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The 1922 White Mineworkers Strike

Workers at War - CMEU and the 1945 African Mineworkers' Strike

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The trade union movement in the 1930s

SACTU

The 1973 Strikes

History of workers' struggles from 1974 to 1979

Histories of some interesting trade unions

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INTRODUCTION

In this booklet we tell some stories about the long history of Cape Town stevedores. We tell of early strikes of stevedores and their organisation in the ICU. Next we look at the growing strength of the stevedores when they organised in the Cape Town Stevedoring and Dock Workers Union. After the Second World War we see how dockworker organisation was weak for many years. Finally we tell the story of how stevedores start to organise and grow strong again in the 1970s.

Who are the Dock Workers?

Dock workers are divided into two groups. First there are the stevedores. These men work on the ships. They load goods from the cranes on to the ships, and offload them from the ships on to the cranes. They work for the private shipping companies.
The second group of workers are the railway workers. These men work on the quayside next to the ships. They load the goods from the quay on to the cranes and offload them from the cranes on to the quayside. They are employed by the railways, which is run by the government.

The two groups work together. One group cannot work without the other. But because they have different bosses, they often get paid different wages and get treated differently. In this booklet we will see that the division between the two groups sometimes caused big problems in the history of Cape Town docks.

EARLY ORGANISING ACTIVITY

It is the workers of South Africa who produce everything the country needs. Some workers, like transport workers, are especially important because all business depends on them.

The workers who work on the docks are very important. South Africa sells many goods overseas, and also brings in products from other countries. Most of these goods go to and from South Africa by ship. The ships must be loaded and unloaded. This is the work of the stevedores and railway workers at the docks.

Many businesses depend on these workers to send their goods overseas or to bring in other goods from overseas. So if these workers on the docks go on strike, it does not only worry their own bosses. It upsets many other bosses too. When dock workers sneeze, the whole country gets a cold!

We can see that this is true when we look at the Cape Town docks. The first strike was more than 125 years ago, in 1854. The workers won higher wages because they were strong and important.
But after the strike the workers were still not happy. They complained that the work was hard and dangerous. They said the wages were too low.

In 1886 the gold mines were opened in the Transvaal. The Cape Town docks became much bigger because the gold mines needed many things from overseas. The dock workers became even stronger because there were not enough people to load all the goods for the mines. Between 1890 and 1905 the workers often went on strike to demand higher wages and better conditions.

The bosses tried to break the strikes and to lower the wages. They sent recruiting agents to the Transkei to get contract workers. They even put guards on the trains to catch workers who tried to run away.

THE ICU

After the First World War things were very difficult for workers. Prices rose. Conditions in the reserves were also very bad. There was very little rain and very little maize grew.

At that time many African men came to work in Cape Town. Most of them left their families in the reserves. These men worked in Cape Town on contract and lived in compounds and in the locations.

Many of these workers worked at the docks. There were unions for the skilled and semi-skilled workers on the docks, but the African and coloured unskilled workers were not organised.

In about 1918 people in Cape Town started to organise the unskilled black workers into the first small unions to fight these bad conditions. Some of these unions were the Industrial Workers Union, the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) and the International Socialist League. The organisers concentrated on the Table Bay and Simonstown harbours, where most of the workers were. The unions grew quickly. In less than one year the International Socialist League had 1000 members in their Table Bay branch.

All these unions tried to win higher wages. First they sent a letter to the bosses demanding higher wages, but the bosses ignored the letter. The ICU sent another letter demanding higher wages for all coloured and African workers.
This time the bosses answered. They refused to raise wages and threatened to sack all the workers and recruit new men from the reserves.

The ICU then decided to organise together with the Cape Federation of Labour Unions (CFLU). This was a federation of the unions for the skilled and semi-skilled workers. The workers in the CFLU unions were also suffering because of the drought and the shortage of food. They agreed on a new demand - that the government must not allow any food to be exported while the shortage of food in South Africa was so bad.

The dockworkers said that they would refuse to load food for export if the CFLU would work with them to support their two demands - for higher wages and for no exports. The unions sent another letter to the bosses.

