registered in respect of train fares increases, despite the lack of improvement in services. The chairperson pointed out that they (MTS) have raised this particular matter with PRASA management on several occasions. The sort of interactions detailed here, arguably are reminiscent of old labour movement traditions such as mandated report backs. Mandated report backs, as union practices have been almost unmade by the era of bureaucratic unions (see Buhlungu, 2010a). This shows the extent to which worker experiences of absolute, relative and relational spaces can be fluid and evolving (see Chapter 3). By raising these complaints in the coach, elected MTS leadership is expected to act upon such complaints and, therefore, provide feedback to workers. Furthermore, the manner in which MTS has structured its activities is to ensure that it fills important gaps left by the demise of the erstwhile local unions and street committees. Below I demonstrate how workers draw from these spaces in order to give meaning and identity to their comradeship. As a worker locale, the train is a space occupied by a particular societal class stratum.

### 6.5.1 Socio-economic position: “Barekishi ba matsogo”

It would seem, in as far as the findings of this study suggests, that over and above being workers’ space, comrades’ coach also attach a particular identity to its occupants. Arguably, this shared identity is used to affirm solidarity among workers. What this finding points to, is that the hierarchical class divisions among workers as observed by Buhlungu (2010a) and others (see also Buhlungu & Bezuidenhout, 2008; Satgar & Southall, 2015) can be attributed to only certain spaces (sectors) of the economy (see Chapter 5). As already indicated above, workers in shopsteward positions travel on this coach (See Section 6.4).

This in itself does not mean class divisions do not exist, merely that the hierarchical class gap is yet to manifest in this space. Under careful analysis, the data reveals, these workers share an identity specific to the space they occupy – a class position informed by their material conditions. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2016 the following occurred. The chairperson in the coach reminded all those present in the coach about the importance of joining unions. The significance of this message was amplified by a comrade shouting:

Kamoka ro rekisha matsogo ko bo Koekemoer (Observations, 03 May 2016).

Translation:

All of us present in this coach, we are going to sell our hands to the Koekemoer (Observations, 03 May 2016).

‘Selling hands’ refer to the fact that the train is occupied by those who sell their labour power to owners of means of production. Importantly, the above quote seeks to also distinguish between those who ‘sell hands’ as blacks and generally travel on the train and resides in one of the many South African townships. The owners of means of production are generally white Afrikaners, hence the reference to the surname Koekemoer (see Chapter 2). These are geographies of race and class. The significance of the aforementioned differentiation is not only embodied by the spatial (absolute, relative and relational) (see Chapter 3) experience of the two racial groups but that fundamentally, this distinction is a rallying call for solidarity. A further interrogation of the group identity – “Barekishi ba matsogo”, reveals a reference to the

material conditions of this group. This is also reinforced by shouting such things as: “Opela le wena o dula mokhukhung” (sing you too live in a shack). This brings to the fore the material conditions of the occupants thus underscoring the importance of organising. This speaks to the manner in which these workers frame their identities. For this reason, they underline the need for unity based on a common racial and class position. This manner of identity politics is also reflected in the songs they sing, and the meaning attached. Being a shack dweller speaks to the dual role of MTS as both a worker organisation but also a campaigning structure for the ANC led alliance. As such, workers are able to use MTS’s influence on local politics to push for demands around basic services such as low cost houses (see Chapter 7).

Drawing from Harvey’s (2006) matrix of spaces and Ed Soja’s (1985) socio-spatial dialectic, the findings of this study show that worker solidarity cannot simply be understood and framed in class terms, but that an interplay between race, class and geographically informed identity politics give rise to a resilient form of comradeship, referred to as, ‘Barekishi ba matsogo’. Drawing on the theoretical framework guiding this study allows me to embed and explore how building on identity and class present workers with opportunities for a ‘remake’. This elaborates on an argument intimated in Section 6.4 around ‘workers spatial fix’. The theoretical framework adopted in this study has accentuated the fluidity of space. That is to say, space; in its absolute sense is meaningless, therefore cannot arguably confer an identity upon its inhabitants (see Chapter 3). On the other hand, space is not innocent and as such can impact upon human agency, whilst also being influenced by human activities (socio-spatial dialectic). This nuanced analysis of space and worker identity allows us to illuminate the weakness inherent in the South African labour scholarship, which relates to the assumption that a workplace is pre-loaded with meaning and identity.

The aforementioned assumption suggests that, because the workplace is pre-loaded with notions of worker identity and solidarities, restricting access through practices such as triangular employment relations (trinity of interlocking processes) is enough to fracture and weaken worker militancy (see Chapter 5). The existing South African and global labour scholarship has placed a particular emphasis on the workplace as a space that automatically confers meaning, solidarity and worker identity. Consequently, labour in general has been projected as being ‘unmade’, however with a few exceptions for a ‘remake’ (see Chapter 5). The identity that the coach confers



upon its occupants demonstrates the extent to which this coach is a resonant space/place, and also a space of empowerment.

It can be said that, this space can be positioned as a 'fix' against the current decomposition of the traditional absolute workplace. Conceptually, the train can provide relative and relational workplace for MTS workers affected by the trinity of interlocking processes (see Chapters 2 & 4). Furthermore, observations point to comrades' coach as a space for education. The ascendancy into position of power by transnational and monopoly capital has heralded the defeat and weakening of labour (see Chapter 5). This has fractured the once militant labour movement, decimating in the process, the once proud tradition of worker education. In the theme below, the study pays attention to the education offered on the train, by workers for workers.

### **6.6 Not a 'Khetšeng': An Information Hub**

In light of the neoliberal assault upon workers of the world and their movements, global labour scholarship has shifted focus to labour centred revival strategies (see Chapter 5). However, often ignored among such revival strategies is the notion of workers' education. Being a worker/employee in an epoch in which employers have sought to obfuscate who is an 'employer' and who is an 'employee' as one of the many strategies utilised by capital; worker education becomes a necessity (see Chapter 5). By deploying a trinity of interlocking processes, capital has managed to effectively weaken worker solidarities along class lines and fractured workplaces. Accordingly, an argument can be put forward that legislative education offers possible countervailing force against the aforementioned strategy. This is because; legislative education is one of the many ways to empower workers (Kabeer, 1999; 2001):

Wednesdays are education days. This stems from the discussions flowing from Tuesdays as complains day. You are required to research a bit about the complaints raised on Tuesday so that you can have an input on Wednesday. Our days of education are mainly based on working environments. Will talk about our equity skills, no, not equity skills but equity plans. We will talk about your basic conditions of employment; we will talk about your labour relations. We Will talk about, ehh your, which? This other acts maan? Eh, you're OHS Act. Ehh, so many legislatures (sic). People should be aware. Gore there is no way where the employer can

submit the equity plan to the department of labour without the knowledge of the workers. The employer must involve you as a worker to draft that report to be submitted at the department of labour. You need to be part, is either in terms of a representative or by yourself as workers. The employer must come and say comrade we got a time frame. We got a due date by which we must submit our equity plan to the department of labour. Therefore, what is it that must be submitted so that we can improve our working conditions (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

In addition, Mmotong points out that workers are informed of where to go if they require some of these pieces of legislations:

... Go to government printing works. All these legislatures (sic) are available for no more than R5.00 a copy. We encourage them to read these and see if whats contained in these pieces of legislatures (sic) is being implemented at their places of work (Interview with Mmotong, 9 Sep 2017).

In an era in which the pendulum has swung in capital's direction, legislative education becomes the cornerstone of worker resistance. It facilitates worker's ability to make informed choices and according to Kabeer, choice is power (see Chapter 5). It is therefore noteworthy that MTS has set aside days for specific worker centred issues such that Tuesdays and Thursdays are 'complaints' day, Wednesday is 'big issue' days. Furthermore, the use of information as power tool has historic roots:

... As workers, we knew how to keep the police at bay so that they don't harass us at our meetings. We had a booklet that we used as a reference point. For example if a police officer demanded that you remove your T-shirt because of the slogan on it that is deemed offensive. We knew that he must furnish you with a receipt, we asked for his name and rank so that we able to trace them should the need arise (Interview with comrade Maphila, 27 Aug 2016).

Asked to address the coach, MTS general secretary had this to say in respect of the space occupied by 'MaCom':

Comrades please be aware that this month is workers' month and goa swanela gore re tšwetše di nyakwa tša babereki pele.

Translation:

Comrades please be aware that this month is workers month. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to do more in order to advance workers' interests.

Explaining why the comrades' coach exists, he continued to point out:

We were not drunk when we started these coach comrades. We had a mission. It is therefore important to keep comrades busy discussing important issues (Observations, 09 May 2016).

Indeed, observations reveal that issues of importance to workers, ranging from Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and disciplinary hearings are topical discussions in this space. The following took place Thursday 29 October 2015. Being a Thursday, one of the more 'enlightened' MTS members stood up to shed light around the question of UIF:

MaCom, are le bo tšeng gore if o se sure gore employer o didacta tšhelete ya UIF. Tšheya your green barcoded ID (identity documentation) o tšene any department ya labour o fihle o ba botše gore o tlo tšheka gore employer o goga tšhelete ya UIF. Should it be gore employer ga comply, ba tlogofa selo se sengwe se bitšwa gore ke one-direction form. Form eo o tlo e tšeya wa e tlatša then wa e fa employer to ensure gore o didacta UIF from your salary (Observations 29 Oct 2015).

Translation:

Comrades, let me tell you. If you are unsure as to whether or not your employer deducts UIF levies. Simply take your green barcoded ID (identity document) and walk into any department of labour and inform them you want to verify if your employer is UIF compliant. Should it be that the employer is not compliant, the department of labour will furnish you with a so-called one-direction form. Fill it in and then hand it to the employer to ensure that monthly UIF levies are deducted from your salary (Observations, 29 Oct 2015).

