

“How Harriet Sewed Up the Rag Trade”¹
Harriet Bolton and the Garment Workers Industrial Union: 1967-1971

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(Work in progress)

WANTED: Slaves at Starvation Wages.
The Clothing Industry in Natal desperately needs: Male and Female
machinists, cleaners, layers up, cutters. But the basic laid down wage buys
only bus fare and one meal per day!
Starting rate R5.00 per week
After 2 years R9.25 per week
After 4 years R15.25 per week
Could you live on this?
26 000 clothing workers are battling to do so!
(Advert, Natal Mercury, April 1971)

On a Tuesday morning, a week after this ‘advert’ was published, more than twenty-four thousand workers walked out of clothing factories in Natal, effectively halting industry for the day. They gathered at the Currie’s Fountain Stadium, where they turned down paltry pay increases offered by employers, and demanded a living wage. In doing so, they participated in the first regional industry-wide strike since the Garment Workers’ Industrial Union’s (GWIU) turbulent formative years in the 1930s. The employers’ negotiating committee, still seething from the directed jibe in the *Mercury*, and powerless to resort to disciplinary action in the face of the numbers involved, quickly acquiesced to the workers’ demands of a twenty percent increase in wages. Meanwhile, the union’s secretary Harriet Bolton was dubbed “the heroine of the workers” in Natal’s press.²

This paper will form the basis of a chapter in an MA dissertation which seeks to document the life of Durban trade unionist Harriet Bolton. As I hope to begin demonstrating through this essay, focussing in on the activities of one person can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of certain flashpoints in history. With this in mind, I will specifically describe and investigate the role of Harriet Bolton, as secretary of the traditionally conservative GWIU, in the particular history of this ‘moment’ of worker militancy. In doing so, I hope to gain a deeper comprehension of the parameters in which she, and the union, acted. The 1971 strike at Currie’s Fountain is not an event marked in the literature on Durban trade unions. Through this paper I hope also to demonstrate how a closer examination of the roots of the mass meeting facilitate an understanding both of the history of the union pre-1971, and the future role that it was to play.

When the union initiated the agreement negotiation process with employers in 1970, wages for garment workers in Natal were well below those set in the Transvaal. This phenomenon had a long history. Factories in coastal areas traditionally paid lower wages

¹ Headline on a Post article discussing the strike at Currie’s Fountain April 28, 1971

² Post, *How Harriet Sewed up the Rag Trade*, The Leader, Sunday Tribune etc.

in the clothing industry, and the regional structure of Industrial Councils and later the intensive investment in factories in 'border' areas, which were not covered by the agreement, meant employers in Natal could get away with lower rates of pay. Bolton recalls that the union no longer wanted to be held responsible for pulling the industry's wages down:

I mean, Johannesburg, and Cape Town would say to us – whether it was truthfully or not – but they would say to us 'our employers use you as an example for why our wages shouldn't go any higher, because they can't compete with your employers'. That's all we needed ... I also wanted to put to the test my theories that if you have a strong shop stewards' team and you had prepared the ground, that you could in fact meet the employers head-on and your your sheer numbers backing you would make you win the day. And in fact the employers were absolutely adamant that they were going to give quite a small increase.³

She recalls that the atmosphere in South Africa during this period was tense, and the union's negotiating committee were pushing for a peaceful bargaining process. Bolton, however, maintains that she "wanted a test":

It was a highly sort of emotional time in South Africa. There'd been a lot of talk about patriotism and loyalty and agitators ... feeling was running quite high, and Special Branch were fairly active, and people were generally afraid to be too outspoken⁴

Bolton also recalls that at this stage the clothing industry was beginning to constitute a "security risk" in South Africa. The labour department felt the union was "out of hand and getting too strong and above ourselves."⁵ She draws parallels with the situation in the Textile industry, which was dominated by textile tycoon Phillip Frame. Frame had the protection of the Labour Department, and police were often called if there were disputes at his factories. Frame factories were also notorious for their brutal suppression of any attempts to organise. Bolton says the increasing number of Africans coming into the clothing industry meant the garment industry had begun to receive more attention from the state:

... there were a fair number of Africans drifting into the industry then, we had invited elected representatives for Africans working in delivery and where they were part of the machine staff, they participated in our shop steward elections, and we had invited them to all our general meetings, all of this with strong disapproval from the Labour Department, the employers and so forth, but they didn't say anything about it, they *knew* about it. This sort of made us ... bear watching.⁶

³ Harriet Bolton. Interviewed by David Hemson. 1974

⁴ Harriet Bolton. Interviewed by David Hemson. 1974

⁵ Harriet Bolton. Interviewed by David Hemson. 1974

⁶ Harriet Bolton. Interviewed by David Hemson. 1974

Employers came in with “strong arm” tactics from the first meeting with the industrial council. They agreed there was need for some changes, that the workers “weren’t quite happy”, and offered labour a two-and-a-half percent increase. Bolton recalls that the employers’ association accused the negotiating team of being difficult, and maintained there were “agitators” amongst them. Meanwhile, they suggested that workers were not expecting the kind of increases the union was pressing for.

