

Mzabalazo on the move: Organising on a South African commuter train.

MPHO MMADI

(University of Pretoria)

The existing literature on labour movements notes how trade unions have been weakened in recent years. This observable pattern is not unique to South Africa; arguably, this decline represents a global phenomenon characterised by the disintegration of erstwhile militant labour movements. In the case of South Africa, the post-apartheid neoliberal labour regime has fragmented, almost to a point of extinction, the militant social movement unionism (SMU) of the 1980s. Despite this trend, various studies have detailed pockets of revival and resistance by workers spread across a variety of sectors and continents. The article seeks to contribute to this literature by drawing on the case study of Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS). MTS was formed in 2001 as a ‘mobilising structure’, aligned to the African National Congress (ANC) and its alliance partners. Using the notion of space as a theoretical tool, the article attempts to understand MTS and the space it organises –the train. MTS utilises the travel times to and from work to offer legislative education to largely unorganised/non-unionised workers. In addition to legislative education, MTS members (self-styled comrades) discuss community issues and matters pertaining to the ANC’s tripartite alliance as an attempt to foster a particular kind of identity politics. The data collected reveals that, amongst other contributions, MTS offers hope and a sense of solidarity to those workers without workplace representation. The comradely sense of belonging, buttressed by a common identity potentially mitigates the impact of workplace fragmentation – experienced by the majority of workers in South Africa. Organising on the train points to one missing link in our current efforts to understand workers’ agency – the geography of transport in South Africa and its related possibilities as a site of revival. With a specific focus on the MTS as a case study, the article suggests that the train, as a by-product of apartheid spatiality represents a strategic location for worker organisation in South Africa.

Keywords: Social Movement Unionism; comrade; socio-spatial dialectic; space; comrades’ coach; Mamelodi Train Sector.

The history of South Africa has without doubt influenced the character and organising repertoires of the South African labour movement. This can be linked to the long process of disenfranchisement, exclusion and exploitation that started in 1652 and endured until the

1990s. The white minority regime adopted a number of strategies and a battery of legislative measures to fashion race relations, class hierarchy and spatial separation that ensured and facilitated the exploitation and marginalisation of the black working class.¹ The South African social movement unionism (SMU) emerged in this context as a response to particular social conditions that have been articulated elsewhere.² Drawing on Edward Soja's notion of socio-spatial dialectic, the article contends that, the manner in which South African workers relate to the concept of a train can be traced to apartheid spatial configurations.³ For a South African worker, train is not an innocent form of mobility. To this end, as Soja puts it, space should be conceptualised as both product and producer –socio-spatial dialectic. This approach 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 organized 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.⁴

Soja conveys the idea that space is not merely a backdrop, but that the manner in which it is shaped influences human behaviour. Space is also the outcome of human actions hence human actions and spatial forms exists in a dialectical tension. Put differently, this is to say the production of space embodies both the medium and outcome of social action relationships.⁵ The article reflects on the historical role of the train as a mode of worker transportation system in South Africa. With a specific focus on the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) as a case study, the article suggests that the train, as a by-product of apartheid spatiality, represents a strategic location for worker organisation. In so doing, I seek to bring to the foreground the role of transport to the centre of analysis and interrogate how it shapes worker identities and actions.

¹ See S. Terreblanche, *A history of inequality in South Africa, 1652-2000* (Scottsville, UKZN Press, 2001).

² See G. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994); R. Lambert and E. Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa?', in W. Cobbett and R. Cohen (eds), *Struggles in South Africa* (Trenton NJ, Africa World Press, 1988), pp. 174-184.

³ E. Soja, 'The Socio-Spatial Dialectic', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 70, 2 (1980), pp. 207-225. See also E. Soja 'The Spatiality of Social Life: towards a transformative retheorisation, in D. Gregory and J. Urry (eds), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (London, Macmillan, 1985), p. 90-9.

⁴ *Ibi.*, p.208

⁵ J. Mashayamombe, 'Sanitised Spaces: the spatial orders of post-apartheid mines in South Africa', (Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2018), p. 30-43.

With the exception of a few scholars (mostly geographers), South African labour scholarship has failed to analyse the relationship between workers and transport (particularly, the train).⁶ Moreover, there is yet to be a study that attempts to understand how workers in particular, experiences daily train travels to and from work in post-apartheid South Africa. The central argument of this article is that by ignoring South African workers' experience of the train as a mode of transport, a key site of worker militancy and political identity formation is excluded from analysis. This limits our understanding of South African workers. With the changing nature of work and fragmentation of the workplace, transport sites remain some of the strategic worker convergence points. This article, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to the theme of South African labour revival with a focus on the train as a strategic site of organising as demonstrated by MTS. Firstly, the article positions the train as a space/site for a 'remake'. This refers to the fact that MTS is a new and to some extent innovative way of organising and that it represents an opportunity for labour revival. Secondly, it suggests that the train is imbued with meanings that promote worker identities and solidarity formations. Thirdly, I argue that in seeking ways to reinvigorate the labour movement, strategic and innovative use of space could be key to such efforts.