As these observable interactions point out, it can be argued that the comrades' coach is not only about song and dance, but that empowering workers through knowledge is of central significance:

*On Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2015 when the floor was opened for complaints, an elderly man stood up, wearing black and blue uniform with epaulettes; he indicated that he was a security guard. Now on his monthly payslip there are monthly R6 deductions for something called PSiRA. He was not sure why this money was being deducted and needed to be educated around this. The Chairperson indicated that he himself was not well informed around it and asked fellow comrades to investigate this and assist the fellow worker.*

My own investigation indicated that PSiRA stand for Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority. For this reason, all security guards are certified by this body, and this might explain the monthly deductions from its members. This gives credence to the argument that the comrade coach is an important space, a space of important conversations. This is also reflected in the constant reminder that the coach is not a kitchen. Generally, there are certain meanings attached to and associated with a kitchen in an everyday human interaction. It is meaning laden, designated for a particular function. One leader pointed out the importance of the coach in this way:

In this coach, you enjoy benefits such as learning about the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) (Observations, 05 July 2016).

For MTS members underscoring the importance of the coach not being kitchen stems from the fact that:

Comrade Mpho ne, nna nkare, this khetše, because of the smallest part of the carriage, ba e bitša gore ke ka khešheng, cos ge motho a le ka daa, ba believe gore motho ole wa rasa. So because of leshata lela, and le area-nyana yela. A kere ke toilet mo, and then ke seat go ka dula batho ba e two and then kamo ga ka dula three. So that's why bare ke ka khetšeng (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

Translation:

Comrade Mpho, all I can say to you is, this kitchen, comes about because of the smallest part of the carriage, hence the name kitchen because usually the people who occupies that part makes noise. Because of the noise and the size of that area. There is a toilet, and right next to it there is a seat, big enough for two people and another one for three people on the other side. So that's why it is called a kitchen (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

According to comrade Mafa and Segoa this is about functional differentiation:

Khetše ne, ke plek ya go ja. And batho ge bale ka khetšeng barasa ka gore baja and ba swara ditaba (Interview with comrade Mafa, 21 Oct 2017).

Translation:

A kitchen is a place of eating. And when people are in the kitchen they make noise because of conversations that are held over food (Interview with comrade Mafa, 21 Oct 2017).

Not necessarily ka khetšeng, ge ba bolela bare ka khetšeng, ba bolella batho ba eleng gore barasa wa bona. They decided to come and make noise, as if ke ka khetšeng. You will find that, ehh goba le, ehh smallanyana group of people who will just organise themselves and begin to distabilise our programme. But they stay there, at the back you see? At the back, remember how our carriage is organised you see? Then they will be far but trying to disturb our programme. That's why we end up saying kamo khetšeng (Interview with Comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

Translation:

Not necessarily a kitchen, when we say kitchen, we normally are referring to those who are making noise. They decided to come and make noise as if we are in a kitchen. You will find that, ehh there is, ehh a small group of people who will just organise themselves and begin to distabilise our programme. But they stay there, at the back you see? At the back, remember how our carriage is organised you see? Then they will be far but trying to disturb our programme. That's why we

end up saying, you in the kitchen (Interview with Comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

As the above quotes make clear, the comrades' coach, as a workers' space serves a specific purpose and should be differentiated as such from other social spaces. It is an important space of engagement and should, therefore, be regarded as such. It is a space of political identity formation and information dissemination. A key question that follows from this is: to what extent can individual workers utilise this kind of information/knowledge to protect their workplace-based rights against capitalist exploitative practices?

It can be suggested that it is possible for those without traditional forms of power to rely on the knowledge shared in the coach to protect against workplace injustices. For example, by drawing from rights based frameworks such as institutional power. Proponents of labour geographers seem convinced that this is feasible (see Chapter 3). Arguably, it is possible, more so because some of the information disseminated in this space does not only revolves around abstract principles of labour law but includes and is primarily made up of useful tips and advice that workers can draw from to navigate particular situations. The following were brought to the attention of workers in the mist of the 2016 disruptions as a result of the rail upgrades:

There was a lot of unhappiness with Metrorail around the train delays. More so because most of the working-class commuters are dependent on the train to access employments opportunities. The Chairperson indicated that when late for work, as we can all see how late the train was, workers, upon disembarking must walk into the Metrorail offices and request a letter attesting to the fact that the trains were running late that morning (Observations, 8 June 2016).

MTS has ensured that the transport provider furnishes such letters to its members. This is done to make sure members do not lose their employment. Around this time, trains would be late by anything of between 40 minutes to an hour.

Offering advice to Comrade Mama who asked a question on behalf of a friend and colleague who was facing DC, after the union refused to represent her:

MaCom please lehlokomeleng taba ya self-representation ko disciplinary hearing. Ge o ka ekemela ka ntle le hlatše go ba boima

because it is going to be your word against that of the company. Always MaCom, eba le motho ko DC, gore ka moswane gobe leyo a ka hlatšelang story sagago (Observations, 20 Oct 2015).

Translation:

MaCom please be warned against any form of self-representation during disciplinary hearings. If you self-represent you run the risk of having no one to corroborate your side of events later on. It thus becomes a case of your word against that of the company. Always MaCom ensure that you have someone with you so that should the need arise; you will have a witness who will back-up your story in future (Observations, 20 Oct 2015).

In addition, an MTS member who is currently a shopsteward cautioned fellow comrades against stealing company property. He indicated that he has attended a number of DC's involving theft and workers could not be successfully defended because they were caught red-handed with company property (Observations, 10 Feb 2016):

Comrade are hlokomeleng ya letsogo because go ba boima go defenda motho yob a mohweditšeng a utswa. Nna ke attendile di disciplinary hearing tše ntši and ga go bonolo, more especially ba go kreyo o utswa (Observations, 20 Oct 2015).

Translation:

Comrade let us be careful not to steal employers property because it is not easy to defend someone caught stealing. I have been to a number of disciplinary hearings and these are not easy to defend, particularly when caught red-handed (Observations, 20 Oct 2015).

These are useful survival tips shared among comrades. Importantly, these tips are not only informed by legislative precepts, but are also drawn from everyday personal experiences (relational and relative spaces). Comrade Mmotong explains that people are drawn to the kind of information shared in the coach because they can relate to what is being said. It is during these educational conversations that other workers realise they face the same challenges in their respective work spaces. For example, comrade Dinakanyane related the story of one woman who only became aware that

the employer owed her money after hearing the discussion around legislation inside the comrades' coach:

As a worker, you are affected by legislation. I remember there was a woman who worked at some company and then was dismissed without being given something. She lacked information regarding her situation. One day while we were discussing the BCEA she raised her hand (Interview with Dinakanyane, 03 Oct 2017).

The thrust of Dinakanyane's narrative can be linked with Harvey's trio of spaces. It also shows how the woman in the story was able to draw from the comrades' coach as a place and source of power and knowledge, an example of resonant place. It is the relevance of the information being shared that draw workers to the coach – a place of empowerment (see Chapter 5). According to comrade Mmotong:

The information that is there, the education that we share leads you to develop an interest. Gore mara batho ba, ba bolela ka dilo tša mannete, gore gape rena ko reberekang go so le so. Ge o fologa, like rena ne re fologa ko Bosman, I am telling you, one or two people will come to you. Bare ya mara comrade taba e oe bolelang ke nnete. Every day, e mongwe ebile o tlabo a go khapa nyana so ... Interest e developa from the understanding, and the information e re e shenang ka ko le coaching (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

Translation:

The information that is there, the education that we share leads you to develop an interest. It leads one to the realisation that they too are affected by the same problems because they can pick-up on areas of shared experiences. Because of this, as you arrive at Bosman, I am telling you, one or two people will come to you. To say comrade we too can relate to the issues raised in the coach. Every day, sometimes you will have one of the workers walk with you half way ... Interest develops from the understanding and the information we share in the coach (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

... Basically, as MTS we did not start a trade union. It was at this company, may I reflect on the name of the company? ... There is these company in the name of ehh, Brooklyn Panel Beaters. NUMSA is active



there. Comrades heard us as members of the train sector as we were engaging inside the train then they asked. To say, we are employed in this company, we are currently un-unionised, and we would like to establish one. I won't say what I did, I will say what we did. We gave them membership forms of NUMSA for them to join. After they joined we called NUMSA's organisers to organise that workplace. Remember every member has a right to join a union ... There is no employer that can prevent workers from joining a union (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Sep 2017).

The significance of the information shared in the coach is further reflected in the fact that workers feel lost and vulnerable in the absence of MTS owing to the train disruptions:

Believe you me or not neh. Even now because of this heh, heh, frustration of the trains, that is caused by the trains, the operations of the train. And the implementations of the new trains. But still now, I am receiving calls. Comrades day in and day out saying, can you please help us. We need this organisation. It was helping us; we were able to deal with the employers based on the information we received from this organisation. That is a clear, ehh, ehh, ehh indication to say ehh, ehh members and non-members, because some were non-members. But they liked to go and ride in the same carriage where we organise. More especially in carriage number 4, so we were having many people who are our members, even though they were not members in the books. But they were our members because they rode in the same carriage as us ... This is proof that people found the organisation useful (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Sep 2017).

Drawing on the data collected for this study, it is clear that MTS as an organisation provides refuge to workers currently not offered protection by the largely industrial model unionism prevalent in South Africa (see Chapter 3 & 4). The regular calls by members in need of assistance underscores the need for an organisation such as MTS and organic intellectuals that run it to empower workers on a daily basis. There is, without a doubt, a vacuum in this space. *Significantly, the information gleaned from the data collected suggests that the comrades' coach and or MTS cannot adequately be conceptualised by reference to industrial unionism lexicons such as 'structural'*

*power and 'associational' power. In addition, it cannot, as organisation mobilise notions of 'symbolic leverage' and or 'moral power' (Silver, 2003; Chun, 2009; Fine, 2006; Von Holdt & Webster 2005).*

This therefore requires some level of empowerment that devolves from MTS but not necessarily in its organisational form (Kabeer, 1999 & 2001). Faced with specific workplace related problems, through MTS, workers seek out specific forms of information (resources) that allow them to make strategic choices as required by specific circumstances (agency). The findings of this study note examples of empowerment as observed on the train and also contained in one-on-one interviews (Kabeer, 1999: 445). The Marxist parlance used to frame discussions and identity politics are the basis upon which unions are built. However, the comrades' coach/MTS is not yet developed to such an extent that it can be mobilised as a worker union. Whilst the shared space provides group identity, these workers are employed as individuals upon disembarking the train. This resonates with Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu's (2010: 21) argument that worker agency can be informal or formal, individual or collective, unplanned, sporadic and or sustained. Furthermore, the agency can be operationalised at different scales – local, national and or the body (see Chapter 3).