Well, they couldn’t bluff us. We knew, we were in total communication with the workers and we knew what they expected ... and we knew they would back us up. We were in a very, very strong position. Well, the first tactic that we tried ... we went back and we said to the workers that ‘will you, each of you, write down your budget and what you feel about the latest offer of increases.’ And we gave them two weeks. I went to the industrial council meeting which was two weeks later, and when we were sitting down around the table I had my staff bringing in the three sacks of mail that we’d got. 18 000 letters, written on the backs of cigarette boxes, on bits of pockets, you know, belts, bits of material, paper – sweet paper, some of them – but, you know I said: ‘choose at random.’ Labour Department were absolutely staggered, we’d put them on their beautiful shining boardroom table. I mean they were absolutely staggered, they were obviously real, they were obviously genuine, they were obviously not a put-up job, and I think this shattered them a bit. Anyway, they raised their offer to about seven-and-half-percent ...⁷

The union then authorised Bolton to place the bold half-page advert (above) in the *Natal Mercury*. She recalls that employers at the time were “advertising madly” in Natal newspapers for workers, but were not prepared to pay reasonable wages. The shaming tactic worked. “A lot of them said their friends accosted them in clubs, and so on, and said ‘My God, is that all you pay, you rats’.”⁸ She says employers were furious about it, and demanded an apology:

they demanded ... that we put an apology in the paper about that advert. And I said to him ... “If the employers’ association wants an advert in the paper, they CAN PUT IT IN THEM BLOODY SELVES!” (laughs) and our, our whole delegation got up and walked out!⁹

At the 1972 Trade Union Council of South Africa (Tucsa) conference, Bolton was requested to elaborate on a reference she had made to police pressure during the union’s negotiations. Bolton revealed that threats were made that police would deal with “agitators”:

when we rejected the employers’ offer of 7 ½ %, and said it was not enough ... we were again told by some of the employers that other employers had said to them – “Don’t worry to argue any further with the Negotiating Committee of the Garment Workers, especially Mrs. Bolton, because we have access to higher

⁷ Harriet Bolton. Interviewed by David Hemson. 1974

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Harriet Bolton. Interview Hannah Keal 2005

authorities and you will be able to speak to her at Pretoria Central Jail next week, so don't worry to call a meeting.¹⁰

After these veiled threats, Bolton says she felt the time had come to safeguard the negotiating committee, and herself:

So we said if in fact it's the negotiating committee and not the workers who want these increases, and if what the employers tell us is right, that the workers are ready to accept what the negotiating committee isn't, we'll have this confirmed in a meeting at Currie's Fountain.¹¹

Shortly after this decision was taken, the union sent out a low-key notice requesting members to give their opinion of the wage increases on offer at a meeting at Currie's Fountain. Bolton recalls that the notice received swift attention from the Special Branch:

Immediately, we were visited by the Special Branch who asked for copies of the notices, and for the reasons why we were holding a meeting on that day, and warning us again that it could cause incidents, and it could be dangerous. The same Lieutenant from the Special Branch visited us every day until the day of the meeting, and I think that we counted upwards of seven or eight Special Branch men at our meeting¹²

On the 23rd of February, nearly the entire membership of the Garment union, which at that stage stood at around 24 thousand workers, met at Currie's Fountain on a working day. Several employers, who Bolton said wanted the negotiations settled, cooperated and gave workers permission to leave the factories. Others prohibited them, but the workers went anyway. Only one factory was not represented on the day:

... what I knew, and didn't tell anyone else, I didn't tell my committee either because they would have been afraid, was that the meeting in fact constituted a stoppage of work and I thought that's the kind of demonstration that we needed. So that the workers could stop work, they could be out of their factories where some of the employers were willing to give the increases we'd asked and I knew what would happen. Those employers would say 'we are willing, so will you work', so we had to get them away from the factories and out and stop them all ... Currie's Fountain was absolutely chock-a-block full. I remember I was so worried that I didn't even sleep at home the night before, because I was *certain* the police would come and pick me up and then everything would collapse ... We went to Currie's Fountain, I was pretty certain we'd have a *good* meeting. I was *amazed* that we had such a terrific meeting.¹³

10 1972 Tucsa Annual Conference, Report of Proceedings: Cape Town August 1972 AH 1426 Ad 1.21

11 Interview with Harriet Bolton, David Hemson. 1974.

12 1972 Tucsa Annual Conference, Report of Proceedings: Cape Town August 1972 AH 1426 Ad 1.21

13 Interview with Harriet Bolton, David Hemson. 1974.

Two days after the strike, the union sent a circular to shop stewards to inform them that a settlement had been negotiated and all their demands met. The letter indicated that the agreement had been settled in their favour thanks to the stand made by members in attending the general meeting at Currie's Fountain "like true Trade Unionists."¹⁴

The saga, however, was not yet over. The owner of a Clairwood factory, *Del Lingerie*, fired the shop steward after the mass meeting, and thirty-seven clothing workers then tendered their resignations and walked out of the factory. The owner, however, charged them with participating in an illegal strike and the matter went to court. The story made headlines in *The Leader*, where Bolton slammed the actions of Labour Department officials, who, she said "acted like policemen."¹⁵ The women were eventually found guilty and insisted on seeing their five-day sentence behind bars through on a matter of principle. The union, however, persuaded them otherwise and paid the fine.