The article is an outcome of an ethnographic PhD study conducted in Tshwane, in South Africa's Gauteng Province from 2015 until 2017. The study employed participant observation as the researcher actively participated in the activities of the comrades' coach as a member of MTS.⁷ The data collection process also involved attending monthly meetings of the organisation at the local primary school in Mamelodi Township. The article begins with a discussion of the 'making of the South African working class'. This section shows how the apartheid state utilised the train, not just as a means of transportation, but to control the movements and residential locations of black migrant labour. Furthermore, it details the extent to which the apartheid spatial engineering relied on the train to facilitate some of its geographic legislative segregation measures. The next section briefly discusses the so called 'transportation politics'; and this is linked to the following section on the case study of MTS.

⁶ See G. Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines: constraints and significance', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4 (1993), pp. 713-730; G.H. Pirie, 'African Township Railways and the South African State, 1902-1963', *Journal of Historical Geography* 13, 3 (1987), pp. 283-295; G.H. Pirie, 'Johannesburg Transport 1905-9145: African Capitulation and Resistance' *Historical Geography*, 12:1 (Jan), pp. 41-55; M. Khosa, 'Transport and Popular Struggles in South Africa', *Antipode* 27:2, 1995, pp 167-188; J. McCarthy and M. Swilling, 'The Apartheid City and the Politics of Bus Transportation', *Political Geography Quarterly* IV (3), 1985, pp. 235-249.

⁷Comrades' coach refers to the specific carriage occupied by comrades/MTS members on the train. This is usually carriage number 3 or 4 from the front of the train.

It outlines the origins, aims, and organising model of the MTS; and the article concludes by suggesting that the train offers opportunities as a possible labour revival site.

The making of the South African working class

While cognisant of 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, I emphasize the influence of geography/spatial particularities.⁸ Granted, the sweeping political changes of the 1990s have improved 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.⁹ However, the continued importance of the train for mobility, arguably points to a continuation of the past with the present. The train, and later on buses and minibus taxis came to play a dominant role in the daily commute of African migrant workers. This is linked with South Africa's racialized geographic separation of races.

From the 1950s, the then apartheid state embarked upon an aggressive process of forced removals. The process of removal was based on racial and ethnic division of the country. Non-whites were removed from city-centres and designated to reside in townships. Generally, these were close enough to places of employment but away from city centres reserved for occupation by whites only. This was an important period in the making of the South African working class for one particular reason. It ensured that African workers had to commute daily into city centres and it is in this context that transportation system became central to the daily lives of African workers. 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, and the like became the typical commuter migrants of apartheid South Africa. In addition, the country was divided into seven ethnic specific geographic areas called Bantustans. For example, Ndebele people were designated to reside in KwaNdebele. In this way, the Ndebele people were considered non-citizens in white South Africa. This spatial engineering gave rise to the

⁸ See J. Anderson, 'Towards Resonant Places: reflections on the organising strategy of the International Transport Workers Federation', *Space and Polity*, 19,1, pp. 46-61.

⁹ See S. Buhlungu, *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the democratic transformation in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010); S. Buhlungu and M. Tshoaedi, 'A Contested Legacy: organisational and political challenges facing COSATU', in S. Buhlungu and M. Tshoaedi (eds), *Contested Legacy: South African trade unions in the second decade of democracy* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2013).

so-called ‘*international*’ *commuting labour force*.¹⁰ This term describes the daily travels of those located in Bantustans close enough to white South Africa for labour to commute to work on a daily basis. Murray crisply expresses this process as the “commuterization of the black labour force”.¹¹ This commuterisation process carved out trains as an important worker space. Both the daily township-to-city commuting workforce and the ‘international’ commuters were the product of the apartheid government’s policy of spatial separation and racial segregation. Buses and minibus taxis emerged in this context as an outcome of state led spatial planning described above. As on the trains, the manner in which South African workers relate to the abovementioned modes of transport is mediated through the struggles against the apartheid state. Therefore mobilising against increases in train and bus fares could very well turn into political rallies. Stadler makes a similar observation in respect of bus boycotts in Alexandra in the 1940s.¹² For most working class Africans, buses and trains represented an extension of the apartheid state machinery into their lives, reflecting the ownership patterns of these modes of transportation. From as early as 1930, through the Motor Transportation Act, the apartheid state sought to disadvantage black operators in the transport sector by protecting trains and state-owned buses against competition from black-owned minibus taxis. It was only in the 1970s with the advent of the kombi that the black minibus taxi industry witnessed growth. Minibus taxis became popular with township commuters and proved to be a much-needed ally during boycotts of state-owned trains and buses.¹³ For township commuters, the transport geography gave rise to a distinct travel experience that in turn produced a highly politicised commuter socio-spatial dialectic.