This time the bosses knew that the demand was backed by many workers and they had to listen. The railways raised the wages of their workers to five shillings and the stevedore bosses offered six shillings. But the stevedores were not satisfied with this. A meeting of 800 workers at the location set up a new demand

* 8 shillings and sixpence a day
* no more exports of meat and wheat while people in Cape Town starved.

The next day, 17 December 1919, the strike began. Clements Kadalie, president of the ICU, rode round the docks on a bicycle, telling everyone that it was time to stop work. Stevedores, dock workers, and white crane drivers all stopped work. Every day more workers joined the strike. A strike committee of black and white workers was set up. White trade unions helped by giving strike pay and rations to the workers in the location. The only scabs were a few foremen, some casual workers and some long service railway workers.
Every day the workers held meetings on the Parade and in Adderley Street in the middle of town. Many people supported the strike and many workers in other parts of Cape Town also went on strike to demand higher wages. Meanwhile the bosses met with government. The bosses were very worried, because if the stevedores refused to load their goods, there was nothing they could do. They tried to recruit more men from the reserves by offering scabs higher wages. But they could not get enough workers. The government sent soldiers and police to intimidate the workers. They threatened to throw all strikers out of the location. But the workers still did not return to work.

Then, just before Christmas, the bosses told the workers that exports would be stopped. The white unions stopped supporting the strike. They had won their demand and did not want to support the black workers' wage demands. The black workers continued their strike but soon the money ran out. After fourteen days of striking all the workers were forced to return to work. Many workers were arrested and charged in court.

But the union was not defeated. A few months later the workers sent a deputation to the bosses to demand higher wages and overtime pay. The bosses were afraid of another strike. They agreed to raise wages to 8 shillings a day with double pay for overtime. This was more than double what other unskilled workers were earning at this time. The workers had won a big increase and also built a strong organisation. They had won a big victory. The ICU continued to grow and by 1925 there were 6000 members in Cape Town.
THE CTSDWU

After a few years Cape Town workers began to leave the ICU. Why did this happen?

Firstly, many of the Cape Town leaders did not agree with the way Kadalie organised. The Cape Town leaders were John Gomas, James La Guma and Ralph de Norman. They said workers should form different unions in their different industries. All the building workers together in one union. All the clothing workers together in another union, and so on. They said that all the workers in each industry had the same problems. They should first organise around these problems and build strong organisation in their factories and in their industry before uniting with workers in other industries. But Kadalie wanted the ICU to be a general union. He wanted one union for all workers.

Secondly, Kadalie was more conservative than the Cape Town leaders. Gomas, La Guma and De Norman were members of the Communist Party. They believed in socialism. Kadalie feared the strength of the communists. In 1926 he expelled all Communist Party members from the ICU. The ICU lost many strong leaders because of this.

Thirdly, the government and bosses tried to divide the workers along colour lines. At this time there was much unemployment in South Africa. The government told bosses to give work to white and coloured workers rather than African workers. On the railways, many African workers lost their jobs and were replaced by coloured workers. This caused divisions among the workers. Some African ICU leaders in Johannesburg began to say that coloured workers were stealing their jobs. Cape Town workers did not agree because in Cape Town coloured and African workers had always worked and organised together.

THE BIRTH OF THE CTSDWU

By the end of the 1920s the Cape Town branch of the ICU had died, but Cape Town workers continued to organise. The workers formed industrial unions in the place of the ICU. In the late 1920s the stevedores formed the Cape Town Stevedores and Dock Workers Union (CTSDWU). The dockworkers who were employed by the railways, formed the Bantu Alfred Dock Workers Union (BADWU).
The CTSDWU was the strongest and best organised union for unskilled workers in Cape Town. It registered under the Industrial Conciliation Act. (See box). The stevedores' wages and conditions were much better than those of other unskilled workers in Cape Town.

The Industrial Conciliation Act said that workers should organise in unions and bosses should organise in Employers Associations. Then the unions and employer associations should form registered Industrial Councils in each industry and do all their negotiations in Industrial Council meetings.