Empowerment has been displayed by one of the founding members of MTS, comrade Matala<sup>13</sup>. Some within the organisation, comrade Mmotong and comrade Moela have also tried to emulate comrade Matala's example. According to comrade Dinakanyane:

Comrade Moshimane o sa se dira seo sebego sedira ke comrade [Matala]. Wa mona [Moshimane] wena wa raloka. Ne rena le strike ko Transnet ka 2010, o tšile Moshimane go tlo thuša ka strike seo (Interview with comrade Dinakanyane, 21 Oct 2017).

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<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, comrade Matala has since passed away. His legacy and influence is discernible when both in the coach and during casual conversations. He apparently was one of the most radical leaders of MTS and has individually, on a number of occasions visited various workplaces to represent workers during DC hearings and or to mobilise against exploitative practices.

Translation:

Comrade Moshimane<sup>14</sup> is still practicing what used to be done by comrade [Matala]. You see [Moshimane], you take things lightly. We had a strike at Transnet in 2010, Moshimane came to assist with the strike (Interview with comrade Dinakanyane, 21 Oct 2017).

Comrade Mmotong, who currently serves as a full time shopsteward and a regional secretary (Northern region) for the South African Postal Workers Union (SAPWU), points to his involvement in a similar situation. He attended to fellow MTS members' disciplinary hearing as a representative. He says proudly, that he represented the fellow comrade so well that at the end of the hearing, the lawyer representing the company gave him a legal DC procedure booklet. For him this was a testament to his knowledge. Additionally, the case remained unresolved for a further two years following the disciplinary hearing.

This is a form of agency fermented elsewhere – the train – and then applied across space. This talks to Herod's (1997: 3) argument that workers' ability to produce and manipulate geographic spaces into specific forms is a potent form of social power (see Chapter 3). This also speaks to the notion of a socially produced scale. What comrade Mmotong alludes to is that worker power can be packaged differently in varying context (see Herod, 2001: 49). In this case, the member was informed by the employer of the impending disciplinary case against him, though without workplace associational power, the case was challenged with associational power that exists and operated outside of the workplace. This speaks to labour's ability to achieve fixes. Significantly, this shows how worker agency is able to traverse space and place. I argue, that this challenges some of the language used in the literature about how workers' solidarities and identities have been 'fractured and or segmented' (see Chapter 5), I return to this point below.

Comrades are dropped off at various stations along the journey en-route to work and in general work at different locations and factories. Here, they arrive as individuals and not a group of MTS members that can depend on each other for workplace comradely

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<sup>14</sup> As it turns out, comrade Moshimane (nickname to signify his youthfulness) is one of the comrades interviewed for this study – comrade Moela. He unfortunately refused to elaborate on his involvement in the strike arguing that it is for fellow workers to tell such stories about him.

support. As such, it can be inferred that their power to challenge capital is recognised only as a potential. Individuals are ultimately the collective that make up worker movements once the aforementioned potential is realised. In the final analysis, the study shows that whilst workplace worker identities and solidarities are being fractured, the comrades' coach remain a source of worker power percolating with possibilities. The educational sessions around labour legislation and various tips and guidance that are shared in this space, leaves open the possibility for MTS members to push back against exploitative practices in the workplace. The strength of such workers is not located in associational, institutional and or structural power, but knowledge as the foundation upon which certain practices can be challenged as being against or outside of legislative dictates (see Section 6.6). These workers' choices reflect their 'spatial praxis' as conditioned by their social milieu, in light of the sociological and geographic imaginations (Harvey, 2009: 23-4; Herod, 1997: 3).

The stories shared by comrades Dinakanyane and Mama above clearly demonstrate that knowledge can provide refuge for those outside the associational power offered by unions. In addition, it demonstrates that workers always seek educational information that can be useful in specific workplace related matters, in the form of spatial praxis (see Chapter 3). This is the chief reason why Mafa started travelling in the coach, because as he points out, he was offered legislative education. In seeking knowledge, these workers are not necessarily interested in mobilising a whole workplace, but rather to retreat into an informed space as a source of defence. Using knowledge as a power source is not new to South Africa as the post 1973 unions were strengthened and built block by block through labour centres established across the country to offer services to the erstwhile nascent labour movement. This was over and above disseminating knowledge relevant and related to workers and community activists. The data seem to suggest that, comrades' coaches act as a preparative school, which is, in effect an agent of socialisation. This finding is informed by the fact that learners/pupils travel in this coach to school and most importantly, engage in the song and dance activities.

Without suggesting that these learners are likely to become working class train commuters, I merely seek to illustrate the extent to which knowledge and information shared in the comrades' coach constitution the building blocks of unionism, community activists and political leaders. This exposure is likely to shape these learners and their

future involvement or lack thereof in civil society groupings. All issues to do with the ruling ANC and its partners (COSATU, SACP and SANCO) are ventilated in this space. The historic role of the alliance has ensured that the political field, be it community centred matters or bread and butter workplace issues, are generally discussed as part of the ruling alliance. This is useful in trying to for account the centrality of alliance politics in this worker dominated travel space.

## **6.7 Summary**

This chapter aimed chiefly, to present the findings of the study. However, due to the nature of the study and the research question(s) (see Chapter 1) that informed the data collection and writing process, the themes emerging from the data were weaved into a broader/super theme – understanding the train and its significance to the daily toil of the South African working class. Put differently, the themes are organised in a manner that provided a direct answer to the question (s) informing the research. This approach of a ‘broad/super’ theme is advantageous in that it attempts to enmesh, into the findings all of the presiding chapters and the related subsections. This chapter is the extension, as per Burawoy’s (2009) extended case method, of the apartheid spatial reach into the post-apartheid South African workplace and community geography. Based on this logic, the findings are a reflection of the process described as the ‘making of the South African working class’ (see Chapter 2).

The researcher introduced the chapter by drawing on South African literature on transport as not only a background, but to buttress the argument around the centrality of the commuters train as workers space and its inherent possibilities for worker and community collaborative activities. The picture presented, is framed by the first three themes, namely, ‘The Mamelod-Pretoria CBD railway line’, ‘Mamelodi train sector’ (MTS) and ‘Mzabalazo on the move’. These three sections provide the lenses through which the ‘inside of the train’ as a location wherein comrades contact their activities is understood. In other words, the abovementioned themes set the ‘scene’ – structuration – for the micro-level ‘inside the train’ observations. For the researcher, the scene setting approach is important as it elevates the significance and the deep meaning that workers attach to and their understanding of the train (see Sections 6.3 and 6.4). These meanings and identity politics are filtered through the ‘inside the train’ themes: ‘union local?’ and ‘Not a Khetseng: the information hub’. These are presented as

opportunities and constraints that are shaped by and are products of a particular geographical context – socio-spatial dialectic.

The largely descriptive picture constructed by the last three ‘inside the train’ themes points to the emasculation of the erstwhile militant and effective SMU on the hand. Yet arguably, and perhaps more cogently, MTS’s vignette on the other hand is that of hope and pregnant with possibilities for those with a labour organisation revival thrust. Chapter 7 pays attention to the largely political aspect of MTS. It is well known that South African workers have, since time immemorial had links with the ruling ANC, and SACP.

## Chapter 7

### Workers and Politics: A Multi-Pronged Strategy

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#### 7.1 Alliance Politics

The propensity of worker organisations leadership to be offered political office is a well-documented practice not only here in South Africa, but throughout the entire world and the African continent in particular. A comprehensive analysis of this trend in respect of the African continent is offered by Beckman et al. (2010) (see Chapter 5). To be sure, MTS is expected to recruit members for the alliance as outlined in its constitution. This means, by extension, members of MTS are also members of the governing party. It follows from this arrangement that those with political aspirations are afforded political office through the MTS ticket. Inevitably, the comrades' coach is a political site, and therefore provides a platform for local political office campaigns.

On November the 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015, the 2016 local government elections were the subject of discussion and comrades were reminded to go and vote for the ruling ANC the following year (Observations, November 2015). In addition, there was an appeal for comrades to stop physically attacking councillors and damaging public property:

Maqabane<sup>15</sup> are gopoleng gore ge re tšuba sekole le di clinic, go sufara rena le bana ba rena maqabane. Ge o tloga mo o ya vandalaesa ntlo ya khanselara o beya bana ba gagwe kotseng. A renaganeng maqabane, re be le perekišhano.

Translation:

Comrades lets just keep in mind that burning down schools and clinics only makes us poorer. Vandalising such infrastructures affect only us and our children. Similarly burning down the local councillor's house is ill advised because you put his/her children at great danger. Let's rethink our methods comrades.

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<sup>15</sup> Maqabane is IsXhosa for Comrades

One thing clear is that, the message against vandalism is quite strong and a consistent position of MTS members and its leadership. On Tuesday the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, the chairperson, comrade Maponya condemned, strongly events that were taking place in Vuwani in the Limpopo province. He discouraged fiercely the torching of schools and other government building. Other leaders have made similar points:

... As MTS we do organise community protests. But we do so at the political level. At the level of the ANC. We don't organise then via train sector, even if they are led by members of the train sector, but they are organised through the ANC. As a campaigning structure, remember the protest itself is a campaign, therefore members of the train sector will fully attend such ehh, ehh protests, as a campaign ... we organise them jointly with the SACP and SANCO as well (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Sep 2017).