¹⁰ J. Browett, ‘The Evolution of Unequal Development within South Africa’: an overview, in D.M. Smith (ed), *The London Research Series in Geography 2. Living Under Apartheid: Aspects of Urbanisation and social change in South Africa*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London), p. 22

¹¹ C. Murray, ‘Displaced Urbanization: South Africa’s rural slums’, *African Affairs*, 86, 344 (1987), 311-329, p. 314; D. Goldblatt, ‘The Night Riders of KwaNdebele’, in O. Badsha, (ed). *South Africa the Cordoned Heart: twenty South African photographer* (Cape Town, The Gallery Press, 1986), p. 34.

¹² A. Stadler, ‘A long Way to Walk: bus boycotts in Alexandra, 1940-1945’, *African Studies Institute* (1979), p. 13.

¹³ C. McCaul, *No Easy Ride: the rise and future of the Black Taxi industry* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1990a), p. 41. M. Mmadi, ‘Mobile Workplace: work conditions and family life of taxi drivers’ (Unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2012), p. 32-3; P. A. Croucamp, ‘The Social Relations of the taxi in South Africa: contending theories of corporatism, pluralism and systematic patronage’, (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Free State, 2002), p. 76.

Theorising *Stimela*: transport and workers

A few scholars have addressed themselves to what can broadly be referred to as transportation politics. The thrust of these analyses is the fact that transportation is not an innocent part of daily life in South Africa.¹⁴ Due to a number of reasons – fares, relocations and facilities – transport was always a site of mobilisation and protest action during the apartheid era. Faced with rising transport costs on the one hand, and paltry wages on the other hand, many Africans from townships including Alexandra, Sophiatown, Lady Selborne and Evaton engaged in bus boycotts from the 1940s and 1950s. Subsequently, in the 1980s, there was a resurgence of bus boycotts. There were widespread and intermittent boycotts launched by United Democratic Front activists in the mid-1980s; but prolonged and politicised boycotts were mounted in East London, Durban and on the West Rand.¹⁵ 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 add:

It is possible that by taking up issues such as transport within their programmes, worker organizations 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.¹⁶

For some geographers, this is not surprising because transport is not a mere sideshow to workers' daily lives.¹⁷ This is poignantly clear in the case of South Africa. Transport networks help give form to space because they can be deliberately engineered to influence space and how it is experienced. Von Holdt has shown how, in Witbank, militant youths had to burn down company (Highveld Steel) buses to prevent township dwellers from going to work.¹⁸ Nothing reveals the importance of transport geography and the train in particular, perhaps more than

¹⁴ See Pirie 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines'

¹⁵ A. Stadler, *A Long Way to Walk: bus boycotts in Alexandra, 1940-1945* (University of the Witwatersrand, African Studies Institute, 1979); T. Lodge, *We are being punished because we are poor: the bus boycotts of Evaton and Alexandra, 1955-1957* (University of the Witwatersrand, African Studies Institute, 1979); J.J. McCarthy & M. Swilling, 'South Africa's Emerging Politics of Bus Transportation', *Political Geography Quarterly*, (1985), p 381,383, 389, 390; I. van Kessel, *'Beyond our wildest dreams': The United Democratic Front and the transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville VA, University of Virginia Press,2000), pp. 193-97.

¹⁶ Ibid McCarthy and Swilling, 1985, p 389.

¹⁷ G.H. Pirie and M. Khosa, 'Transport Geography: web and flow', p, 283, in C. Rogerson and J. McCarthy, (eds). *Geography in a Changing South Africa: Progress and Prospects*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 283.

¹⁸ K. Von Holdt, 'Social Movement Unionism: The Case of South Africa', *Work Employment Society*, 16:283-304 (2002), p 289.

