

Power and Classification: Casual Workers Struggles in the South African Post Office

By David Dickinson

Jennifer Chung's (2009) important study illustrates how marginalised workers mobilised symbolic power in their struggles for better pay and conditions in the US and South Korea. Chung uses Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic power as 'one of the most fundamental mechanisms of change in the social world.' Central to the disputes she describes were 'classification struggles' in which the legitimacy of the triangular employment relationship, created by the introduction of labour brokers, was challenged: workers demanded to be legally classified as employees of the client company, not of the labour broker. Labour broking separates the *de jure* and *de facto* employer, usually to the disadvantage of workers. Chung places emphasis on the ability of the precarious workers to shame their *de facto* employer by making visible the conditions under which they worked.

Labour broker employees or 'casuals' in the South African Post Office (SAPO) engaged in their own struggles against exploitation (Dickinson 2015). Organised into workers committees they successfully challenged labour broking. After strenuous attempts to resolve the dispute through legal channels, they focused on, often violent, forms of 'disruptive power' (Wilderman 2015). There were symbolic victories in their struggle, but these alone were far from decisive in their struggle.

Labour Broking in SAPO

The post-apartheid government charged state-owned enterprises, including SAPO, with infrastructure development. The Post Office's key role was its Universal Service Obligation (USO) to provide affordable postal and communication services to all South Africans. This involved the establishment of retail post office facilities and the provision of addresses, important for accessing a range of services and technologies, to which mail can be delivered.

Mail is sorted in mail centers and sent to postal depots which service a defined area divided into 'walks.' Postmen (and sometimes women) sort the mail and deliver mail, usually on bicycle. Mail remains important given the still low effective penetration of alternative means for municipalities, banks, stores and other companies to deliver statements and invoices. Large urban townships, in particular, provide profitable areas for postal delivery.

The Post Office made extensive progress in fulfilling its USO. However, it had also been charged to do this without demand on the fiscus. SAPO achieved this between 2005 and 2010, turning around what had been approximately R1bn annual losses in the late 1990s. However, this was accomplished in significant

part by the use of labour brokers.

In 2000, management imposed a moratorium on entry level positions in the organisation. From then onwards, posts were filled by labour brokers. Despite doing exactly the same work, labour broker employees had different terms and conditions of employment to permanent employees. In round terms, by 2011 a permanent postal worker's salary was R8,000 (\$660) a month, but a labour broker would be paid R4,000 (\$330) a month to supply a worker, who would be paid R2,000 (\$165). Despite the monthly placement fee, the combined effect of savings on salaries and benefits dramatically reduced SAPO's wage bill.

This situation was maintained through the hopes and vulnerability of casual workers. When the former ran out, the latter kicked in. Attempts to organise unions were directly blocked. The nature of the employment relationship meant that a supervisor could have an employee dismissed by picking up the phone and asking the labour broker for a replacement worker.

By 2011, approximately one third of SAPO's workers were casuals; 8,000 out of 23,000. One workforce was relatively privileged and unionised, the other was precarious and without representation. SAPO's industrial relations environment was dominated by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) affiliate, between 1996 and 2012. However, despite COSATU's high profile campaign for the banning of labour brokers, CWU made little efforts to prevent their entrenchment within the Post Office. Nor did they make any serious attempt to organise casual workers.

A Successful Challenge to Labour Broking

From 2005, casual workers in Gauteng, the province where Johannesburg is located, started to establish independent workers committees. With limited resources, they attempted to address their situation through every possible avenue: SAPO management, the labour brokers, COSATU, various unions, the Department of Labour, the Council for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), even the Labour Court. They were sent from pillar to post. In the end they concluded that they had to fight their own battles.

In mid-2011 a series of unprotected strikes by SAPO casual workers erupted across Gauteng. Empowered by their own initial success the casuals adopted the slogan, 'We are the union ourselves!' The strike, however, crumbled, without a

single concession after SAPO obtained a Labour Court interdict. With the strike leaders facing jail, defiance evaporated.

Although the strike was defeated, valuable lessons were gained: to stay away from the courts, in future the leadership would remain hidden; they would focus on the Post Office, and not the labour brokers, if they wanted to achieve their objectives; and, they now had techniques to prevent mail delivery, particularly in townships. These techniques were not about the withdrawal of their labour, but rather the application of labour in preventing non-striking workers or replacement workers from delivering mail.