Reflecting on the negotiation process, Bolton recalls that it was marked by the solidarity of the workers, across racialised structures. A ban on overtime, traditionally exceptionally difficult to implement and monitor, had been strictly adhered to:

During the whole of that negotiation, workers also took a decision not to participate in any incentive bonus schemes and not to work any overtime; and this constituted considerable sacrifice. The African workers in the industry agreed to this as well, and supported to the hilt the movement ... They showed the most terrific spirit, and it just shows you what total communication with workers can do.¹⁶

This dramatic series of events has received little attention in histories of Durban's trade union movement.¹⁷ While a number of work stoppages, some of them based at Durban's docks, are seen as important forerunners of the 1973 strike wave, the meeting at Currie's Fountain is overlooked. This is possibly because it could be read as sectional, in that it represented one *registered* union, with an undeniably conservative history, and its struggle through the state's bargaining machinery to negotiate a wage agreement.¹⁸ In

¹⁴ Garment Workers Union Cba 1.2

¹⁵ *The Leader*, June 18, 1971. page 1.

¹⁶ Interview with Harriet Bolton, David Hemson

¹⁷ The problems of reconstructing events from memory is an issue that will be explored, perhaps in a separate chapter. It is vital to remember that accounts tend to present the end result as a foregone conclusion ... while the reality is obviously more complex

¹⁸ The Industrial Conciliation Act, passed in 1924, provided the framework for collective bargaining and the resolution of disputes through industrial councils. Individual unions and employers' associations, registered under the Act, were responsible for setting up and registering a council for their industry. Agreements reached on wages and working conditions through this bargaining machinery were legally enforceable. Crucially, African men ("pass-bearing natives") were excluded from the definition of employee. Until the Act was amended in 1956 this did not extend to African women. Before this, however, African women had not yet entered secondary industries in significant numbers. Although unions with African male membership were in theory not outlawed, they were barred from registration, and hence excluded from bargaining machinery and legal protection. In practice, attempts made by Africans to organise into unions with any autonomy were met with crushing repression from the state, ably aided by capital. This is illustrated both by the fate of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), and later,

this sense, even if boundaries were being pushed, what the majority Indian and Coloured members of the union were doing through the negotiation process, up until the strike, was 'legal', and perhaps therefore unworthy of comment. Related to this, the historiography around the role of Trade Union Council of South Africa affiliated unions has mostly been concerned with how Tucsa as a federation, along with its affiliated unions, sought ways to further the interests of White, and to a lesser extent, Indian and Coloured workers. This was always to the detriment of African workers, as will be discussed below. While it would be difficult to find fault with this depiction of Tucsa, it is my contention that through casting all Tucsa unions in this mould, the possibility of a more nuanced history is shut down. However, perhaps the most important reason for this lack of attention in the historiography is that events in Durban were soon to overtake the GWIU, relegating the 1971 'moment' to relative insignificance.

The 1973 Durban strikes and the nation-wide strikes which followed are remembered as the defining moment in the resurrection of the struggle for democratic trade union organisation in South Africa, with the Durban explosion at its core. In the first three months of 1973, over 60 000 workers, the majority of them African, struck. Many of these strikes were concentrated around Frame textile factories in Durban.¹⁹ The strikes are generally credited with sparking a major resurgence in worker organisation, marked by principles of 'open' unionism and shop-floor democracy. Lewis also points to the significantly broader impact the strikes had on industrial relations:

Industrial relations were forced onto the agenda of employers long used to ruling with the stick ... The government undertook a major reorientation of the legislative framework that for fifty years had regulated relations among African workers, employers and the state. These were not ephemeral shifts but major institutional changes marking off one era from another.²⁰

The genealogy of the strikes, the reasons why they happened, and particularly why they took place in Durban, as well as their aftermath, have been amply documented elsewhere,

by the state's attempts to trounce the emerging democratic unions in the early 1970s. . . Registration under the Industrial Conciliation Act was not denied to Indian and Coloured workers. At the same time that this legislation was passed, provisions were made for the establishment of 'Wage Boards', which would set wages for areas not covered by Industrial Councils. Employers and employees were permitted to make representations to Wage Boards. The 1953 Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act put in place a 'works committee' system to cater for African men. Although ostensibly voted in by workers, these committees were tightly controlled by factory management. Regional committees and a centralised labour board – staffed by Labour Department officers – were also set up. (Only seven committees existed from 1953 – 1957, ten in 1960, 19 in 1961 and 24 in 1965. This number remained unchanged until 1973. Eddie Webster (ed) *Essays in Southern African Labour History, Organised Labour under Apartheid, Introduction* (209-232) The usefulness, or otherwise, of such structures became a hotly contested issue among the emerging independent unions in the 1970s.

¹⁹ While the 1973 strikes are generally regarded as having started more or less spontaneously, historians have placed them in a broader context of an apparent slow revival of worker militancy. This includes strikes by Durban and Cape Town dock workers, work stoppages on the Namibian mines and scattered action in Johannesburg. However, Friedman terms these "straws in the wind" as compared to the upheavals of 1973.