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 offered only 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 weakened SATAWU's position in relations to the employer. Consequently, SATAWU members adopted violence as a strategy to deal with those 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 organised on public transportation system – the train. 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, it should be noted, has a long history in South Africa. What is of interest here was the *site* of the said violence together with the accompanying protest action.¹⁹ 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 metro-rail declared it a 'national crisis'.²⁰ The national death figure was reported at 23 people, with 18 of these deaths in Gauteng province alone. In addition to those killed, scores of others were paraded naked and/or assaulted on the trains. Arguably, the security guards' locus of discipline demonstrates the centrality of the train as a site of solidarity and identity, particularly for those workers with vague relationships to the notion of a workplace. With its roots in apartheid South Africa, *en route* mobilising continues to be important for factory-floor based actions. This can be linked to a broader structural question. To what extent have places such as Mamelodi and formerly oppressed African workers been incorporated into a notional non-racial South Africa

¹⁹ See G. Simpson and E. Webster, 'Crossing the Picket Line: violence in Industrial Relations in South Africa', *Industrial Relations Journal of South Africa*, 11,4(1991), pp. 12-24; E. Webster, 'Marikana and Beyond: new dynamics in Strikes in South Africa', *Global Labour Journal*, 8, 2 (2017), pp. 139-158; C. Chinguno, 'Strike Violence after South Africa's Democratic Transition', in V. Satgar, and R. Southall, (eds). *COSATU in Crisis: the fragmentation of an African Trade Union Federation* (Sandton, KMM Review Publishing Company, 2015), pp. 246-267.

²⁰ Tshetlo, T. Tshetlo, 'More Thrown From Trains. *Citizen*, (12 May, 2009), p. 9, available at <https://reference.sabinet.co.za/uplib.idm.oclc.org/webx/access/samedia/Image3/200609/1/4220062110.pdf> retrieved 12 October 2016; S. Nare and M. Kobue, 'Hurled off Train: Attackers Search for Uniform and Notebooks of Workers not on Strike', (*Sowetan*. 04 May, 2006), p. 1, available at <https://reference.sabinet.co.za/uplib.idm.oclc.org/webx/access/samedia/Image3/200608/2/4220061925.pdf> retrieved 12 October 2016.

of the post-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 develop a historical account of *Stimela* (coal-powered train) not only as a mode of transport, but also as a significant and integral part of apartheid spatiality. The weakness inherent in the South African scholarship on apartheid spatial engineering is the predominant focus on the legislative means enacted to give effect to geographic separation.

Without a cheap mode of transport, able to ferry large numbers of low-paid workers without political and industrial citizenship across the economic landscape, it is inconceivable that the apartheid state would have implemented spatial apartheid on the scale or at the pace of its implementation. 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 outcome of particular historical processes, referred to by Soja as socio-spatial dialectic.²¹ For these reasons, the train reflects a distinct class politics. Therefore, it is not simply a 'container' of commuters. On the contrary it is imbued with class, racial and political meanings. 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 (with a few exceptions) 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, the epicentre of colonial and apartheid social engineering was a geographic strategy based on institutions and infrastructure linking together rural homesteads and villages, and mining centres and towns.²² Key to this spatial strategy was the apartheid government's ability to perfect and implement an elaborate form of controls. Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu identify four forms of control: spatial control, reproduction control, associational control, and political control.²³ 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. Indeed, in his song, "*Stimela*" from the album *Still Grazing*, Hugh Masekela eloquently captures the feelings and emotions that migrants often associated with the steam train:

²¹ See Soja, 'The Socio-Spatial Dialectic'

²² A. Bezuidenhout and S. Buhlungu, 'From Compounded to Fragmented Labour: mineworkers and the demise of compounds in South Africa, *Antipode*, 43, 2, (2011), p237.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 238, 241

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 whoo! They cuss, and they curse the coal train...²⁴

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* was and continues to be a key ingredient in the making of the South African working class. Pirie observes that railway wagons were incubators of new social identities and solidarity formations.²⁵ The current railway network in Tshwane serves to provide an explanation for the train as a space of choice for MTS.

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. 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 17th of March 1890 as a 20km line servicing Braamfontein (Johannesburg) and Boksburg. In the same year, the rail passenger service between Lourenco Marques (present day Maputo) and Pretoria was constructed.²⁶ The mineral discoveries heightened the need to develop a well-integrated and functioning railway to cater for the mining industry – both in terms of industrial inputs and labour.

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 time schedules controlling departures and arrivals. Because of this, commuters are compelled to congregate at designated departure/arrival sites. It is this need

²⁴ H. Masekela, 'Still Grazing' Track 11 (1974).

²⁵ G.H. Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines: constraints and significance', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4, (1993), pp. 713-730.