The next strike, led by the *Mabarete* (The Berets) grouping of casual workers between December 2011 and April 2012, brought about the end of labour broking in SAPO. This strike failed to match the scale of the previous one. Indeed, as the strike dragged on, divisions hardened and casual workers divided into two hostile camps. In the end it was just three hundred strikers that took on the Post Office.

SAPO tried again to interdict the strike, but court interdicts were ignored and attempts to serve summonses were stonewalled. On the ground, a process of trial and error created a flexible structure in which roles emerged around personal character, local knowledge, and street savvy.

The Mabarete now began to *ho tsoma* (hunt). In essence, this involved groups patrolling townships to confront anybody delivering mail. Such confrontations ranged, depending on circumstances, from warnings, to forced stripping, to beatings. The *ho tsoma* tactic multiplied the impact of a few hundred strikers. Through a combination of changing formats, mobility and secrecy it was all but impossible to know where they were operating on any particular day. Over large parts of Gauteng deliveries ground to a halt.

The Post Office initially refused to acknowledge that a strike was occurring and attempted to ride out the problem. A change of tactics from *ho tsoma* to 'home visits' then emerged. The first visit was spontaneous; the township house where the mother of the largest labour broker's owner lived. The second home visit, to a senior official in CWU, was planned. The CWU official was not in, but members of his family were. The message was that he should not meddle in their strike; casual workers were now fighting their own battles.

The third home visit was to the SAPO manager responsible for mail delivery in Gauteng. On arrival at the gated complex where the manager lived, they posed as employees who had come for unpaid wages. The manager was not in, but as with the previous visit, family members were. By chance, a working postman was delivering in the complex that would normally have been safe territory. The strikers left his bike and took the unfortunate man with them to reinforce their message.

They had not even reached the Metrorail station before a call, brokered via an intermediary, came through; the manager

wanted to talk. In late March negotiations agreed that the Mabarete, all long since fired from employment by the labour brokers, would be employed directly by the Post Office. They would be paid at what the labour brokers had received. This was, more or less, cost neutral for SAPO, but it meant an approximate doubling of the Mabarete's salary to some R4,000 (\$330) a month. The Mabarete returned victorious to their depots.

It was also agreed that other casuals would follow a similar process to that outlined for the Mabarete and that everybody working in SAPO would be, eventually, converted to full-status permanent workers. By July 2012 the use of labour brokers in the Post Office had ended.

Conclusion: Sources of Power

The struggle of SAPO casual workers constituted a successful classification struggle, albeit one which has not, to date, been matched with financial equality.¹ Attempts were made to mobilise symbolic power. One such attempt, aimed at breaking SAPO's denial that a strike was taking place, was joining COSATU's national march against labour broking. Unlike other marchers who wore union T-shirts, the Mabarete 'hijacked' the event by wearing SAPO bibs. They were the only marchers to identify a company and the media focused on them to the embarrassment of the Post Office. However, morale boosting as such symbolic achievements were they were not decisive.

The Mabarete's struggle raises many issues. One, in line with calls by scholars such as Lambert, Webster and Besuidenhout (2015), is the need to recognise and explore the full repertoires of power resources available, within different contexts, to precarious workers.

¹ Much of the industrial unrest that has followed in SAPO since 2012 is a legacy of this still incomplete conversion process.

David Dickinson is professor of Sociology and associate of the Society, Work and Development Institute at Wits University, Johannesburg. A regular visitor and part-time resident in South African townships, David's concern is the challenges of, and responses to, uncertainty, adversity and inequality.

References

- Chung, J. (2009) *Organizing At The Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labour in South Korea and the United States*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dickinson, D. (2015) *Fighting Their Own Battles: The Mabarete and the End of Labour Broking in SAPO*. SWOP Working Paper 2.
- Lambert, R, E. Webster and A. Bezuidenhout (2015) 'Global Labour Studies: The Crisis and an Emerging Research Agenda', *Labour History*. 53:2.
- Wilderman, J. (2015) *From Flexible Work to Mass Uprising: The Western Cape Farm Workers' Struggle*. SWOP Working Paper 4.