The government made this law for the skilled and semi-skilled unions. Very few unskilled unions registered, but the CTSDWU was one of them. The government was forced to register the CTSDWU because the workers were well organised.

The government hoped that Industrial Councils would control the unions so that workers did not become too militant. Instead they hoped that the union officials would negotiate and drink tea with the bosses.

The railway workers union, BADWU, was not allowed to join an industrial council because dock workers were employed by the government. The Industrial Conciliation Act said that workers employed by the government could not register their union under the Act.

But the CTSDWU and BADWU worked together to fight the bosses. The workers did not want the law to divide them. For example one time the stevedore bosses tried to pay lower wages by employing BADWU workers instead of stevedores on the ships. But the workers would not cooperate with this trick. The two unions held a joint meeting. All the workers threatened to strike if management continued with its plans.
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

In the 1930s there was a big depression all over the world. There was very little production in the factories. The docks were not busy because there were so few goods to be shipped. Work was scarce for factory and dock workers. Stevedores could only get work for one and a half days each week. Some people were so desperate for work that they bribed the foremen with eggs, chicken and money to give them work.

Unemployment weakens the organisation of the workers, because the bosses know that they can easily find unemployed workers to replace people who demand better wages and conditions. The railway bosses decreased wages from 6s to 4s. The shipping companies sent many of their ships to Durban instead of Cape Town to avoid paying the higher wages earned by workers in Cape Town. They threatened to lower the Cape Town wage. Also, instead of paying people a fixed wage per day, they now paid them according to how much cargo they loaded (piece work). They did this to try to make the workers work faster. Working faster meant that the work was even more dangerous and hard.

Some organisations tried to organise the unemployed so that they would not weaken the workers by taking their jobs. The ANC held mass meetings on the parade. The CTSDWU had early morning meetings at five o'clock at the docks. James Shuba, the union secretary, and Ray Alexander, another organiser, organised workers to join the union. They demanded that the bosses give all workers turns to work so that they could all earn some money.
The workers suffered a lot in the depression, but the dock workers were well organised and could resist. The CTSDWU worked with the railway workers. They formed a United Front Grievance Committee. They collected signatures for a petition to the stevedoring and railways bosses.

In the middle of the depression, the union negotiated its first agreement with the bosses. This was the first time that African workers negotiated and signed agreements under the Industrial Conciliation Act. The Industrial Conciliation Act was not supposed to cover African workers. But the CTSDWU was so strong that it even got the government to register it and allow it to make wage agreements under the Act.

The agreement made a minimum wage of 8s a day. Foremen, skilled workers and workers who loaded frozen goods, received extra pay. The union also negotiated about hours of work, with overtime pay for extra work. The bosses agreed to give work to union members first whenever work was scarce.

**ORGANISATION SPREADS**

Stevedores and dock workers in Cape Town did not only organise about their own problems. They also organised in support of workers in other parts of the world.

**HANDS OFF ETHIOPIA**

One important example of the way people in Cape Town showed their solidarity with struggles far away is the Hands Off Ethiopia Campaign.

In 1935 Italy was ruled by the fascists. In that year the Italian army invaded Ethiopia (Abyssinia) on the east coast of Africa. Ethiopia's struggle was very important particularly for black South Africans. Ethiopia was the only unconquered black state in Africa and Italy was attacking its independence. Many organisations in South Africa supported Ethiopia's struggle against fascism and colonialism.
They held many mass meetings. At one mass demonstration on the Parade, they adopted the following resolution:

"This mass meeting of workers and citizens of Cape Town urge the full independence of Ethiopia, the withdrawal of all troops from Ethiopia, the complete political and economic boycott of Italy, full support for the transport and dock workers at various ports who have refused to load Italian ships and a united front against Fascism and imperialist war."

After the meeting many people marched to the Italian embassy in Cape Town.