²⁶ Metrorail, 2016, available at: www.metrorail.co.za, retrieved 18 July 2017.

to converge at a particular place at certain times that allows workers the space to socialise and share workplace and community related concerns. By its very nature, the train encourages and facilitates the *camaraderie* 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 population, 344,577 reside in Mamelodi. This makes Mamelodi the second biggest township after Shoshanguve with a population of 403, 162.²⁷ The Mamelodi rail line is made up 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 station. The second line diverges from Koedoespoort through the following stations: Queenswood, Pienaarsrus, Vilieria, Dearnis, Gezina and Capital Park. These stations are not merely geographic spots in the universe. It is clear from this section that the train, as a worker's space, has been in existence for a long time. MTS's ability to organise in this space attests to this fact. What is not clear, however is the lack of penetration into this space by the more formal unions and the labour movement broadly. The next section offers some insights in this respect.

Workerist-populist debates and worker spaces.

The 1960s experienced a period of relative peace following the decline of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). This phase was abruptly disturbed by the turbulence of the 1970s. The year 1973 transformed apartheid spatial configurations forever. By re-inserting African worker's rights on the political and social agenda, the 1973 moment permanently changed the South African political and economic landscape. In a space of about two months (January and February) of 1973, over 100 000 black workers embarked on a series of spontaneous strikes in Durban alone. Soon the euphoria spread to other cities. Amongst the many unions and labour federations to emerge in the 1970s was the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Spatially, the FOSATU unions were located in the workplace as a key space from which to scale their demands. This approach underlined an understanding that class was the nucleus around which power operates. For this reason, the FOSATU unions focused their attention on the workplace as a space from which to organise workers. From the

²⁷Statistics South Africa (2016), available at <https://www.statssa.gov.za>. retrieved 5 March 2017.

perspective of this group, class and race politics should not be mixed. This view came to represent what is known as workerism.

On the other hand, there were those within the labour movement who believed that race and class issues could not be separated. This viewpoint was therefore at variance with the workerist approach. Workers should be organised in their communities and workplaces because they are oppressed at both ends. This grouping came to be known as populist.²⁸ For populists, workplace freedom is incomplete without political freedom. For ordinary workers, however, life in apartheid South Africa was experienced in terms of racial oppression. There were objective pressures for a reconciliation between the two positions, leading to the formation of a new union federation in 1985.

The South African context was such that the trade union movement had to formulate and strategise not only with the question of class struggle but also race relations. 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. It is against this backdrop that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) emerged as a militant social movement unionism. Consequently, COSATU adopted tactics that focused on shop-floor mobilisation, whilst at the same time espoused greater affinity with the national democratic movement, represented especially by the UDF and ANC. Generally speaking, the workplace was much easier to organise. According to Buhlungu, this is because the labour process in the manufacturing sector of South Africa promoted worker solidarity and made organising less difficult.²⁹ The Fordist labour process characteristic of manufacturing sector was dependent upon a large pool of workers converging at the point of production. Whilst placing a focused attention upon the workplace, COSATU was active in other spaces such as street committees. This approach concretised the social movement unionism that came into being as a vehicle through which to challenge apartheid spatiality. According to Lambert and

²⁸ J. Sithole & S. Ndlovu, 'The Revival of the Labour Movement', in *Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol 2: 1970-1980*, (Pretoria, UNISA, 2006) p 190; S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African workers trade unions, 1970-1984* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987); J. Maree, 'The Emergence, Struggles and Achievements of Black Trade Unions in South Africa from 1973-1984', *Labour, Capital and Society*, 18, 2 (1985), pp. 278-303; B. Magubane, *The Political Economy of South Africa* (New York, Monthly Review, 1978) ,p 321; S. Byrne, "'Building Tomorrow Today": a re-examination of the character of the controversial "workerist" tendency associated with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) in South Africa, 1979-1985', (Unpublished Masters dissertation, Wits, 2012), p. 137.

²⁹ S. Buhlungu, 'Full-time Officials and the Dilemma of Leadership: a case study of the dynamics of democracy and power in the post-1973 trade unions', (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2001).

Webster, social movement unionism comes about because of a recognition that labour is not a commodity to be bargained over but that labour is both a social and a political force.³⁰ This kind of unionism is peculiar to specific places and times – authoritarian regimes exemplified by apartheid South Africa, Brazil and the Philippines. 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.

Because of this, the multiclass alliance that characterises SMU resonated 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.³¹ 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. The neoliberal labour regime is characterised by market despotism and the withdrawal of the state regulations. With limited state regulation, capitalism reign supreme and simply replaces permanent workers with temporary and casual workers. Furthermore, companies also outsource certain services to outside providers in order to bypass regulatory regimes such as labour laws. Faced with the changing nature of work, the old industrial unionism model has proved inadequate to the new world order. Added to this, leadership struggles linked to the ruling ANC have further weakened the federation. Of significance, here is the expulsion of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) from COSATU in November 2014. The expulsion was a culmination of long running battles within the federation and the tripartite alliance more broadly following the 2007 ANC conference in Polokwane.