²⁰ Lewis, 189

and it is not my intention to discuss these issues in any depth here.²¹ It is perhaps suffice to say that in the context of these upheavals, the silence around the strike at Currie's Fountain is put into perspective. However, I believe that Bolton's account of these events opens up some interesting questions. Through this discussion I will start to interrogate Bolton's role at the helm of the union, and try to understand the parameters in which she acted, tracing a story of how she starts to push and shift these strictures in particular ways. I also wish to investigate here possible links between the union in the early 1970s and an earlier period of radicalism, which was marked for a brief time by its cooperation across racialised structures. Finally, I wish to show that this particular point in the history of the GWIU had some important consequences for labour history in Durban.

In order to begin to address these questions, it is first appropriate to situate both Bolton's relationship with the GWIU, as well as give some description of the broader history of the trade union movement in Durban. Bolton was voted into the position of General Secretary of the Garment union in 1964, after the death of her husband James (Jimmy) Bolton. Bolton recalls, with a dry laugh, one of the last things James said to her:

He didn't say to me, "how are you gonna manage your six children?" 'Cause, you know, we only had the house we lived in we didn't have any money, you know, he wasn't a believer, he was a socialist. He never owned a house till he married me, I made him buy a house ... Instead of saying "how will you manage with your six children you know, and going to have to work, you know ... long hours" ... he said to me, "you've got to promise me that you'll move the Garment and Furniture Workers out of the old Bolton Hall in Albert Street". Because the Group Areas had frozen it and we had the Industrial Council there and it was getting too small for all of us, and he said, "and the Council must never move away from us because then we can't control them,"²²

Bolton maintains that she learnt "all I know" about trade unionism from her husband, and named the new union hall, which they started to operate out of in 197(2), after James. However, records show that under her leadership the union quite obviously took on a more militant position. As I hope to demonstrate, Bolton also succeeded, if only to an extent, in integrating more democracy into its running and further encouraged the participation of African workers in its structures.

²¹ See, for example: IIE. The 1973 Strike 'Human Beings With Souls' This moment also departed significantly from the experience of the 1960s: trade union organisation in the country faced its nadir. At the turn of the decade conditions of work and wages for most African workers were controlled by employers and the registered unions, who negotiated through industrial councils. Barred from registration, African workers had little or no control over their working conditions and their attempts to organise were met with brutal repression. By 1965, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), a 'nonracial' federation which married struggles on the factory floor with the struggle for political rights, was virtually non-existent, most of its leadership either banned or in exile. The suppression of Sactu was a major setback for worker militancy: in the six years from 1965 to 1971, less than 23 000 African workers stopped work. Meanwhile, even the avowedly apolitical Tucsua felt some of the brunt of state pressure during this period. In 1969, after threats of an exodus of right-wing White unions, the organisation expelled its few remaining, weakly organised, African union affiliates

²² Interview with Harriet Bolton 1, June 2005

James Bolton, a furniture upholsterer from York, was a founding member of the union in 1934, and served as General Secretary until his death. While the formative years of the union were some of their most militant, with a number of lighting strikes recorded from 1933 to 1935, the GWIU differed in important ways from the burgeoning racially 'mixed' industrial unions, often under the influence of radicals, which marked this period. Lewis argues that the growth of secondary industry and attendant changes in the work process in both the pre and post depression years forced many industrial unions to embrace the concept of open trade unionism and sign up all workers – irrespective of sex or colour. They often remained unregistered in order to do this.²³ Meanwhile, Communist Party aligned activists, who strove for the ideal of working class unity across races, made significant inroads into organising unions in the Durban area. While the garment union had a 'mixed' membership and executive of White, Coloured and Indian workers, under Bolton's influence it charted a moderate course.²⁴ The union established an Industrial Council almost from the outset, and maintained a conciliatory approach to negotiations with manufacturers. James Bolton's staunchly anti-communist sentiments and conservative unionism led him into direct conflict with the active left-aligned trade unionists, who saw potential in the mass of poorly paid garment workers. Long vilified as a right-winger, most of their criticisms seem to stem from his fierce resistance to their bids to gain footholds in the garment and textile industry, as well as his initial strategies of exclusion at the helm of the Furniture union.²⁵ Bolton, who was at that stage working as a union typist and part-time organiser, recalls numerous attempts by radical activists and workers to try and stage coups at the general meetings of the GWIU membership. Muriel Horrell noted this was still a trend as late as 1961:

There are vocal left-wing minorities within some of the mixed unions ... for example the Natal Garment Workers' Industrial Union, the National Union of Leather Workers and others, although at present these members are over-ruled if matters are put to the vote.²⁶

²³ Lewis, Jon. Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-55. The rise and fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council. Cambridge University Press, Great Britain: 1984.

²⁴ A 'parallel' African union was set up in 1948. Unwilling to compromise their registration for the sake of unity, a number of unions set up 'parallel' or 'number two' unions in order to cater for African workers entering industry. These unions, while often paying lip service to the ideal of one integrated worker body, argued that through parallel organisations African workers would at least have some say in negotiations with employers. The reality was often different. The need to negotiate through the registered union created a dependent relationship from the outset. The registered union's interests lay in controlling the bargaining process in order to prevent undercutting by African workers. The president of the Garment Workers Union (GWU) in the Transvaal, Anna Scheepers, was notorious for her tight control of the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW), the largest African parallel union in the Trade Union Council of South Africa fold. Well into the 1970s, and despite employers' willingness to negotiate directly with the union, Scheepers insisted that African unionists were "not ready" for the responsibility, and continued to negotiate on their behalf. Scheepers' example was not an anomaly. Indeed, much of the Trade Union Council of South Africa's (Tucsa's) history is bound up with their controlling relationship of African parallel unions.