At another mass meeting in Cape Town, John Gomas spoke. He said the bosses were making fat profits out of the war by selling food to Italy's army. He said the dockworkers must stop loading ships going to Italy. Dock workers in Durban and Cape Town stopped loading all Italian ships, even if they were not going to Ethiopia.

Although the Ethiopians fought bravely, Italy won the war. But the Hands Off Ethiopia campaign was an important one. Many people and organisations had united to fight fascism, war and colonialism, and to support struggles in another country.

THE RAILWAY WORKERS

In the early 1930s a group of organisers started a new union for black railway workers. This was the Non-European Railway and Harbour Workers Union (NERHWU).

This new union grew quickly. After one year there were 1300 members in Cape Town. NEHRWU opened branches all over South Africa. After a few years it had over 20000 members.
During the Second World War many new factories opened in South Africa and many more workers came to the towns. Life was hard for these workers. Houses were scarce and food prices were rising all the time. The workers formed new unions to fight for better wages and conditions.

THE CTSDWU DURING THE WAR

Cape Town stevedores also suffered from rising prices during the war. The stevedores would not accept small rises in wages any more. They had a meeting with the bosses at the Industrial Council and demanded decent increases.

During the war the workers at Durban docks were well organised and very militant. The stevedore bosses in Cape Town were nervous that the Cape Town workers would follow the example of Durban and go on strike. In 1943, after long negotiations the Cape Town workers won their first big increase since their 1920 victory. But many things were threatening the position of the stevedores.

Firstly, bosses in other industries supported the stevedoring companies when the companies tried to keep stevedores wages low. If stevedores wages went up, the stevedoring companies would charge the companies more to transport their goods, and this would lower their profits.
Another problem for Cape Town stevedores was that wages at the other ports were lower than in Cape Town. This was a threat to the Cape Town stevedores because the bosses sent ships to the other ports to be loaded and offloaded. The bosses did this so they did not have to pay the higher Cape Town wages. This meant that there was less work for the Cape Town workers.

The CTSDWU was aware of all these problems. They knew that they needed the support of workers outside their union and outside Cape Town. They decided to work with these people so that everyone could stand united and fight for better conditions for all.

The union sent Welcome to the Transkei where the stevedoring companies recruited migrant workers, to take the message of organisation to the people there. Welcome told the people not to agree to work for low wages as this would harm them and the other workers. He told them about the importance of unity and organisation.

Then Welcome and Veldman went to Port Elizabeth. The workers in Port Elizabeth welcomed them and listened to what they said. Soon afterwards the Port Elizabeth workers started their own union, the Maritime Union of South Africa.
ORGANISATION BECOMES WEAK

THE GOVERNMENT ATTACKS

Before the war the government changed the Industrial Conciliation Act to say that Africans could not belong to registered unions. Separate unions had to be set up for African workers. The CTSDWU ignored this law. The union had always had coloured and African members together, and they knew that separate unions would weaken their unity and strength.

At first the government did not enforce the law strictly. Government officials wrote letters to the union telling them that they must expel all African members and form a separate unregistered union. The CTSDWU refused to expel the African members. They used lawyers to try to show that the law did not say that the union must expel the African members. But the union's resistance did not help. In 1948 the Nationalist government came to power. They passed an even stricter law to stop all unions with mixed membership.

When the government made the new law most of the members of the union were Africans. The union had 1000 African members. The government did not want African workers to sit on the Industrial Council. So the government stopped the stevedoring industrial council. When the government did this the union leaders became afraid. They stopped organising African members and the union became weaker and weaker.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR.

*No. 1868.*

INDUSTRIAL CONCILIATION ACT, 1937.

INDUSTRIAL COUNCIL FOR THE STEVEDORING.

(LOADING AND UNLOADING OF SHIPS),

TRADE, CAPE.

I, Jacobus Johannes Scheepers, Industrial Registrar, hereby notify that, in accordance with the directions of the Minister of Labour in terms of sub-section (2) of section thirty-four of the Industrial Conciliation Act, 1937, I have cancelled the Registration of the Industrial Council for the Stevedoring (Loading and Unloading of Ships), Trade, Cape, with effect from the 15th June, 1950.