The alliance as whole came under pressure as the contradictory multiclass relations and COSATU's own democratic traditions began to unravel. The following three reasons are highlighted as having fuelled the rupture within COSATU. First, there existed major

³⁰ Lambert and Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa?'

³¹ Buhlungu, *A Paradox of Victory*, G. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements*; A. Sitas, 'Moral Formations and Struggles Amongst Migrant Workers on the East Rand', *Labour, Capital and Society*, 18, 2, (1985), pp. 372-401; K. Scipes, 'Understanding the Labor Movement in the "Third World": the emergence of Social Movement Unionism', *Critical Sociology*, 19, 2(1992), p. 83-4; P. Dibben, G. Wood, & K. Mellahi, 'Is Social Movement Unionism Still Relevant? The case of South African federation of COSATU', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 43, 6, (2012), pp. 494-510.

differences around ideology. These differences were linked to the workerist/populist debate discussed in the preceding section. Second, there were differences around notions of trade union democracy, and to notions of worker control and participatory democracy within the labour movement. And third, there were class divisions exemplified by the material differences between members of public sector unions and those belonging to private sector unions. Workers in public sector unions earn an average of R 14 108.58 per month compared to R 10 760.92 in the private sector. These tensions are analysed in detail by Satgar and Southall.³² Consequently, a majority of workers are without workplace representation. This process encapsulates what Theron refers to as a trinity of interlocking processes – externalisation, casualization and outsourcing. Workers across the globe have had to devise new coping strategies as a result.³³ The next section focuses on MTS and its activities on the train, arguing that the train represents a strategic site of consciousness and mobilisation for those workers without workplace representation. For a majority of these workers, the workplace has been rendered meaningless by the trinity of interlocking process.³⁴ The existence of MTS on the train as an organising structure aligned with the ruling alliance suggests two things. First, that some of the organising repertoires of the 1980s have lingered on in the post-apartheid period. Second, MTS arguably embodies some of the key building blocks of social movement unionism of the past. While this latter feature is observable throughout the paper, the argument is not fully developed here, but will be presented elsewhere.³⁵ The main objectives here is an attempt to introduce MTS and its organisational structures to South African labour scholarship.

Mamelodi Train sector (MTS)

The history of workers organising on the trains dates back to the 1970s at the height of labour unrest in South Africa. In Pretoria (Tshwane) organising started as a ‘defensive unit as a result

³² V. Satgar and R. Southall, “Cosatu in Crisis: analysis and prospects”, in V. Satgar and R. Southall, (eds). *Cosatu in Crisis: the fragmentation of an African trade union federation* (Johannesburg: KMM Review Publishing Company (PTY) Ltd, 2015), p. 1-30; see also A. Bezuidenhout, C. Bischoff and N. Nthejane, ‘Is COSATU Still a Working Class Movement?’, in A. Bezuidenhout, and M. Tshoadi (eds), *Labour Beyond Cosatu: mapping the rapture in South African labour landscape* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2017), p. 48

³³ J. Chun, *Organizing at Margins: the symbolic politics of labor in South Korea and the United States* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006); E. Webster, A.O. Britwum, and S. Bhowmik, ‘A Conceptual and Theoretical Introduction’, in E. Webster, A.O. Britwum, and S. Bhowmik, (eds). *Crossing the Divide: precarious work and the future of labour* (UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2017), pp. 1-11; J. Theron, ‘Employment is not what it Used to Be: the nature and impact of work restructuring in South Africa’, in E. Webster and K. Von Holdt, (eds). *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace: studies in transition* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2005), pp. 293-317.

³⁴ J. Theron, “Employment is not what it Used to Be”.

³⁵ M. Mmadi, ‘Rethinking Associational Power’. “Work in progress”.

of what was happening on the East Rand with Inkatha'.³⁶ This is in reference to the violence that broke out in the so called KATORUS region (Katlehong, Thokoza, and Vosloorus). 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'.³⁷

The violence was perpetuated by Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters.³⁸ Thus as the above quote by Mr Maphila makes clear, Zulus were perceived as 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.³⁹ It can be stated that 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*. 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. With the advent of democracy, the defensive unit was formally constituted into the Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) on 9 June 2001 as a "mobilising structure" with the following aims and objectives as spelled out in the constitution.⁴⁰

- 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

³⁶ Interview with Mr Maphila, (former COSATU shop steward and ward-councillor in Mamelodi Township) 27 August 2016.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ IFP is a Zulu nationalist political party with support base concentrated mainly in the province of KwaZulu Natal

³⁹ South Africa is a country with 11 official languages. Some languages are more dominant in certain regions. For example, Zulu is dominant in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Significant parts of the Gauteng province however have higher numbers of Zulu speakers. But Tshwane is dominated by so called Pretoria Tswana and Sepedi speakers.