²⁵ See, for example, Jack and Ray Simons' *Class and Colour*, Brenda Wall and Ken Luckhardt's unashamedly heroic history of the South African Congress of Trade Unions Organise ... Or Starve! as well as Pauline Podbury's *White Girl in Search of the Party* and Betty Du Toit's history of the textile workers, *Ukubamba Amandolo*.

²⁶ Horrell, 56

Indian workers were an important part of this radical tradition. Indeed, Freund asserts that for a brief period from the mid-1930s, and particularly in the early 1940s, Indian workers in Durban were regarded as among the most militant in the country.²⁷ This era was marked by a sharp increase in strikes, many of them characterised by the inter-racial solidarity in the workplace that Lewis has pointed to. However, by the mid-1950s, the majority of Indian workers were signed up to registered, conservative Tucsa unions; nearly two decades of militancy apparently forgotten. Freund offers compelling reasons for these developments, arguing that this period of worker militancy should be understood not only in terms of “a striving for non-racial working-class unity” but should rather be “associated closely with assertions of ethnicity, both by and against Indian workers.”²⁸ This was particularly with reference to Indian workers seeking to maintain their relative work privileges, as well as their ongoing struggle for living space, and trading and investment rights in the city.²⁹ Freund suggests that the majority of these workers were not, in the end, prepared to relinquish these privileges and follow the political vanguard into significantly redressing inequalities in the name of working-class unity. He cites as examples a number of unsuccessful strikes, supported by both Indian and African workers, as being experiences which disillusioned workers and illustrated the difficulties of maintaining unity during the post war years. Among these, Hemson describes the strike at Dunlop in 1942 as a “watershed” which altered the course of working class organisation and unity. He argues that the strike, which broke out in response to the company’s victimization of members of the non-racial Rubber Workers’ Union, was “decisive in undermining radical leadership in registered trade unions and in causing distrust and hostility between Indian and African workers.”³⁰ The strike was effectively quashed by the company, which brought in busloads of African workers from the reserves. The strike, Hemson argues, was also significant in the move of Indian activists, often linked to the Natal Indian Congress and the Communist Party, away from their focus on organising workers and the ideal of working-class unity to “political action in defence of the Indian community.”³¹ Freund also sees the bloody 1949 race riots as adding to the difficulties of maintaining inter-racial solidarity. ‘Political’ stay-aways called by the Congress-Alliance in the early 1950s were the nail in the coffin for the possibilities of support for non-racial trade unionism from Indian workers, hundreds of whom were arrested, lost their jobs and were kicked out of their rented accommodation.

By contrast, the particular style of conservative, conciliatory and ‘top-down’ unionism that marked the GWIU is attested to in a publication sent to members in 1963, entitled “A Call to Members”. Eight years before the strike at Currie’s Fountain, the leaflet describes

²⁷ Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*,

²⁸ Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 53

²⁹ This was particularly in connection with the so-called ‘Pegging Act’ of 19(42). See also David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. As mentioned above, Indian and Coloured workers enjoyed significantly privileged positions as workers, relative to Africans. Theirs was the right to strike, and to join registered unions. There were also major differences in terms of wage scales, which by the early 1950s were balanced heavily in favour of Indian workers.

³⁰ Hemson, *Class Consciousness*. 337

³¹ Hemson, *Class Consciousness*, 339

real differences in the style of unionism both described by Bolton in her account of the strike at Currie's Fountain in 1971, and discussed above:

the vast majority of our members do not, for various reasons, attend our Quarterly General Meetings with the result that, except for the contact established between the Organisers, or through the Shop Stewards or Shop Committees, many members are not fully aware of what is actually happening with regard to their Union ...³²

The union also pleaded with members not to embark on a go slow, as negotiations were at a delicate stage. They were also requested not to stop overtime: "an appeal is made to our members not to take drastic action but to follow the policy determined by the Union."³³

By the time Bolton took over responsibility for the union, Indian workers made up the large majority of the workforce in the clothing industry.³⁴ Indian women had also entered the factories in significant numbers. Freund, backed by Meer's findings, suggests that their entrance into industry was "a family strategy governed by fathers and husbands, rather than by the women themselves". He also stresses the need to complicate the link often made between waged work and independence and militancy. In the case of Durban Indian women, Freund suggests that "very often women workers are not easily able to turn their power to earn wages into any substantially different sense of themselves in the world."³⁵ This argument is supported by oral evidence from Margaret Rajbally, a shop-stewardess who worked in a clothing factory for twenty years before joining the GWIU as an organiser:

at that time (1960s) ... I serve as a shop stewardess but the unions were very conservative. It was just sort of day to day thing, not to say that you taking up things with management strongly and because of that weakness management took lot of advantage ... our parents ... mothers were in the industry because they would not just think about a union. Even if you went to them and said look, you have a union you must take advantage of the union, you have a problem bring it to the union and we'll do this and that for you. We'll take up your grievance, but they would not. They feared losing their jobs and they always said that if we bring complaints to you we might be victimised, we might be dismissed etc. ... in those