J. J. SCHEEPERS,

Industrial Registrar.

The government passed other laws which weakened organisation. Many trade union leaders were banned and removed under the Suppression of Communism Act. The government also passed many apartheid laws. The government tried to divide and weaken the workers' organisations by dividing workers along colour lines.
PROBLEMS IN THE CTSDWU

The government's laws weakened the CTSDWU. But the problems of the union were not caused only by the government. The new law said that the union must either stop organising African workers or otherwise it couldn't be registered. The union leaders thought it was very important to be registered. They expelled all the African members. They relied on the law and registration instead of on the strength and unity of the members.

The union officials also made other mistakes. After the war the leaders often did not fight for the workers. They preferred to have meetings with the bosses rather than to organise the workers. They relied on pen and paper in their struggles rather than the strength of the workers. They preferred to drink tea with the bosses rather than meet with the workers. Some people even said that union officials stole the workers' money. Also the union did not support the struggle of workers at the other ports.

Cape Town Workers Scab

Here is one example of the problems with the officials in the Union.

In 1946 Port Elizabeth dock workers went on strike. They demanded recognition of their union and the same wages as the Cape Town workers.
The Port Elizabeth bosses tried to get scabs from the other ports. Durban workers refused to scab, but some workers from Cape Town and East London went to work in Port Elizabeth as scabs. Veldman, the Cape Town union secretary, said that he had allowed scabbing because the Port Elizabeth union had not cooperated with him earlier. Many members of the Cape Town union were very angry about this. They said that Veldman was running a company union - a union for the bosses.

In 1957 there was another strike at Port Elizabeth docks. The government sent convicts to work on the docks. They sent police to intimidate the workers. The union officials in Cape Town and East London workers again sent workers to scab. This time the Cape Town union officials said the bosses had tricked them. They said that the bosses did not tell them that they needed more workers because of a strike.

Port Elizabeth workers and many workers in Cape Town could not understand why the Cape Town union officials preferred to listen to the bosses' story and not to their fellow workers. They wrote letters to the newspaper complaining about the union officials. They published a pamphlet which said "Let not one stevedore leave Cape Town to work in Port Elizabeth". They complained that the Cape Town union was not fighting for the workers any more.

AFTER THE WAR

The twenty years after the war were hard years for workers in South Africa. The Nationalist government tried to destroy the unions. Some unions continued to fight, despite the government repression. In 1954 many of these unions came together to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). They organised a big campaign for a minimum wage of a Pound a Day for all workers. The railway workers union joined SACTU and took part in the Pound a Day Campaign.

But the CTSDWU did not fight. By this time the CTSDWU was already broken by the government and the actions of the union's officials. There were only a few coloured members left in the union and many of the best workers had been lost. The CTSDWU did not join SACTU.
Although the union was broken, at times the stevedores still tried to fight the bosses on their own. For example, in 1955, workers loading coal on one ship went on strike to demand higher wages. But the bosses broke the strike easily. They called in an official of the Native Affairs Department. He told the workers that African workers were not allowed to strike. They returned to work at the old wages. Without an organisation to support them, the workers realised that they could not win a strike.

Dock workers also stayed away when the political organisations called general strikes. For example, in 1960 the PAC called for a general strike. Many dockworkers answered the call and stayed away from work for three weeks. In the 1960 strike the newspapers said the stayaway caused the worst holdup since the war and many ships had to wait in the harbour. Even though they had no strong union, the dock workers were prepared to join other workers in the struggle.

UNITY OF THE BOSSES

While the dock workers were weak the stevedore bosses were strong. They were strong because they came together in three ways: on the Wage Board, in a Stevedoring Association and by joining their companies together.

After the stevedoring industrial council was deregistered, stevedoring wages were decided at the Wage Board. The Wage Board was a committee of government people. It had a meeting every four years to hear the demands of the bosses and workers. Then it decided on a minimum wage for all ports in South Africa.
Before the Wage Board, the stevedores in Cape Town had won the highest wage of all unskilled workers. The Wage Board changed this and set very low wages.