⁴⁰ Mamelodi Train Sector (MTS) Constitution of 2001.

- To support and promote the struggle for the right of the working class and finally
- To promote safety and security on the trains.

Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, and as outlined in the 2001 constitution, MTS has managed to adapt its role as demanded by the conditions of post-apartheid South African workplace. As one of the comrades said, ‘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’ (Observed by author, 09 May 2016). The important issues discussed in the coach refers, *inter alia* as exemplified by the message below. MTS deputy president and coach chairperson had the following to say:

Comrades, let me tell you. If you are unsure, as to whether or not your employer deducts Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) levies. Simply take your green barcoded ID (identity document), 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 (Observed by author, 29 Oct 2015).

Educational sessions such as the one observed above are regular occurrence in the MTS coach. These sessions provide important information on a range of worker related issues from UIF, labour law and disciplinary hearing. MTS president and regional secretary of South African Postal Workers Union (SAPWU) cautioned fellow workers against self-representation:

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 (Observed by author, 20 Oct 2015).

For those workers without workplace union affiliation, this space helps raise consciousness around worker rights. The level of consciousness achieved in this way, arguably, make it easier for workers to join unions and amenable to building new ones from the ground. The organisational and leadership structure of MTS also allows ordinary workers to gain leadership

experience on the train that is transferable to the workplaces and broader communities. This is because the membership of MTS is not only limited to workers, but commuters broadly. As such, MTS is a broad church of unionised and non-unionised workers. The key requirement of its membership is simply that one is a train commuter. However, this has an almost natural selection aspect to it in that it is mostly workers who consistently commute on the train. It is in this respect that those without any union and leadership experiences learn valuable lessons on the train. 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.

In addition to the top five positions, five additional members are elected to form the top ten –constituting the executive committee. 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 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.

Moreover, the aforementioned are expected to recruit members on behalf of MTS and the tripartite alliance as a whole. 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.⁴¹ These fee levels, together with the nature of these commuter trains that MTS organises, underline the fact that the organisation is a working class movement.

Mzabalazo on the move!

The title of this section is a literal description of MTS. *Mzabalazo* is vernacular for struggle and or to organise/mobilise. 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 we conceptualise the train. The existence of MTS reveals the train as a worker space. Significantly, this space opens up the possibility of the comrades' coach as a substitute for the erstwhile meaning-laden workplace. The findings indicate that MTS organises six morning trains daily from Pienaarspoort to Pretoria and the same number for the return journeys. Buhluu has suggested the following in relations to the South African labour movement. Firstly, that there exist 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. As a consequence of the foregoing trends has been, amongst others, the negligence of local level structures.⁴² 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 presents a much more nuanced analysis as opposed to a juggernaut process of weakening and waning union influence. She discerns an intricate process through which labour is 'unmade', newly 'made' and 'remade' in different geographic contexts.⁴³ Accordingly, labour cannot simply be projected as being in perpetual decline due to the changing nature of work and capital's increased mobility. On the contrary, labour is being made in new sites of capital investments whilst also re-strategising and organising innovatively –remake. The findings in this study affirms Silvers argument as South

⁴¹ MTS, 2001

⁴² See Buhluu, *Paradox of Victory*.

⁴³ B. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 19.

Africa's working class is faced with new challenges that have, to some extent fractured old identities and sources of power. 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: Tuesdays and Thursdays are '*complaints*' days, when 'MaCom' are encouraged to bring complaints for discussion.⁴⁴ Wednesdays are '*big issue*' day. Workers are expected to raise topical issues that speak to workplace and or community concerns. Mondays are reserved for workers to engage in song and dance that invokes and fosters a sense of solidarity and belonging; there are no formal activities scheduled for Fridays. The next section demonstrates how workers use the train to give meaning and identity to their comradeship. As a worker locale, the train is a space occupied by a particular societal class stratum.

Socio-economic position: 'Barekishi ba matsogo'.