³² GWU Cba 1.2

³³ Historical Papers GWU Cba 1.2

³⁴ In 1952, Indian workers made up well over half of the 4 184 members. (T. Gardener, "Socio-economic position of the Indian, 1952. cited in Freund) By the mid-1950s, Coloureds and Indians made up 89 percent of the workforce in the industry nationally, this figure stayed relatively constant until the early 1970s. Exact figures are difficult to get for the later period. Madari contends Indian membership stood at over 70 percent during the 1960s. It is safe to assume that Coloured workers made up the rest of the members. White and African employees were certainly in the minority.

Madari, B. A Historical Investigation into the Garment Industry in Natal with Specific Reference to the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal). Hons thesis, unpublished. University of Durban-Westville.

³⁴ Padayachee et al, Indian Workers

³⁵ Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*. 81.

days you just cannot make the workers talk, they will not talk, no matter what you go and say. They worshipped their employers and they also felt that no, we will do anything for our boss because he has given us a job and we're getting paid on a Friday.³⁶

The union had been a member of Tucsa on and off since the federation's inception. This in itself reveals some of the politics of the GWIU, and is worth considering briefly.³⁷ The Council was formed in 1954 by an alliance of unions which agreed to limit membership to registered unions only. Although it was dominated by a White, mostly male, executive, Indian and Coloured workers made up a significant proportion of Tucsa membership.³⁸ Friedman suggests that while the all-white labour confederation, the Co-ordinating Council and its successor, the SA Confederation of Labour, could get away with policies that openly discriminated between Black and White workers, Tucsa's position was obviously more complex. As such, the federation enjoyed a reformist image and was seen as a force for "moderate, non-racial unionism"³⁹. He argues, however, that Tucsa compromised with government on a number of important issues over the next two decades, which revealed its priorities were to keep its unions under White control.⁴⁰ He also, however, points towards the relative privileges that some Indian and Coloured workers gained through the racial job bars. This, he argues, gave registered unions with a Black majority a "direct interest in helping to control African workers."⁴¹

It is within this complex context that Bolton began her work at the helm of the Garment union. Tracking her career through the press has proved a valuable exercise, for Bolton

³⁶ (Interview with Margaret Rajbally (SACTWU Organiser) for the SACTWU History Project by Jean Fairbairn in Durban at Bolton Hall on 14/05/1990)

³⁷ For the next twenty years member unions dithered painfully over the question of African unions' affiliation to the body. Tucsa was politically dominated by craft unions, and the literature generally agrees that more liberal elements in the council were often held to ransom by their interests.³⁷ During the course of the 1950s and 1960s, various resolutions were passed in favour of unions making real efforts to organise African workers, and the Tucsa constitution was amended to allow "all bona fide unions" to affiliate. Between 1962 and 1967, however, only nine African unions affiliated to Tucsa. The majority of these were parallels to registered Tucsa unions, the largest of which was the ex-Sactu affiliate, the NUCW, led by Lucy Mvubelo. Under pressure from the state, and threatened by a craft union exodus in 1969, the council again limited membership to registered unions, and expelled its remaining African affiliates.

³⁸ Give stats on Tucsa membership here ... In 197(1)? the GWIU (80 percent Indian membership) with around 25 000 members was one of Tucsa's largest affiliates, second only to the Coloured Garment union in the Western Cape.

³⁹ Friedman, Building Tomorrow Today.

⁴⁰ From my reading of the Tucsa conference minutes, similar issues were raised at conferences throughout the 1960s, and similar arguments were used to defeat or support the resolutions taken. Attitudes of racism and paternalism abound. A number of union leaders at the conferences seemed to agree that African people were not 'developed' enough for 'responsible' trade unionism. Some Tucsa unionists saw their role as a moderating force. If they didn't do something about the unorganised African working class, they would fall into the dangerous hands of Communists. Tucsa's hostile attitude to Sactu unions is also illustrative. There are interesting comparisons with their policy regarding Sactu during the 1950s and 1960s and their behaviour towards the new independent unions in the early 1970s. Indeed, Friedman, (and many others – get references) argue that Tucsa was often spurred into action because of the threat posed by other initiatives to organise African workers

⁴¹ Friedman, Building Tomorrow Today, 71

used newspapers to meet her own ends, and in turn attracted prolific coverage.⁴² An inconspicuous 1966 *Natal Mercury* report on Durban Parliament's debating society marked the first sign of the increasingly vocal public figure that she was to play in Durban. At the society, Bolton had debated in favour of changing labour legislation to recognise African unions under the Industrial Conciliation Act, arguing that:

It is evident that a radical change has come about – the emergence as an Industrial Worker of the African ... Such a change calls for change of the legislation, not half-hearted paternal supervision as with the Bantu labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, but a recognition of the emergence of a whole class of workers as wage earners doing jobs which Job Reservation has not been able to keep 'white' ...⁴³