Echoing the above clarion call, comrade Segoa continued to say:

We can never, as train sector go and protest at an individual's household. Because we just don't wake-up and say we going to protest. We can never allow a situation in which a protest action is directed at an individual's home. Because we know and understand that wardcouncillors are employees of the municipality. Therefore, when have issues we will take them to the municipality ... our members know and are always advised to stay away from protest actions that target individual's homesteads (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Sep 2017).

This was revealing of two key findings: (a) that local ward councillors are put into power by workers. This finding is in line with the interview conversation held with Mr Maphila who was deployed by Cosatu to stand as a ward councillor. Starting in 1994 Mr Maphila was a councillor for ward 34 in Mamelodi West, ward 6 in 2002 and ward 28 in 2011 (interview with comrade Maphila, 27 August, 2016). Moreover, (b), that it is the same workers who demand accountability around service delivery issues. Conclusively, this makes clear the fact that comrades' coach is not only workers' space but also a site of community contestations. Arguably, campaigning in this space makes this point poignantly clear. The workers' active involvement in this political project can be framed by reference to the 'making of the South African working class'. That is,



socio-spatial dialectic (see Chapter 2). The general secretary of MTS addressed the coach as follows on the morning of 17 May 2016:

Comrades please be aware that this month of May, is workers month and therefore is incumbent upon us to do more in order to advance the interests of workers. This month is International Workers month and we have planned to commemorate some of our former leaders who passed away. Because if we don't do this comrade, counterrevolutionary forces will up-stage us comrades. We will wake-up one day to find Inkatha Freedom Party<sup>16</sup> or the DA<sup>17</sup> busy claiming to commemorate one of our fallen leaders (Observation, 17 May 2016).

This statement was in reference to the newly formed and ANC breakaway party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by the former ANC youth league (ANCYL) president Julius Malema. The EFF attempted to commemorate and honour the late ANC military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe operative, Solomon Mahlangu who was convicted of murder by the apartheid government and hanged in 1979. MTS secretary general was asking MTS members to be vigilant of such attempts and that they needed to reclaim the political space as workers.

In line with the secretary general's message, observations from late April into May 2016 indicate that the comrades' coach increasingly became a political platform. This finding was a distinct characteristic of the 05:45am train number 91:16. Chairperson of the coach, comrade Maponya was campaigning for the position of ward councillor in Mamemlodi east. Inevitably, comrade Maponya dedicated a substantial amount of time talking elections as well as to encourage fellow comrades to register for the upcoming local elections. Typically, after singing the national anthem and as has been the case since the local elections campaign intensified, comrade Maponya announced the following:

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<sup>16</sup> Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) is one of the oldest; mainly KwaZulu Natal based political party with a predominately-Zulu ethnic support base.

<sup>17</sup> Democratic Alliance traces its roots to the apartheid years. It has been renamed and reformulated its image along the years and it is currently the largest official opposition party in the South African parliament.

(1) MaCom letsebe gore di 23 May 2016 ke le tsatši la mafelelo la go ngwadisa for dikgetho tša se legae. (2) ANC e tlabe e hosta a regional manifesto launch ko Attridgeville kadi 29 tša May 2016. MaComrade a kgopelwa go ba gona ka bontši bja bona. Dipese tše 16 di tla tloga mo Mamelodi ka letsatši leo. (3) On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, ANC will launch the provincial manifesto ko FNB stadium” (Observations, 19 May 2016).

Translation:

(1) Comrades please note that the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2016 is the last day for local elections voter registration. (2) ANC will be hosting a regional manifesto lunch at Attridgeville on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. Comrades are requested to attend the manifesto launch in their numbers. 16 buses will depart from Mamelodi on the day. (3) On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, ANC will launch the provincial manifesto at FNB stadium (Observations, 19 May 2016).

Comrade Segoa explains why MTS choose and supported comrade Maponya to contest for a councillor position in the up coming local elections:

... Because we are members of society, we are not only going to discuss issues affecting workers. Even social issues at home, we need to discuss those issues and political issues. One of the congress resolutions we took was that MTS shall serves (sic) as a campaigning structure of the alliance ... As workers we can't only be active at work through unions, because at times, workplace problems are linked and are as a result of political problems. People need to understand that aspect. For example, if I speak about the labour relations Act, that Act came about because of the political organisation currently in cabinet (sic). So, to achieve some of our objectives as workers, we needed to have influence at the political level ... So, we saw it fit, as a campaigning structure to deepen our participation in these [political] platforms ... That is why majority of MTS members are leaders elsewhere in society. We agreed that we needed to see our members in government, we are having councillors. The first thing we agreed was that lets target ward 10. It was an informal settlement, Mandela,

Lusaka<sup>18</sup> ... We agreed that comrade<sup>19</sup> ... who was our former president to be a ward councilor there. He was a ward councilor for five years and we said we could not leave that space alone. And we said comrade ... [Maponya] must be a councillor because there are issues there. And we want to see train sector represented there because members of the train sector shall, from time to time represent the working class. We considered comrade [Maponya] and we managed to be successful ... What we are doing is to encourage comrades at ward 10 that this is a suitable candidate and we're providing them reasons for our candidate (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Sep 2017).

For those seeking political office, the comrades' coach provides access to a captive audience with links and deep-rooted community ties. Generally, there exists a connection between workplace and community leadership roles. This means that an attempt to separate the world of work from the community as a place from which workers come from is naïve and futile an exercise (see Chapter 5). As a space of contestation, the comrades' coach is ineluctably a site for a just social project – citizenship rights (see Chapter 5). At the material level, capitalism is the chief driver of comrades' deprivation.

Because of this, then the political aspect of the space is amplified and articulated through political parties such as the ANC. At an ideological level, the ANC; guided by the Freedom Charter as an economic blueprint become an important vehicle through which full citizenship rights can be attained. This provides the motivation and premise upon which comrades seek to elect fellow workers to leadership positions. This triangular relationship between citizenship, worker and political agent is generally reflected in the struggle songs characteristic of this space. Read against this backdrop, and as reflected in the songs, it seems workers continue to be loyal to the alliance. However, this loyalty has come under strain as the alliance has shown signs of cracking as embodied by the so called 'NUMSA moment' and the subsequent formation of a new union federation (see Chapter 5).

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<sup>18</sup> Mandela and Lusaka are some of the sections that makes up Mamelodi East. These were informal settlements before they were formalise.

<sup>19</sup> Name concealed for ethical reasons.

A conversation with two interviewees in particular – comrade Segoa and comrade Mmotong is telling in this regard. The former is currently a member of NUMSA and a shopsteward at Bosal Africa. The latter is with SAPWU as already outlined above. SAPWU is a breakaway union from a COSATU affiliate, the Communications Workers Union (CWU). Both these comrades are members of the SACP. The seismic shift brought about by the expulsion first of NUMUSA from COSATU and secondly the formation of the new federation called the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), has confused workers' political identities. This is what comrade Mmotong had to say about the rupture in COSATU:

It was not a good idea to expel NUMSA because of their difference you see? I will give an example in terms of these political organisations. The ANC youth league, ehh, by the time when Malema was the president and the mother body decided ehh, that, in actual fact it was not a good idea for the ANC to expel Malema. But then in this case you see what happened after COSATU expelled NUMSA, there is this, what you call SAFTU that has now been formed, you see? Because once you expel you're not providing a solution, you're exacerbating the problems, because there is this federation and it is living, and it will get support. Workers will be confused because they don't know which one to follow. I am a member of SAPWU, but the leadership knows very well that I am also a member of the ANC and the Communist party. So, if you say let's affiliate to SAFTU are you saying I must stop being a member of the ANC? (Interview Mmotong, 09 Sep 2017).

From the response above it would seem as comrade Mmotong is making a poignant point regarding the failure of COSATU to draw lessons from the mistakes of the past. In this case, the expulsion of Malema led to the formation of the EFF, with the outcome that the new party took away supporters from the liberation movement. This explains Mmotong's argument that the expulsion has actually created more problems if anything else. Politically, workers' identities have been challenged. Comrade Segoa is a NUMSA shopsteward and a member of the SACP and ANC. One of the chief reasons he joined NUMSA is because he was a member of the communist party. There was a drive to consolidate the alliance and its support base. For him, and many others, the situation is much more complex.

When asked if he thought it was a good idea for COSATU to expel NUMSA, this is what he had to say:

Ehh, no, no. On that one son of soil let me come out clear and be forthright with you. It was a terrible mistake. As member of NUMSA and SACP, many who know me will tell you that I fiercely opposed that decision during [SACP] Provincial Councils meetings, I always objected to that decision. It cannot be that a decision to expel NUMSA is taken so lightly. I indicated that some of us joined NUMSA because of the alliance ... It was ANC that instructed me to go join NUMSA based on the slogan ... We were taught the slogan that says one country, one federation, one industry, one union. ANC finds itself power because of workers support through COSATU (Interview with comrade Segoa, 14 Aug 2017).

Comrade Moela agrees with Segoa in terms of where the power lies:

... Mchana, let me say power belongs to us as workers. The power relates on us. Even in our communities, the power relates on a community level. The party itself is just an ordinary thing. The power belongs to the ordinary members in that party. We simply are waiting for the political power struggle to finish ... As soon as the dust settles we will assess which federation has workers' interests at heart (Interview comrade Moela, 09 Aug 2017).

It is clear that blind loyalty doesn't apply here. The workers realise that their interests come first and that at political level, they are the backbone of successful political organisations. The political terrain has since changed significantly. It is not clear as yet what the political ramifications of these developments will be. One thing for certain is that it has led to confusion. Contrary to individual opinions however, the songs that workers continue to sing provide both ideological and political outlook. They mostly reflect a historical epoch when the slogan referred to by comrade Segoa above still held sway.