The Wage Board was a good system for the bosses. There were very few stevedoring companies. This made unity very easy for the bosses. All the bosses met together before the Wage Board sat to discuss their demands. They decided what they wanted to pay.

The stevedoring bosses in Cape Town also formed the Cape Town Stevedoring Association. The Association recruited all the contract workers for the docks. They gave the union secretary a job in an office working for the Association. The Cape Town bosses also joined together with the bosses in the other ports.

The stevedoring companies joined together so there were very few bosses and it was easy for them to organise.

In the old days many cranes were needed to unload a ship.
THE 1970’s

The bad position lasted until the 1970s. Then workers all over the country began to organise again. The new organisation started in Durban but soon spread to other parts of the country. In Cape Town the stevedores were one of the first groups of workers to organise.

In 1972 it was time for the Wage Board to meet again to decide stevedoring wages. Workers in Cape Town did not know about the meeting, but a group of students from the university who were interested in wage issues heard about it. The students spoke to the secretary of the CTSDWU and asked him to tell the workers about the meeting. The secretary refused, so students handed out pamphlets telling the workers about the meeting. They also said that workers in Durban were going to attend a Wage Board meeting.

100 Cape Town workers went to the Wage Board meeting. A few of them spoke about their problems. The workers demanded R18 a week, the same as the Durban workers were demanding. The students wrote a statement supporting the demands of the workers.

The bosses were worried. It was the first time workers had attended the Wage Board. The government was also worried. They sent security policemen to the meeting.

After the meeting the workers waited for months, but the Wage Board had still not decided the new wages. Meanwhile the stevedoring companies changed from a six to a five day week. They also made overtime hours shorter. So wages fell.
Workers were angry and decided to act. 1500 stevedores had a go-slow and refused to do any overtime. The bosses did not know what to do. They could not force workers to do overtime. The "go-slow" was legal. But bosses could not get all the work done if workers refused to do overtime.

After three days the bosses called a mass meeting. They offered to pay the same wage as before for the new shorter hours. But there was nobody for the bosses to negotiate with. Workers did not come forward as spokesmen because they thought the bosses would victimise them. The bosses had nobody to speak to.

The go-slow continued for one month. Then the new wages were published. The daily wage and overtime pay were increased. The workers started to work overtime again.

THE BOSSES FIGHT BACK

Workers had won some of their demands. But they were not strong enough to win all the demands. The bosses had learnt a lesson. They wanted to be able to speak to the workers if there was any trouble. They wanted to form committees for workers under the control of the bosses.

They set up a liaison committee for the African stevedores. The bosses chose six members and the workers chose the other six members of the committee. The head of the Stevedoring Association, Captain Cobb, was the chairman of the committee.

The bosses also tried to start the CTSDUWU again for the coloured workers.

But workers did not support the bosses' committees. They saw that the bosses wanted to have separate committees for Africans and coloured workers so that they could divide the workers. The liaison committee and the CTSDUWU were very weak. Very few workers voted for the liaison committee. They did not attend the meetings, or join the union. The secretary of the union died, and the union disappeared with him.

1974 OVERTIME BATTLES

Workers still had a problem with long hours of work and overtime. Work started at 7.20 in the morning and workers had to get up at 5.30 to be in time. Overtime was meant to finish at eight o'clock. But workers did not live in a compound at the docks any more. They lived in the
location. The bus home left five minutes after eight o'clock and people often did not have time to catch the bus. So they only arrived home at eleven o'clock and then still had to cook their supper.

In October 1974 the workers demanded to finish work ten minutes earlier so that they could get home sooner. 2000 workers refused to work any more overtime until their demands were met. They said that the day was too long and tiring. They also said that their basic wage must go up. Because the basic wage was so low they were forced to work overtime to earn a decent wage.

When the workers stopped working overtime, the shipping, stevedoring and railways bosses all met together. They offered the stevedores an increase in wages. The liaison committee accepted the offer. But the workers said the committee members were the bosses' puppets. They refused to accept the offer.