Incidentally, this was also the year when she was voted onto Tucsa's National Executive Committee. She sent the transcript of her presentation and a newspaper clipping to Tucsa secretary Arthur Grobbelaar, along with a note, which clearly demonstrates their amiable relationship:

I thought that you and Steve (Scheepers) and Tom Murray might be interested in the enclosed seeing that so many points used were thoughts pinched from the three of you, or should I say learned from you three ... I was warned that the ... Durban Parliament never manage to carry a 'liberal' motion so I should not hope but in spite of this we did because the others were demolished by their lack of knowledge of the legislation.⁴⁴

I would argue that even at this stage Bolton's ideas were presented in terms remarkably less pragmatic than official Tucsa line. However, Bolton and the union executive's endorsement of Tucsa policy was clearly spelt out in the GWIU's annual report for 1967/68:

TUCSA does an extremely efficient job as the mouthpiece of the workers, and the good public relations and promotion work done by the Officials at Head Office have brought the questions affecting workers to the ears of our Government Officialdom.⁴⁵

Over the next few years, her involvement with the emergent 'open' union movement in Durban, and her public criticisms of Tucsa, meant she increasingly came into conflict with the conservative leadership, and membership, of the council. Certainly, by the early 1970s, correspondence and minutes from conferences reveal that her attitude about Tucsa's worth was changing considerably. This included a widely reported, vicious spat with the Tucsa executive, and in particular Grobbelaar, where she labelled Tucsa "A

⁴² It is my intention to look into this issue further, particularly the ways that newspapers represented Bolton over time. i.e. "Mother of 30 000", "outspoken trade unionist", "rebel unionist", etc.

⁴³ Historical Papers AH1426 AB4.2.41 file 1

⁴⁴ Historical Papers AH1426 AB4.2.41 file 1

⁴⁵ AH1426 AB4.2.41 file 1

spineless talking machine” in newspapers. I am interested in the tensions that Bolton negotiated between her position on the Tucsa executive and her apparent growing conviction that the Council did not represent the best interests of workers. What motivated this? And why did the Garment union remain affiliated to Tucsa if they felt so opposed to the council’s policies? One way of answering this is tracking the long tradition of dissenting voices evident at Tucsa conferences. Clearly, behind the closed doors of conference, there was a space to criticise and debate issues. However, I would also suggest that, to some extent, Bolton’s views expressed at conferences and in newspapers did not necessarily always reflect those of the union’s executive and membership.⁴⁶ Harriet contemplated this issue in a later interview:

HK: And you were actually on the (Tucsa) committee though weren’t you?

HB: Yes I was

HK: How did you kind of negotiate that?

HB: Oh I just spoke up at every, blasted meeting

HK: (laughs) really?

HB: see my members, some of my members agreed with Arthur you know ... I mean some of them were very proper ja

HK: it must have been quite difficult for you ...

HB: ja very difficult and in fact over you know these youngsters later on coming into the, the unions to help and being in our office and us holding, meetings of, black workers in our hall um a lot of my Indian members were very nervous about it and very disapproving. But you can see why as I say I could stand up to being a White and having a, certain amount of protection not total when they harassed me but, they were very nervous when their families and they were harassed at home by Special Branch wanting to know ... I mean I could see their point ... but on the other hand you know I wanted them to have a bit more, gumption some of them did but not all of them⁴⁷

By the late 1960s, the GWIU was already beginning to function differently from the ‘model’ of Tucsa affiliated unions, with their ideally conciliatory approach to employers. In April 1967, *The Leader* reported on a mass meeting of clothing workers at Currie’s Fountain. The union were in the process of negotiating a new agreement, Bolton’s first at

⁴⁶ In mid-1974, Bolton was put under pressure by the Garment union executive to resign. The South African Labour Bulletin put this down to “differences of opinion with the executive on the issue of support for African trade unions.” Vol 1. No. 8. 2-5. The chairman of the union, Ismail Muckdoom, explained that union officials had been harassed by the security branch. Sunday Times Extra, 1/09/74

⁴⁷ Interview with Harriet Bolton, Hannah Keal. 2005.

the helm of the union, which according to legislation came up for review every four years. In pouring rain on a Saturday morning, around eight-thousand members of the GWIU converged on Currie's Fountain to give their mandate on the two percent wage increases on offer from employers.⁴⁸ According to an article in *The Leader*, Bolton delivered a "rousing" speech:

"Ninety percent of workers here," she claimed "were warned to come to work this morning. Employers will now see how strong you are" ... If talks with employers proved unsatisfactory workers had no alternative but to strike.⁴⁹

Negotiations, however, were wrapped up soon after without resorting to this. In an interview seven years later, Bolton charted the lead-up to the strike at Currie's Fountain in 1971 to the wage negotiations and the meeting in 1967. She recalls she wasn't satisfied with the agreement:

I didn't feel I had done as well as I could. The workers were happy, the committee were *very* happy, because I was inexperienced and they kind of felt they had to take a larger share of the responsibility than they had to take before. They were all mutually patting each other on the back, but I was unhappy. I didn't feel that we'd had enough contact with the workers.⁵⁰