### 7.1.1 Song and Dance

*For this theme, the attached USB contains the audio-recorded data that could not necessarily be captured by text. This section should therefore be read in conjunction with listening.* The audio data is very valuable for it captures the essence, emotions and feelings of the carriage. Observations and field notes show that, songs sang in the comrades coach serves a number of functions: Firstly, the songs are about projecting the ideological orientation of MTS. Secondly; the songs are about highlighting workers' material conditions. Lastly this creates an atmosphere that fosters solidarity and a feeling of comradeship:

Look Mpho, we have our weekly programme, we have the same understanding in terms of our weekly programme, Monday! However, we do not encourage people to have a hangover because anything is possible in that coach. But on Monday we focus on singing. Just to revive our spirits from the weekend to show that as comrade we're still here, we're still living, we're still kicking, that is Monday ... (Interview with comrade Mmotong, 09 Sep 17).

Indeed, singing is an important ingredient of mobilising. This speaks to the fact that there is a song for almost every situation. These songs are embedded in workers' sociological and geographic imaginations. Songs and singing emerge out of and as a reflection of particular spaces. Having Monday as a day of revival through song and dance demonstrates the extent to which workers are alive to differing spatial influences upon their identities. Monday signals the start of the five-day working week in the South African context with Saturday and Sunday set aside for rest. An argument can be made about the differing social relations that govern relationships and behaviours when at work and when at home in relation to the concept of socio-spatial dialectic. This suggest that being away from work for two days produces a distinct form of absolute, relative and relational spaces (see Chapter 3). Thus, because singing is imbued with meanings that speak to both political, class, and ideological, geographic and material conditions it becomes important for emplacing and reinforcing shared identities. Below I pay attention to some of the more popular songs and attempts to elucidate their meanings.

### 7.1.1.1 That's why I am a communist

Amongst the many liberation and struggle songs, the comrades sing a song called: 'that's why I am a communist'<sup>20</sup>. Drawing mainly from the lyrical content, it can be inferred that the song not only seeks to highlight workers' material conditions, but also their ideological viewpoint:

My mother, my mother was kitchen girl  
My father, my father was garden boy  
That's why, I am communist, I am communist (x2)

(Song included in the attached Universal Serial Bus (USB)).

A closer and nuanced analysis of this song highlights the clear inequalities that exist between workers, as highlighted by the collective identity 'barekiši ba matsogo' and those who own the means of production. However, the gist of the message is packaged at an ideological level in which communism is the rallying call to remedy the fundamental contradictions of a class-based capitalist society. As such, the song also signifies the inclusion of SACP as part of the tripartite alliance. The message contained therein, affirms workers' allegiance to communism as a political system through which to ameliorate capitalism's harsh material conditions. The subsequent song, speaks directly to this last point.

### 7.1.2 Material conditions

Yhoba, yhoba yhoba, yhoba yho!  
Ah yhoba yhoba yhobee, yhobee, yhobee (x3)  
Ah metro? Lento o yentsayo, ai lunga'ga (x3)

Translation:

Yhoba, yhoba yhoba, yhoba yho!  
Ah yhoba yhoba yhobee, yhobee, yhobee (x3)  
Ah metro? What you are doing to us is not fair

Thula mntwana, thula mntwana se lwela a malungelo  
A thula mntwana, thula mntwana se lwela a malungelo (x4)

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<sup>20</sup> It is not clear if the song has title.

(Song included in the attached Universal Serial Bus (USB)).

Translation:

Stop crying little one, we are fighting for our rights

In quoting the two preceding songs verbatim, an attempt is made to draw out the comrades' coach as a field of interpellations through which a particular identity is fostered. Using Burawoy's (2009) extensions (see Chapter 3 & 4), the study endeavours to show comrades coach as a field of social forces extending over space and time. The struggle songs are not only about workers' material conditions under a neoliberal juggernaut. These songs and dance are an embodiment of the 'making of the South African working class' (see Chapter 2 & 3). The two songs above, brings to the fore workplace-based exploitation which have a direct impact upon standards of living.

This explains the need to "fight for [workers'] rights". As a field of communication, the comrades' coach finds expression in Harvey's (2006) and Burawoy (2009) space-time concept, but also speaks to Anderson's (2010) resonant place (see chapter 3 & 4). Ultimately, the song and dance aspect of the comrades' coach is imbued with meanings that are intrinsic to workers' daily struggles (see Section 6.4). As the discussions has intimated, songs play a key political role, song narrates and significantly, are mobilising agents. The interplay between the aforementioned roles creates what McCarthy and Swilling (1985) refer to as an "emotionally charged atmosphere". That is, solidarity.

### **7.1.3 Solidarity**

Arguably, worker solidarities can be linked to the political and narrative aspects of songs. In so many ways, the extent and quality of comradeship among workers is reflected in the singing. Observations and audio recordings clearly reveal this fact. Accordingly, songs are utilised to entice and appeal to fellow worker commuters to join in the struggle. The following song is quintessence of this fact:

Amandla awethu, a Sebenza ma se hlangana. (x5)

(Song included in the attached USB)

Translation:



Our power is effective when exercised collectively.

The focus of the song is primarily concerned with the importance of solidarity as workers' weapon against employers. This is about numbers; thus, it is essential for workers to act as a collective. Furthermore, the song epitomises the significance of the train as a potential recruiting space. Also, as demonstrated by the 2006 security guards' industrial action, the train is a space to enforce worker discipline and solidarity. Moreover, observations point out that songs are not used to build only inter-worker collectivism, but that the messages of solidarity are also for purposes of holding together the ruling alliance:

Indaba kabani ma se thandi uZuma<sup>21</sup>?

Indaba kabani? (x4)

Translation:

Whose business is it? That we love Zuma?

(Song included in the attached USB)

MTS members are COSATU members and by extension SACP and ANC members. As the findings of this study have shown, workers' interests are intertwined with those of the ruling party (see Chapter 5). Because of this relationship, MTS has built solidarity network across political, social and economic spheres. Unfortunately, this space has been interrupted by Metrorail/PRASA's line upgrades. Consequentially, comrades started to make use of alternative modes of transport such as taxis to get to work.

## **7.2 Discontinuity: Rail Line Upgrades and the Silent Coaches**

In March 2016, Metrorail/PRASA issued a communique informing commuters of a pending process of rail line upgrades due to commence in April and be completed by September of the same year. The upgrades resulted in closure of the rail lines – Hartbeesspruit station to Pretoria A station in the CBD. This corridor was serviced with a shuttle train. Due to the aforementioned upgrades, trains used the long-winded Capital Park corridor (see the attached map). The upgrades were in line with the expected introduction of new train models, which were unveiled by the state president

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<sup>21</sup> At time of writing Zuma was the president of the ANC and the country.

Jacob Zuma on 9 May 2017. This process however, affected trains schedule severely. This is because of the lengthened travel corridor, which was also congested with trains to other parts of Pretoria.

The congested rail corridor meant the following for commuters: 1) Longer commuter waiting periods. 2) Delayed train departure and arrival times. 3) Trips were characterised by frequent stops and lastly; 4) overcrowding. What followed was a deafening silence in coaches 3 and or 4 that are usually characterised by speeches, education and song and dance. A sense of directionless descended upon the comrades' coach. Every morning, a discernible feeling of longing had become the proverbial elephant in the coach. The upgrades and most importantly, the subsequent introduction of the new train models exposed the fragility of the comrades' coach. Furthermore, the new model poses a real threat to the very existence of MTS as an organisation. The complaints about the impact of the disruptions started to become more prominent from around May 2016. In conversation with an MTS member on the platform while waiting for a train that was late, the following was recorded:

Comrades we need to march to PRASA offices and force them to improve their services to commuters. It is May now, and this means that midyear examinations are around the corner. The current disruptions are likely to negatively affect school learners' comrades. We must boycott metro-rail and force it to accede to our demands (Conversation with MTS member Pienaarsport train station, 04 May 2016).

Inside the coach after the chairperson opened the floor for announcements, the same member took to the floor and made the same point, but this time with an emphasis on how the disruptions will lead to job losses:

Comrades Amandla! Comrades we need to do something about the train service disruptions. At this rate, most of us will lose our jobs comrades because we are always late to work. We need to march to PRASA offices comrades and demand better services comrades. When I get to work, I will send an email to PRASA comrades and convey our unhappiness with the disruptions (Observations, 04 May 2016).

It is in light of the aforementioned train disruptions that informed the message that was delivered by the chairperson of train 91:10 on Tuesday 17 May 2016:

There is a need to once again remind commuters about the [new] train schedule because some of you in here are newcomers and some of you just returned from leave. So, you might not know about the changes (Observations, 17 May 2016).

Present in the coach was the general secretary of MTS who was afforded an opportunity to address the coach:

... I also want to talk about the issue of transport comrades, because if we don't address the issue of transport comrades. We are the once who will be affected negatively because the issue of transport is linked to unemployment comrades ... (Observations, 17 May 2016).

It was from around this time that MTS started to suffer severe setbacks as an organisation. This analysis is informed by the fact that the abovementioned process of disruption brought to the fore an element of dependency upon recognised and elected leadership. This finding is supported by the fact that every morning, a fairly large number of comrades continued to occupy coach no 3 and or 4 yet failed to facilitate normal proceedings. This weakness is not new in respect of South African worker organisations (see Chapter 5). Over and above the leadership dependency weakness, the more worrying threat is structural.

The new model trains are small in size and designed to carry only a specified maximum commuter load. Because of this, Metrorail/PRASA has refused MTS permission to continue making use of coach 3 and or 4 as a worker space. Other casualties of this new model train are hawkers and church groups. MTS leadership has indicated that they will hold talks with Metrorail management to resolve the situation.