The bosses called a mass meeting, but nobody came forward as spokesman. People were scared to be spokesman because they knew the bosses would victimise them. Instead the workers elected their own committee of 14 workers to represent them. They refused to be divided along colour lines. They elected African and coloured workers on to one committee.
After a month of no overtime the workers won their demands. The bosses agreed to end all overtime. They changed to a two shift system with shorter hours. Half the workers worked from 6 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon. The other half worked from 2 in the afternoon to 10 at night.

Basic wages were also raised. Workers were guaranteed a wage of R22.20 per week even if there was no work. If there was work, they could get even higher wages.

The workers had chosen their time well. The docks are very busy in October, unloading all the goods which come from overseas for Christmas. At the end of the month there were 25 ships waiting outside the docks to be loaded or unloaded. The bosses said it would take a month to catch up on the work.

**CHANGES AT THE DOCKS**

Over the last ten years there have been big changes at the docks. Ten years ago there were 2000 stevedores in Cape Town. Today there are only about 450.

The most important reason why there are far fewer workers is that the work of the stevedores has changed.

In the old days all goods shipped to and from South Africa were packed separately in small boxes. All these boxes had to be loaded and unloaded separately.

Today nearly all goods are packed in containers. Containers are crates as big as houses. The containers are all the same size and shape and it is easy to make machines to do the loading and unloading. The containers are often packed far away from the docks, even as far away as Johannesburg. The bosses send the containers to the docks in lorries and trains and the stevedores load them straight on to the ships. These containers are sometimes even driven straight onto the ships.

Containers allow bosses to use fewer workers to move the same amount of goods. One worker can now load as much in one day as he used to load in one month.

The stevedore bosses like containers. With containers they have to pay wages to fewer workers. Also it is much easier for the bosses...
to control machines and boxes than to control workers. Containers make the bosses' costs lower, control easier, and profits higher.

Work with containers is easier and less dangerous because there are special machines to handle them. But containers are not so good for workers. There is much less work and so the bosses want to retrench many people.

At the time when containers were first introduced the workers were not organised properly. They did not protest against the containers. When they began to organise again, one of the main issues around which they organised were containers and against retrenchments.

The stevedoring companies all joined together. In Cape Town there were 7 companies in 1972. By 1976 some of the companies had joined together and there were only three companies left. These were Grindrod, Sassco and Rennies. Today there is only one company which does all the stevedoring work, South African Stevedores Ltd.

**A NEW UNION**

Workers refused to do overtime in 1972 and 1974. But they had not yet built up a strong organisation. The committee which the workers elected during the overtime ban did not last long. In 1979 they decided to ask the General Workers Union to help them to organise again.

When organisers from the General Workers Union (GWU) started organising, they were helped by a big group of eager workers. After a few months 200 workers were having meetings every week.
These workers asked the union to write to the bosses. They wanted the union to call a big meeting so that the workers could elect a committee to represent them. The bosses did not do this. Instead they tried to get the workers to join their liaison committee.

But the workers refused to join the bosses committee. They decided to call their own meeting. At the meeting they elected their own committee of five representatives from each of the three stevedoring firms, a secretary and a chairperson. This committee represented a majority of all the workers on the docks, but the bosses still refused to recognise it. Instead the bosses asked TUCSA to form a union for dock workers. They wanted separate unions for the African and coloured workers.

The workers asked the GWU to write letters to the bosses. The union sent many letters, but the bosses would not listen to their demands. Sometimes they didn't even answer the union's letters.

After months of writing letters, the workers realised that they must show their strength again. They decided to strike for one day. This would be a warning to the bosses. It would show the bosses that the workers were determined and strong. It would show that the committee had the support of the dock workers. If the bosses refused to listen to them, then they would take further action.

The workers were well organised. On 11 December 1979 all the workers went on strike for one day. No work was done at the docks. The workers showed that they had the power to stop all work at the docks. If the bosses would not listen, the workers would not work.

Walkout paralyses Table Bay docks

The bosses were worried and afraid of the workers. They flew round the country holding urgent meetings with the bosses in the other ports. But they had very little power. The workers were united.