Over and above being a worker space, comrades' coach also attaches a particular identity to its occupants. Arguably, this shared identity affirms solidarity among workers. What this finding points to, is that the hierarchical class divisions among workers as observed by Buhlungu and others can be attributed only to certain spaces (sectors) of the South African economy.⁴⁵ Under careful analysis, findings reveal that these workers share an identity specific to the space they occupy – a class position informed by their material conditions. On the 3rd of May 2016 the following occurred, '*...the chairperson reminded all those present in the coach about the importance of joining unions*'. The significance of this message was amplified by another comrade shouting '*kamoka ro rekisha matsogo ko bo Koekemoer*' (All of us present in this coach, are going to sell hands to the Koekemoer).⁴⁶

'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 sentence quoted also distinguishes between those who 'sell hands' – black township residents and train commuters - and the owners of means of production –generally white Afrikaners, hence the reference to the surname

⁴⁴ 'MaCom' is vernacular for Comrades.

⁴⁵ See also V. Satgar & R. Southall, 'COSATU in Crisis: Analysis and Prospects, in V. Satgar and R. Southall, (eds). *COSATU in Crisis: the fragmentation of an African Trade Union federation* (Sandton, KMM Review Publishing Company, 2015).

⁴⁶ Observed by author 03 May 2016

Koekemoer. The significance of the aforementioned differentiation is not only embodied by the spatial experiences 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’ (selling hands), reveals a reference to the material conditions of this group.

Drawing from Soja’s socio-spatial dialect, the findings shows 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 – ‘*Barekishi ba matsogo*’. Drawing on the theoretical framework guiding this analysis allows one to embed and illustrate how building on identity and class present workers with opportunities for a ‘remake’. Conceptually, the argument presented here has accentuated the fluidity of space. That is to say, space in its absolute sense is meaningless, and therefore cannot arguably confer an identity upon its inhabitants. On the other hand, space is not innocent and as such have influence upon human agency, whilst also being influenced by human activities (socio-spatial dialectic). This nuanced analysis of space and worker identity provide an opportunity to illuminate the weakness inherent in the South African labour scholarship –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, therefore restricting access through practices such as triangular employment relations (trinity of interlocking processes) is enough to fracture and weaken worker militancy. The existing South African and global labour scholarship have 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’. That is, the ability to reinvent itself in light of the current onslaught. In the final analysis, it is clear that the ‘workplace’ as a theoretical construct, is heavily dependent upon workers’ subjective identity and shared memories. According to one comrade, the train has shares some aspects with the workplace because ‘in this coach, [workers] enjoy benefits such as learning about the Basic Conditions of Employment Act’ (BCEA) (Observed by author 05 July 2016).

As the above quote makes clear, the comrades’ coach, just like the workplace, is also an important worker space. Arguably, this space can be positioned as a ‘fix’ against the current decomposition of the traditional absolute workplace. Conceptually, the train can provide an alternative form of a ‘workplace’ for MTS workers affected by the trinity of interlocking

processes. Furthermore, as indicated above, the comrades coach also functioned as a space for education. The educational sessions are done in the main for didactic reasons. This aspect render the comrades coach an appealing site for workers. Interestingly, most of the workers ask problem specific questions that are addressed by those in the know –organic intellectuals. Most of those who take charge of the educational sessions are shop stewards and union secretaries in their places of work. Based on this, one can suggest that the influence of MTS is easily spread across a number of workplaces and is also empowering workers without workplace representation. This form of consciousness is not only maintained by the information sessions on labour law, but also through singing of struggle songs and dancing.

Conclusion

The train remains a site pregnant with possibilities for labour revival in South Africa. The near exclusive focus on the workplace has neglected a captive site with deep roots among the South African working class. The fracturing of the workplace has forced the South African labour movement on the back foot. What MTS demonstrates is the importance of innovative thinking and strategic use of space. By relocating union like activities on to the train, MTS has managed to capture members of South Africa's marginalised working class. MTS cannot be referred to as trade union in a traditional sense. However, by providing workers with a space for solidarity and legislative education it has effectively managed to mitigate against the decline of worker organisations. Importantly, by conscientising workers around joining unions, topical political debates and community issues, MTS has without a doubt made more likely that workers remain organised. Significantly, being organised on the train suggests that MTS members are also likely to be organised and/or organisable in other spaces beyond the train. It is now a historical fact that workers generally draw on experiences learned elsewhere to agitate for change and improvements in other areas of their lives. This is important in light of the declining union density and union activities. Furthermore, MTS has kept alive some of the old workers' movement traditions. MTS leadership commutes on the train and directly takes questions from the floor and provide advice directly to the rank and file. In addition, it has kept critical building blocks of the erstwhile militant social movement unionism of the past. Whether or not this will lead to a revitalisation of SMU of the past remains to be seen.

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MPHO MMADI

Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Hatfield, 0028, South Africa. E-mail: Mpho.Mmadi@up.ac.za