### 7.3 Summary

The preceding sections demonstrate beyond the doubt, the deep-rooted links between the South African labour movements and the ruling ANC. As the title of this chapter suggests, this is a multipronged strategy that seeks to advance workers' interests at various levels. As some of the conversations have revealed, politics have influence on all aspects of life. Based on this, MTS members argue that it is not enough to only be involved in the workplace (see chapters, 2, 3 and 4). The chapter has showed that were workers are unable to use some of the more traditional forms of power; they resort to political pressure as a strategy. It is important, however to note that they use political power as insiders and at times as elected political leaders. MTS gives hope to the revival of the erstwhile social movement unionism that was the hallmark of South Africa of the 80s. Certainly, there exist the key building blocks within MTS – in terms of both organising repertoires and organisational structure. Many labour scholars have lamented the disappearance of SMU from the South African political landscapes. A number of reasons are advanced, least among which is the relationship between COSATU and ruling a party (see Chapter, 3 and 4). For now, the re-emergence of SMU remains nothing more than a possibility. With emergcen of SAFTU on the political scene, the future is difficult to predict.

South African workers are complex and multi-layered in their approach to organising. This is reflected in their usage of song and dance as a critical aspect of solidarity building and organising. This stems from the fact that the songs are meaningful and speak to intimated aspects of workers lives and identities. Unfortunately, the demise of MTS as a consequence of Metrorail modernisation project has left many workers vulnerable and directionless.

## Chapter 8

### Discussion and Conclusion

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#### 8.1 Introduction

The thesis endeavoured to understand the train as a worker space as currently organised by MTS. The following can be discerned from the data collected; first that the train can be regarded as a knowledge hub, second, it is a space for friendship and political influence, and third, it provides a sense of solidarity and belonging, more so for those without workplace union representation. Finally MTS, in utilising the train as the space of choice, is strategically located to spread its influence across spaces and foster a sense of worker power through a scalar network (see Chapter 3). The locus of the study was coach number 3 and or 4 as designated spaces of interpellations. Broadly, the thrust of the study can be located within the labour revival theme, but also drawing on the notion of space/geography to understand South African workers and their organisations. This chapter embeds the findings presented in the previous chapter, and links it to the literature reviewed and the conceptual framework underpinning the study.

#### 8.2 Discussion of Findings

Given the nature of this study, the findings chapter sought to mainly present a largely descriptive picture of MTS and its activities. The findings chapter privileged the descriptive approach as guided by the data collection tools and their underlying methodological philosophies. Presenting the case study of MTS as a point of departure is premised on an approach that our understanding of the South African working class is incomplete without reference to transport as an intrinsic element of daily life experience for workers in this country. Whilst concerned with sketching a descriptive picture, the thesis is also an attempt to link MTS to the current sociological discussions around the challenges and opportunities facing the South Africa labour movement.

Consequently, the raw data, main trends and patterns presented in Chapter 4 were thematised as a story of labour being 'made', 'unmade' and 'remade' (Silver, 2003). The main trends and patterns were organised into five broad themes, namely, 1) Mzabalazo on the move; 2) Union local? 3) Not a Khetšeng: An information hub; 4) Alliance politics and 3) Discontinuity: Rail line upgrades and the silent coaches. These were not presented in isolation but were emplaced within their broader structuration. That is extending out from the field and framing the discussions in relation to NHTS and the previous studies contacted in the trains.

As can be seen from the themes presented above, the findings are diverse and offer varied insights into our understanding of the South African working class. All the themes, however, are a reflection upon the South African geography, both in historical lenses and current configurations. The extent to which workers are able to utilise various spaces to their advantage is considered spatial praxis. This is done using a number of theoretical approaches, namely, sociology of space, Harvey's matrix of spaces, Soja's socio-spatial dialectic approach and labour geographers.

### **8.2.1 Mzabalazo on the move**

The findings of this study signify the centrality of space/geography's influence upon human actions and importantly, workers' identity and solidarities or lack thereof. The emergence of the social movement unionism in particular spaces and places underscore this line of argument. Whilst workers' organisations share more or less the same objective, which is mainly to fight workplace based exploitation, it is the space that brings to the fore the dynamic and varied nature of workers' struggle. Seidman's (1994) comparative study on South Africa and Brazilian labour movement clearly demonstrates this finding (see Chapter 5). 'Mzabalazo on the move' is a literal description of MTS as an organisation. The organisation is an extra-factory worker movement constituted on the trains as a strategic locus of power. This theme resonates with Soja's notion of socio-spatial dialectic. Using Soja's (1985) concept allows us to interrogate and demonstrate the extent to which the train; as a space is not *innocent*.

Key to understanding workers in contemporary South Africa is the historical fact that the train was utilised to give effect to apartheid government's segregation objectives whilst also ensuring a steady supply of cheap and migrant African labour without

industrial citizenship (see Chapter 3). In the final analysis, the train was deployed as a form of control. Consequently, train travel to and from work produced a particular form of experience (relational space), that moulded into being a certain kind of worker, who occupies the train not as a mode of transportation, but an *instrument* that facilitated exploitation and segregation. As a product of the apartheid spatiality, the train produced a particular kind of a political worker who reflected upon their citizenship rights on the move (Soja, 1985; Harvey, 2006). Organising on the move is a micro-process of the South African macro-structure (Burawoy, 2009). This reference both the sociological and geographic imaginations (see Harvey, 2009: 23-4).

Importantly, and as it relates to the challenges presented by the hegemony of the neoliberal assault upon workers, communities and companies (see Chapter 5), Harvey's space-time concept permits an approach that historicise while also interrogating how MTS is relevant to the contemporary epoch. Amongst others, the thesis is an attempt to present the 'middle passage' as an embodiment of the famous workerist/populist strategies or what is referred to as multi-scalar actions by Tufts (2009). Read against the neoliberal agenda, the study seeks to turn Harvey's notion of 'spatial fix' on its head with a view to open a discussion on opportunities inherent in the comrades' coach (see Herod, 1997: 26). The approach adopted here, and as is demonstrated by the activities carried out by MTS on the train, is to problematise the notion of a workplace. Conceptually, and the findings underscore this point (see Chapter 6), workers can transfer meanings associated with the workplace elsewhere. This is a spatial shift, not in its absolute sense, rather in relational and relative terms. This is a geographic manipulation aimed at producing new forms of social power (Herod, 1997: 3).

Amongst others, the literature reviewed acknowledges the fact that the disintegration of a workplace, in absolute form, has weakened the labour movement globally. This has arguably limited the avenues for labour to manoeuvre against the 'new work' paradigm (see Chapter 5). This can be attributed to the fact that general thinking and engagement with the notion of a workplace has always been framed in absolute terms. This approach is buttressed by an erroneous view in which the notion of a workplace is presupposed to be meaning laden and affirming of workers' identity. Arguably, this can be explained by labour's traditional sources of power and their effectiveness within the workplace. As the findings chapter has suggested, workers can also 'spatial fix'

their worker identities and solidarities (see Chapter 6 and 2). Understood against the ‘making of the South African working class’, the train is a space of possibilities. And reflect particular forms of spatial/geographic particularities (see Herod, 2001: 49; Castree, 2010: 463; Harvey, 2009: 23-4). In the sections to follow I develop this point further by showing how worker’s identities and solidarities are reinforced on the train through identity politics; language; song and dance.

### **8.2.2 Union Locals?**

Some of the findings in this study correspond with the literature reviewed in respect some of the old traditions of the South African labour movement (see Chapter 5). Most of these traditions have been ruptured by the neoliberal juggernaut and in some instances have become impractical as the labour movement evolved into bureaucratic institutions (Buhlungu, 2010a; Satgar & Southhall, 2015). While not definitively labelling the South African labour movement bureaucratic, the gist of this literature is that, the labour movement is no longer the same and tends to exhibit tendencies of bureaucratic nature. As already indicated, Chapter 6 was chiefly concentrated on sketching a picture of the ‘unknown’, it is therefore not surprising that the story of MTS fit into Silver’s (2003) nuanced analysis and approach to challenges faced by contemporary labour movements. Put differently, MTS is a microcosm of the apartheid spatiality, yet also and most importantly, offer insightful analysis of spaces workers curve out in response to, for example, a trinity of interlocking processes which demonstrates – spatial praxis (see Chapter 5).

Subjected to a critical and incisive analysis, it is clear that the comrades’ coach is a space occupied by the employed and organised workers on the one hand and the employed, unorganised and casualised workers on the other, creating a ‘mutuality despite difference’ (Hyman, 2010: 27). Notwithstanding this clear differentiation, workers who travel on the train frame their socio-economic position in relative and relational terms – “barekishi ba matsogo” as applicable to all of them without exceptions. Hyman’s argument is instructive here. This understanding is informed by the shared space and the related macro-processes unfolding external to the train. Contrary to a widening gap between categories of workers (those in SER and those in casual/temporary employment) identified elsewhere, the findings of this study point to



comrades coach as a space of shared experiences; a space characterised by participatory culture fostered on notions of identity politics.

Overall, the analysis points to a weakness within the labour scholarship and the manner in which discussions are framed. As the findings show it can be inferred that, workplace intra-class stratifications exist only in workplaces and workplaces reinforce these in turn. Away from workplaces that are governed by certain expectations, workers share one thing – the fact that they are workers: “Barekishi ba matsogo”. This is not to suggest that class divisions and inequalities do not exist, but that space influence perceptions, identities and relations (Gieryn, 2000; Castree, 2010; Harvey, 2006; Soja, 1985). That is to say, space is not merely a backdrop, but can shape and influence human behaviour and actions. A related consequence of the changing nature of work as motivated by the neoliberal era has been the rupture of the workplace as a space of solidarity, identity and comradeship. This process has devastated worker collectivism and their organisations. Despite this, the findings of this study indicate that the lack of engagement with space, both conceptually and otherwise, have limited the scope within which to explore how workers navigate the aforesaid neoliberal process. It is important to acknowledge here, that those workers who utilise different modes of transportation to travel to work, are subjected to different spatial pressures around identity formation.