The manager went to the hostel of the contract workers. He called a meeting of all the workers and said he wanted to speak to them. The workers refused to speak to the manager. They
said they would not speak to him alone. They would only speak to him when all the workers, Afrikan and coloured, were together. They forced the manager to make another meeting for all the workers the next day.

Two days later the bosses agreed to recognise the union.

The workers won by being patient, strong and united. The bosses saw their strength. A strike of one day had been enough to frighten them.

AFTER THE STRIKE

Since the strike worker organisation has grown even stronger. Workers have won higher wages and better and safer working conditions. The bosses now give them boots and overalls for dangerous work, and the union helps workers who are injured at work to get compensation. There are still many problems, but the workers feel that the bosses and foremen now have more respect for them and treat them better.

Organisation has spread to the other ports. The GWU sent organisers to Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. In all these ports there are now strong worker organisations at the docks. The bosses are united all over the country. But, now the workers are also united. The workers have now forced the bosses to recognise and negotiate with the union in all four ports.

Stevedores still have many complaints. They work long and hard hours. The work is dangerous. People are retrenched. But the stevedores are determined to continue to organise around these and other issues. They can see clearly the benefits that they have already won through organisation.
HISTORY AND FUTURE

Cape Town stevedores have a long history of struggle. Sometimes they won victories and sometimes they were defeated. We can learn by reading their story and asking why sometimes they were strong and why at other times they were weak.

We can see from reading the history of the stevedores, the dangers of too many meetings and too much bureaucracy. When union officials prefer to drink tea with the bosses, the membership is left unorganised. The bosses no longer respect the union. A union is only strong if its members are well organised. Organising the workers is the first duty of the officials.

We can see that government laws which separated coloured and African workers weakened organisation in the 1950s. All workers must unite together if workers are to be united and strong. There is no room for racialism in the unions.

We can see the importance of national organisation. If one port strikes, workers at the other ports must support them. Otherwise the bosses will send the ships to the ports which are still working. Only when workers in the different ports are united, are they able to confront the bosses.

These are some of the lessons learnt by the dockworkers and by their unions. Dockworkers have a history which they can be proud of. If they learn the lessons of their own history, they will be even more proud of their future.
TWO WORKERS' STORIES

MR ABRAHAMS started work at the docks in 1934. He remembers some of the bosses when they were working as young boys on the boats. First, Mr Abrahams worked for the railways. After ten years he decided that the pay of 4/6 a week was too low. He then went to work for one of the stevedore companies for 8s a day.

Mr Abrahams remembers times when there was so much work that you could work two whole nights if you wanted to. He also remembers times after the war when work was more scarce. Then the workers sat outside the docks and played cards while they waited for ships to come in. They used to say "Watch the Hill" because when a ship was coming they put a sign on the mountain.

Mr Abrahams says that stevedoring work is easier now. But the old times were better because there was more work. Now containers are taking the work away.

Mr Abrahams retired two years ago. He had worked for 47 years. Before he retired he saw many workers were retrenched because of containers. Mr Abrahams wanted to go on working until he had worked 50 years. But, two years ago he also was retrenched.

MR SIKOLOBO was born in 1920 in the Ciskei. When he was 16 years old he went to work for one year in Johannesburg. In 1937 he started work at Cape Town docks. First he lived in District Six. In 1955 he moved to Langa. Now he lives in Lingelihle, the stevedore hostel.

Mr Sikolobo remembers that in the old days the work was very hard. The stevedores moved heavy copper and heavy dirty coal. But, there was work for lots of people. In those days each fruit gang had 33 workers. Now, because of containers, there are only 13 workers in a gang.

Mr Sikolobo was a member of the CTSDWU. He went to many meetings on the Parade. All the workers, coloured and African, permanent and casual, were members of the union. Mr Sikolobo was happy that they had a union in the old days. But he says that the old union did not discuss everything like the GWU does now.

This year Mr Sikolobo goes on pension after working for 46 years at Cape Town docks.