This sense of dissatisfaction is also conveyed in a letter to Anna Scheepers, then secretary of the Garment Workers Union of South Africa (Transvaal), soon after the agreement was concluded.⁵¹ This style of negotiation with the employers' association broke significantly from the union's past two decades of history. For example, the distinctiveness of this meeting is attested to in the annual 1967/1968 report where the decision to call the meeting was described as "momentous" in the history of the union. This is qualified by the sobering comment: "The increases obtained are not magnificent but they were hard earned, and are a step in the right direction."⁵² Soon after this initial meeting at Currie's Fountain, the GWIU's constitution was altered to accommodate more meetings with shop stewards and increased contact on the factory floor.⁵³ Over three years of attempting to instate more democracy into the structure of the union followed, with their sights set firmly on winning major benefits during the next round of negotiations. Bolton recalls that they put in place a week-long election process for shop stewards, to guarantee that the elections in factories were democratic. The union also instituted intensive shop steward training courses. Interestingly, Bolton maintains that she learnt the importance of the role of shop stewards through observing the emphasis that Communist Party aligned workers and organisers placed on shop steward elections during their attempts to take over the GWIU during the 1940s and 1950s:

⁴⁸ At this stage there was a membership of around 10 thousand ...

⁴⁹ *The Leader*, May 5th, 1967

⁵⁰ Interview with Harriet Bolton. David Hemson, 1974

⁵¹ Historical Papers, Garment Workers Union Cba 1.2

⁵² Historical Papers Karis Gerhart, folder 63 (from Annual Report, 1966/167 GWIU June 1967)

⁵³ Interview with Hemson, 1974, and amendment to constitution 1966/167 gwiu, June 1967, from KG, folder 63

I noticed then the importance the Communist movement placed on getting their men in as shop stewards. I remembered that as a good lesson; I think it is *terribly* important. Your shop stewards: it's better to have a strong shop steward movement than it is to have a strong committee. It's actually your life-line and you ought to motivate your shop stewards. You ought to handle every election with great *care*.⁵⁴

Quite clearly the success of the tactics used to negotiate the 1971 agreement was thanks to the structures of total communication with workers that the union installed over a period of three years. Some links can be drawn here to a study conducted by Padayachee, Vawda and Tichman into a much earlier period of militant Durban history, marked by cooperation between Indian and African workers. The authors, concerned with the rise and decline of Indian worker militancy from the 1930s to the 1950s, pay careful attention to the constitutions and functioning of a sample of unions. They place some of the blame for the 'failure' of working class unity directly on the lack of a strong shop-floor tradition and democratic structures in the unions. It is my contention here that, twenty years on and in a significantly different context, the GWIU succeeded to some degree in overcoming nearly forty years of 'top down', bureaucratic management, oppressive legislation and shop-floor quiescence through the democratising of its structures.

Post-strike:

DH: But this led to a lot of other things too, didn't it ...

HB: The larger meeting? Yes, it certainly was. Ja. That big meeting at Currie's Fountain, it led to a revival of the political movements that had lain dormant for ages. Because people had not been aware that workers were that *motivated* or that interested. And that meeting, which received publicity, in the press and on radio, and to the people of Durban, it brought home the fact that workers were in fact interested, you know, alive for things in their own interest, and there was a possibility of political movements getting going. The Coloured Labour Party were very interested, the Indian Congress were very interested, the African Congress were very interested. As well as the Progressive Party and other ministers. Helen Suzman phoned me, when she'd heard about the meeting. Winchester visited me ... I mean it created an *enormous* amount of interest ...⁵⁵

A few weeks after the strike, a group of Nusas students came up with the idea of "Wages Commissions", which would be set up to research and agitate around the wages and working conditions of unorganised Black workers. The impetus to form the Commissions apparently came from the 1969 Durban dockworkers strike.⁵⁶ Soon after this, university lecturer Rick Turner suggested that David Hemson, then a student on the Durban campus,

⁵⁴ Interview with Harriet Bolton. David Hemson, 1974.

⁵⁵ Interview with Harriet Bolton conducted by David Hemson, 1974.

⁵⁶ Hemson et al. *White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement*. 2007

make contact with Bolton in order to facilitate the work of the Commissions. Bolton herself suggests that Turner had learnt about the union's activities through the extensive press coverage they'd received around the 1971 meeting.

In June of that year, around eight-hundred workers gathered at the Bolton Hall to protest a recent Wage Board determination for unskilled workers. Turner, Fatima Meer, Mewa Ramagobin and Labour Party representatives also attended. At the Tucsa conference three months later, Bolton encouraged Tucsa delegates to:

do as we have been trying to do in Natal, and that is to make the persons affected by the Wage Board sittings – I think that that is everybody – but the people not organised into trade unions – to make them aware of their rights, and to make them aware of the fact that they can appear before the Wage Board and make representations for themselves.⁵⁷

Over the next few years, the Bolton Hall became an important meeting space for fledgling worker organisations, which, after the 1973 strikes, slowly grew into 'open' unions. This particular history, and Bolton's role in it, will be picked up in later chapters. At present, it is enough to make the point that through the work of the GWIU under Bolton, important spaces (both physical and ideological) were opened in Durban. This made more possible the emergence of nascent worker organisations, both pre- and post-the 1973 strikes.

⁵⁷ Ad 1.20 AH 1426 17th Annual Conference, Durban, September 1971