Chun (2009) explores innovative ways in which workers can regain some space to articulate their demands and push back against the neoliberal assault. For most externalised workers (denied access to legislative and union protection), MTS provides a pseudo-union local setting in which workers come together and share workplace frustrations and devise useful strategies. Coach number 3 and 4 are useful to casualised and temporary workers who cannot lay claim to workplaces and a sense of worker collectivism. Despite these apparent differences, these workers try and frame their exploitation and workplace experiences in collective terms. Inferences can be drawn from this to suggest that what externalised workers are denied in a place of work (in absolute terms) is offered in the comrades’ coach. This is because that space belongs to ‘barekishi ba matsogo’ irrespective of workplace position and status (see Chapter 6). These are collective and deliberate forms of reference designed to reinforce a sense of unity and purpose in the face of fragmentation and differentiation ‘mutuality despite difference’ (see Chapter 5). In this way, new forms of power emerge

that speaks to specific conditions. In the section below, I demonstrate how MTS exemplifies this approach.

### **8.2.3 Not a Khetšeng: An information hub**

Capital's approach to its pushback against labour has been buttressed by a strategy of obfuscation. This is a convergence point in the literature reviewed as demonstrated by terms such as 'informalisation', 'core', 'none-core' workers, 'externalisation' 'trinity of interlocking processes' and 'legal liminality' (Theron, 2005a; Von Holdt & Webster, 2005; Chun, 2009). In geographic parlance, this simply means capital has shifted the terrain around worker's spaces and places – legislative and workplace. This terrain shift is absolute, relative and relational in character and produces a particular kind of sociological and geographical imagination (see Chapter 3). The shifting space-place dynamic has seen a systematic weakening of workers' traditional sources of power, which include associational, structural and institutional (see Chapter 5). The effectiveness of capital mounted obfuscation strategy lies, debatably in the fact that the traditional sources of labour power are generally collective.

*To this end, capital has targeted and dismembered individual workers from their unions thus fracturing the collectivism while also creating space-place silos, conceptualised as 'spatial entrapment', in order to trap workers as subgroupings belonging to specified spaces.* This 'spatial entrapment' (referred to as segmentation and fragmentation elsewhere) has also rendered ineffective some of the suggested labour revival strategies such as internationalism; organisational restructuring and membership recruitment and linking up with social movements (see Chapter 5). The thesis has added, and has occasionally used, the term 'spatial entrapment' as opposed to describing workers as segmented or fractured. This is because these terms, segmentation and fragmentation carries certain connotations. Research has shown how workers, permanent, casual, and or temporary generally work side-by-side on the production line.

Yet the aforementioned terms suggest a clear spatial demarcation within the workplace and maybe also in personal and social relations. Contrary to this, the relationships that exist in the comrades' coach prove that workers develop friendships and close ties than suggested. It can also be inferred that within workplaces, workers enjoy lunch breaks and share general shopfloor experiences despite their differing

contractual statuses within the workplace. That is to say, workers are only differentiated contractually, whilst most time keeping close ties on the shopfloor and outside workplaces. To this end, the thesis deploys the concept 'spatial entrapment' in respect of employment relations with the employer. The story of comrade Mama above attest to this point (see Chapter 6). The 'spatial entrapment' is fluid and yet rigid. This depends on whether the space-place segmentation is absolute as is the case with formal workplace unions (these are accessible only to members) or relative and relational as in the case of SER unionised workers and temporary/casualised workers on the other hand. By this I mean that SER workers generally share a workplace (absolute space) with temporary and casual workers. Because of this, they share workplace experiences (absolute, relative and relational), while at the same time differentiated by their different workplace positions and status (see Chapter 5). There is a failure on the other hand to delineate who is an employee; sub-contractor; employer and where the workplace is located.

Related to this, recruitment campaigns are not clear with regards to who to target, and it can be suggested that institutional power is not easily mobilised for marginalised workers due to the fact that unions are not eager to represent those who have been spatially entrapped as temporary, casuals etc (see Theron, 2016). Clearly, the findings in this thesis affirm the abovementioned labour challenges (see Chapter 5). Indications are that at some level, most of these challenges crystallise in the comrades' coach as a worker space. Notwithstanding the foregoing, observations conducted reveal that MTS places a particular value on worker education. Findings reveal a pattern that suggests that worker education is in-built into MTS's activities as embodied by workplace informed "big issue" and "complaints" days. The thesis submits that worker education offers opportunities to push back against capital's strategy of obfuscation/'spatial entrapment'. With a particular emphasis on legislative education, MTS offer workers refuge in knowledge.

Drawing on Anderson's (2005: 57) resonant place, the findings demonstrate that workers can rely on the comrades' coach as a knowledge source through which to navigate the relational and relative spaces of powerlessness and insecurity. To this end, the thesis argues, knowledge is a source of worker power. It is not power that is place bound, relying on scale as both a network and in its hierarchical form, the

findings show that comrades have successfully scaled beyond the resonant place (see Section 6.6).

The significance of the educational sessions is underlined by the fact that they are dominated by issues germane to workers and their daily struggles. As the findings chapter has shown, the discussions focus on the nuances of labour law as a praxis that governs the interface between employees/workers and employers. Those in shopsteward and related positions (strong supports the weak) are called upon to educate; advice and guide fellow workers who raise specific workplace related matters (see Chapter 5). In this manner, the knowledge traverses space at absolute, relative and relational levels (see Chapter 3). That is to say, it ruptures the 'spatial entrapment' and can be distributed and used beyond the comrades' coach. The knowledge shared becomes the foundation upon which workers build an understanding of their respective spaces and everyday reference points. This clearly demonstrates the fact that workers are sentient actors with interest in the shape and form of the economic landscape. As Herod (1997: 16; 2001: 16) has been at pains to explain, worker agency is not always concerned with overthrowing the capitalist system. Workers seek out useful information that can be utilised to ensure their continued generational self-reproduction.

Workers who are 'spatially entrapped' into silos – temporary; casual; part-time etc, find it difficult to relate, in absolute; relative and relational terms; to their places of work, union offices and union meetings (see Chapter 5). The comrades' coach is, arguably able to substitute for these spaces in absolute, relative and relational terms. In this space, workers regain their sense of identity and learn, as individuals and a group the basics of labour law that buttresses their workplace resistance.

As the story of comrade Mama and the elderly security guard makes clear (see Section 6.4), workers seek out education; advice and guidance with the objective to make sense of their situations through spatial praxis. The importance of this coach is further accentuated by the reasons advanced by those who joined the organisation such as comrades Mmotong and Segoa. The case studies presented by Anderson (2015) are heavily dependent on utilising one or a combination of associational; structural; institutional and or logistical forms of power. This thesis has sought to depict a different picture; one where workers draw from the comrades coach as a resonant place, in

order to radiate out-ward individually. However, this is not mutually exclusive. The thesis aimed to find out how the comrades coach can help us deepen our understanding of workplace militancy. Related to this, the study also asked, 'who rides to and from work in the comrades' coach'? In respect of the latter, the findings clearly show that MTS members are among the many categories of vulnerable workers identified by the existing labour scholarship (see Chapter 5). A sociologically grounded descriptive approach to the findings is enough to satisfy the aforementioned question (s). However, subjected to a critical sociological analysis, it becomes clear that it was not adequate to simply ask and stop at 'who' travels in this coach. It became, therefore necessary to understand 'why' certain workers are members of MTS.

It is in grappling with the 'why' aspect of the inquiry that the methodological approach adopted in this study became the second element informing the conceptualisation of empowerment. Why do these workers do what they do on a daily basis en-route to and from work? To offer insights to the 'why' and as an attempt to understand the South African labour movement, it then was inevitably, a requirement to 'extend out'. For this, there was a need to extend out from the micro-world of MTS and link theoretically, with broader constellations (see Chapter 5, Burawoy, 2009). Combing through the raw data, it was clear that amongst others; as supported by observable pattern, MTS offer workers some sense of direction and hope. Generally, this is grounded in the knowledge disseminated among the occupants of the comrades' coach.

Evidently, workers also seek out this knowledge and with an objective – to make use of it in other spaces external to MTS coach yet intricately linked with the comrades' coach as a resonant place (see Chapter 3). This is informed by an approach that recognises the need to understand the varied nature of space and place in order to effectively interrogate the different pressures and solutions to workers' situations (Herod, 2001: 49). Linked to this, are the material conditions of those who utilise the train to access economic opportunities. In contrast to the unionised workers in other spaces (for example, those who, as Buhlungu (2010a) has noted, have acquired law degrees in order to be able to present and argue complicated legislative laws at forums such as bargaining councils), most train commuters are not highly educated, nor do they occupy high paying jobs. MTS members generally draw from their lived experiences (absolute, relative and relational spaces) and the most basic

understanding of labour law. Worker organisations flourish where workers already have developed a sense of wrong and right, legal and illegal practices. Here, as this line of argument suggests, unlike the physical ‘place’ that is the corner stone of Anderson’s ‘resonant place’, MTS members are the ‘resonant beings’. To reiterate, it is clear that MTS links well with other existing forms of power, e.g. associational and societal power. The point is simply that MTS does not exist as an organisation in the various workplaces where its members labour. Arguably, therefore its existence suggests workers find it useful, despite MTS being an on-train organisation. This leads one to conclude that MTS *usefully* empowers these workers. Arguably, such individuals can burst open the ‘spatial entrapment’/ silos many workers are currently subjected to. Elsewhere, Buhlungu underlines my argument by pointing out the significance of ‘shared and lived experiences’ that became the driving force behind the post-1973 unions. For most workers in post-apartheid workplace however, these links to collectivism have been severed. Replaced by ‘spatial entrapment’ that has individualised workers by legislatively defining them outside of collective forms of power. As the story of comrade Mama shows (see Section 6.4), her colleague has been spatially severed from NEHAWU by legislative measures, namely outsourcing (see Chapter 5). For most of these workers, any sense of collectivism and worker solidarity is experienced within the comrades’ coach. Below I pay attention to MTS and its relations with the ruling ANC, SACP, and COSATU.

#### **8.2.4 Alliance Politics**

The multi-layered nature of MTS is revealing of the train as a strategic site in the South African context. Not only do workers express and share workplace experience of exploitation and powerlessness in this space. Workers utilise this space to also make known their rights as citizens of South Africa. As a local level member of the ruling alliance, MTS hopes to effect political influence to achieve favourable outcomes for its members – both as workers and citizens. At the political level, MTS membership of the tripartite alliance speaks to two key issues, (a) career advancement for those with political ambitions; and (b) workers’ assumption that by selecting one of their own for political office at the local level, their service delivery needs will be attended to. To this end, workers have voted into positions of local councillors many of their fellow MTS members.

This is also linked to the dual nature of responsibilities borne by workers. Generally, workers' experience of space (socio-spatial dialectic) gives rise to dual leadership roles. That is to say, workers who are union leaders are also just as likely to be community leaders (workerist/populist).

For its part, MTS is revealed by observations not to be constrained by its affiliation to the tripartite alliance as is the case with COSATU (see Chapter 5). Its leadership has called for community meetings where state owned entities such as Metrorail have failed to deliver expected services. This point affirms the narrative that the comrades' coach is a strategic site of contestation. It is an important site of identity politics and consciousness. As the research findings make clear, the train is a space pregnant with possibilities. However, the real concern is the fact that MTS members are geographically fragmented (absolute space) due to the geographical distribution of workplaces. In addition to this, the existence of the comrades' coach as a space to share, forge and consolidate identities, political ideologies and solidarities is under threat.

### **8.2.5 Discontinuity: Rail line upgrades and the silent coaches**

The findings of this study have shown that the arrival of the new model trains has dealt a heavy blow to the existence of MTS as an extra-factory worker organisation. The impact of these developments on MTS are not conclusive as of yet. Suffice it to say, the disruptions that followed the rail line upgrades and the subsequent introduction of the new model train severely affected MTS to a point of extinguishment. It will be interesting to observe how these, together with the arrival of the new labour federation and Tshwane being under a different political administration will influence the shape and form of MTS going forward.

### **8.3 Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the thesis has attempted to accord primacy to the notion of space and geography as key analytical tools within the South African context as lenses through which to make sense of workers and their strategic choices. The urban commuter trains remain an integral part of workers' daily transport needs as a means to access employment opportunities. This point is underscored by the central role the train play in key provinces such as the Western Cape and Gauteng respectively. This

places a demand on labour scholarship to factor the urban railway travel into our understanding of South African workers' experiences. The case study of MTS has demonstrated the extent to which the train can be used strategically as a site of labour revitalisation and renewal. Arguably, the MTS case has shown that workers traditional forms of power can be maintained and strengthened through acts of identity formations and solidarities such as those on display the Mamelodi trains.

A key finding of the study is the identification of train commuting as an important element of labour and social struggles. Additionally, I have attempted to position the train and its strategic role as a possible source of worker power. This form of power must be understood in relations and in addition to existing forms of power. This is to imply that collective forms of power do not simply fall upon workers tabular rasa (see Buhlungu, 2010a). On the contrary, worker collective power germinates, more often than not, from individual informal and formal networks that most times burst onto the scene in collective forms. Capital has been on the ascendancy with the advent of the neoliberal workplace regime and has effectively used its collective innovation and 'power to' and to usurp and challenge traditional forms of worker power. This Harvey refers to a spatial fix (see Chapter 3). It is well documented that the workplace, as a space of power has been annihilated. Drawing on the example of MTS, the thesis has made an argument around the extent to which a workplace can be relocated elsewhere. MTS has demonstrated that this can be done, by transporting workers traditions across space and time. This has challenged some of the language in labour literature such as fragmentation and segmentation (see Chapters 6 and 7). The weakness with such concepts is that they denote the existence of clear-cut spatial differentiations between workers. In reality, workers share much in common and communicate about workplace experiences amongst each other. In essence, the divisions around permanent, outsourced, and casual are nothing more than contractual differences. This I refer to as 'spatial entrapment'.

Furthermore, the existence of MTS revives hope that the former social movement unionism of the 80s can still be revived. Clearly, the shape and organisational form of MTS has been heavily influenced by some of the old worker traditions in South Africa. South African workers are complex and multi-layered in their approach to organising. This is reflected in their usage of song and dance as a critical aspect of solidarity building and organising. This stems from the fact that the songs are meaningful and



speak to intimated aspects of workers lives and identities. Unfortunately, the demise of MTS as a consequence of Metrorail modernisation project has left many workers vulnerable and directionless.

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## Appendix 1



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**Department of Sociology**

**Faculty of Humanities**

### Interview Schedule

### Demographic Data

Age

Marital status

### Employment History

Are you employed.....? if yes

Permanent or temporary.....?

Which company do you work for.....?

Have you ever been dismissed/ retrenched from work? Why?

Are you happy for the reasons advanced for the dismissal/ retrenchment.....?

How are the working conditions at your current company.....?

Are you a member of a trade union? If yes

Which one....? Why did you join a trade union...?

For how long have you been a member.....?

Do hold any position of power/ officer bearer in the union.....?

Have you participated in workplace based union activities e.g. strike....?

What were the issues.....?

Are you happy working for the current employer?.....if not why.....?

### Train coaches

How do you get to work on a daily basis.....?

If by train, which coach do you occupy....? Why.....?

Are you a comrade.....?

Why did you become one.....?

How long have you been a comrade.....?

In your view, what is the significance of comrade coaches.....?

Briefly describe the activities you engage in, in that coach.....?

In your view, who is likely to travel in that coach.....? And why.....?

Are you affected by some of the issues discussed in that coach.....? Explain and give examples.....?

Do you find the issues discussed in the comrade coach helpful in the workplace and related community matters.....?

Are you a community leader.....? In what capacity.....?

Do you take part in community meetings and protests.....?

When do you get the time to sit and discuss community related matters given you work 5 days a week.....?

### Political affiliation

Are you a member of a political party .....?

If yes which one.....?

How long have you been a member.....?

Do you occupy any position of power/ office bearer.....?

Anything else you'd like to tell me about being a comrade.....?

THANK YOU

THANK YOU

THANK YOU



## Appendix 2



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
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**Department of Sociology**

**Faculty of Humanities**

Researcher conducts information:

Cell: 0722963812

Tel: 0124206740

Emal: mpho.mmadi@up.ac.za

### 1. Information letter

Dear Participant

My name is Mpho Mmadi, a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria, department of Sociology. I am conducting research on the importance of the train in maintaining worker militancy in South Africa. You are being invited to take part in this research project. Please be advised that participation in this study is voluntary, that is to say, one can decline to take part in this research project. The research is undertaken solely to be used for academic purposes.

#### 1.1. Tittle of the study

**Mobile Mobilization, en-route to work: Train coaches as spaces for workplace militancy and community struggles**

#### 1.2. Purpose of the study

South Africa is a country known for its radical workplace based militancy and service delivery protests. Due to the history of this country, African people were politically and economically oppressed by the erstwhile apartheid regime. It was during this time that

Africans, both as workers and citizens resorted to all forms of protest and marches against oppression and workplace based exploitation. It is in this context that the train as an almost racially exclusive mode of transport became an important part of the struggle as a meeting point for the African working class oscillating between places of residence and workplace.

The study seeks to understand the so called comrades' coach phenomena on the Mamelodi-Pretoria rail corridor. It endeavours to ascertain the extent to which comrades' coach serves as an important engine room for workplace based militancy and community service delivery protests. It is hoped observations of the said space on the train will provide a better understanding of the significance of comrades' coach to workers and residence collective identities.

In addition to observations, the study will employ interviews, filming and photographs in order to comprehensively understand the phenomena under study.

### 1.3. Risks and benefits resulting from participation in this study.

The study involves some questions that are related to employment and working conditions. Given the high levels of unemployment in South Africa, the study takes into cognisance the fact that some workers are/ might be employed in less favourable conditions and conversing around such issues may invoke emotions, especially for those who are sole breadwinners in households. Where talking about employment related matters proves distressful for participants, the interview will be immediately halted and if circumstances allow be continued at a later stage.

With regards benefits, there will be no material or any other form of benefits associated with participation in this study. Collected information will be used solely for the purposes of understanding comrades coach as a particular form of space as occupied by comrades en-route to and from work. The outcomes of the research are to be written up in my Dphil thesis.

I may also want to publish the findings in a scholarly journal or as a book or book chapter in a field-specific publication. I plan to present my findings to participating organizations, participating individuals as well as to my colleagues at the University of Pretoria and related academic conferences.

Below are conduct details of Prof Andries Bezuidenhout (the research supervisor). You may contact me or him at any time should you have further queries regarding this study:

Professor Andries Bezuidenhout

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology

Faculty of Humanities

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Pretoria 0002

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**Appendix 3**

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
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**Department of Sociology**

**Faculty of Humanities**

Interview consent form

I agree to participate in this study that seeks to understand comrades' coach as an important space for workplace and community protests.

I have read the information letter and understand what the study is about. Furthermore, the researcher offered to explain in the language that I understand where I failed to comprehend the English language. I voluntarily decided to participate and I am aware that I have the right to stop the interview at any time and that I am not compelled to answer questions I am uncomfortable with. Moreover I know that I will not be required to provide reasons for the former and or latter decisions. Also, my identity will be protected and under no circumstance shall it be revealed to anyone outside of this research project. Finally I am aware of the fact that my comments will be integrated with those of others to be interviewed for this research project.

Participant's Signature:

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer's signature:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Agreement: Recording**

I am aware that the interview will be recorded. I understand the intent and purpose of the recording for transcription purposes. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the recording, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

Participant's Signature:

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer's signature:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_