

“Durban’s Rebel Trade Unionist”: Harriet Bolton and Tucsá, 1973 – 1974.

Introduction

In early 1973, Durban was rocked by a wave of strikes of an unprecedented scale. In the first three months of 1973, it is estimated that around 60 000 workers, the majority of them African, struck. By the end of the year, this figure had grown to 100 000, countrywide.¹ The statistics are put into perspective when considering that between 1965 and 1971, only 23 000 African workers stopped work.² These strikes and the nation-wide strikes which followed have gained indisputable status as a vital force for change. They 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 in forcing the state and employers to rethink industrial regulations over the next few years, significantly so in the form of the Wiehahn Commission, which recommended the recognition of African unions in 1979.³

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.⁴

Much of the strike action was focussed around Durban, and particularly the textile industry, in which Bolton, new organisers at the Bolton Hall, and the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund were collectively deeply invested. The strikes added important momentum to these new Bolton Hall initiatives; four unions, an administrative hub and an industrial education organisation were formed within ten months of the mass work stoppages. Indeed, the entire year was marked by heightened worker struggles in the textile industry. This chapter will chart some of these disputes and in particular a strike in

1 David Hemson, *Capital and Class*, 20

2 Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 40

3 Lewis, D. (1997) ‘Black Workers and Trade Unions.’ In G. Karis and M. Gerhart (eds.) *From Protest to Challenge: a Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa*. 189

4 Lewis, 189

August by textile workers in Phillip Frame's factories. This particular dispute, coupled with the new initiatives out of Bolton Hall, became a critical issue at the 1973 Tucsa conference, the outcome of which would have important consequences for Bolton's relationship with the union federation.

In comparison to those preceding it, this chapter covers a relatively short period of time: just over one year. This is due both to the significance of this period for Bolton, and the plentiful sources for this phase. The combination of newspaper reports, trade union and Tucsa meeting minutes, Bolton's correspondence with both international and local unions, and interviews with her, other trade unionists and workers spanning the past 40 years, allow for a detailed account. Narrative aside, the diversity of sources available also makes possible an interesting investigation into how Harriet addressed, presented herself and interacted with different audiences. She had emerged as a personality in Durban's White press from the late 1960s, and particularly as the hero of exploited Indian garment workers during the Currie's Fountain Strike in 1971. Thanks to close press coverage of the textile worker disputes in the Frame complex throughout 1973, her image as a critical and authoritative voice on local labour matters was entrenched. This chapter will chart how this personality developed into "Durban's rebel trade unionist" by 1974.

In broad outline, this chapter will look into responses to the strikes from the Durban press and public, as well as employers. It will then move on to discuss Tucsa and other trade unionists' responses, linking these to the ILO conference in 1973, as well as the Tucsa conference later the same year. The chapter will then provide a detailed overview of Frame's dispute with the textile union, and the implications of this both for Tucsa and Bolton, and in particular their relationship.

Responses to the strikes

The 1973 strikes reverberated locally, nationally and internationally. They provided a major wake-up call for registered unions, most of which had been lulled into varying degrees of complacency by decades of bureaucratic bargaining procedure. Indeed, a point

often neglected by historians of the strikes, as well as the newspapers reporting on the strikes at the time, is that a large number of Indian workers went out on strike along with their African colleagues. A survey conducted soon after the strikes revealed that most of the walk-outs had Indian worker support. However, this was not always voluntary.⁵ The survey also found a high degree of expressed solidarity among Indian male workers with African workers; a point which the authors suggested had great “political significance”.⁶ However, history shows that, barring a few exceptions, these expressions of solidarity generally remained just that. As mentioned above, the strikes also added important momentum to the new Bolton Hall initiatives. Many of the African workers involved in the strikes felt a new sense of confidence; this was illustrated in greater interest in the Benefit Fund and moves to form unions proper in the months following the strikes. Importantly for this chapter, the interest generated by the strikes meant that labour issues became a key news item, and a source for public debate, for at least the following year. The strikes created new space, particularly in the *Natal Mercury* and *Daily News*, in the coming months for critical commentary on labour issues. As Durban’s most active and vocal Tucsas trade unionist, Bolton used this space to promote the work being done out of the Bolton Hall. She was also sought out by journalists for comment. The following section shall firstly give a brief synopsis of the strikes, and their relationship to the Bolton Hall, and then touch on the Durban press, public and employers’ immediate responses.

Unliveable wages, high inflation, desperate living conditions, a poor working environment and discrimination in the work place, embodied by the job colour bar, all contributed to the mass work stoppages which started at the Corobrick and Tile factory in early January 1973. In the weeks that followed, the major upheavals were concentrated around the Frame group’s textile factories in Pinetown. Their genealogy, the reasons for the strikes and their spontaneity, or otherwise, have been discussed at length elsewhere. It is not my intention to recount these debates in any depth here.⁷ Suffice to say, the preceding chapter has put the strikes in the context of a number of scattered strikes since

5 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973, Human Beings with Souls*, 1973. 63

6 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973*. 69

7 See, for example: IIE. *The 1973 Strike ‘Human Beings With Souls’*, Steven Friedman, Lodge, Hemson etc.

the start of the decade, including strikes by Durban and Cape Town dock workers, work stoppages on the Namibian mines and several strikes in Johannesburg.⁸ I have also discussed the existence of a network of people and organisations which, in different ways, had started to open up channels of communication with certain sections of the African labour force in Durban by the time mass strikes shook the city in early 1973. Whether the first attempts at contact and organisation from the Bolton Hall group had any impact on the timing of the strikes is not clear.⁹ Histories of this period have generally not directed much attention to the relationships being formed out of the Bolton Hall and possible links with the strikes.¹⁰ Davies has recently put this down to a trend in scholarship towards “the isolation of autonomous, agentive ‘African voices’”. She makes the argument that the activities of, for example, the students’ wages commissions have largely been ignored because of this, but can “pertain directly to our understanding of the timing and magnitude of the 1973 Durban strikes.”¹¹ I would suggest that she overstates this argument to an extent, as oral evidence certainly suggests that the majority of the workers who went out on strike had had little or no contact with the Bolton Hall group. However, it is still myopic to dismiss outright the impact of the efforts out of the Bolton Hall. This was particularly so with respect to the textile workers, some of whom were already members of the Benefit Fund, and all of whom received the support of the registered union under Bolton’s guidance throughout their strike. Indeed, the textile union knew of the dissatisfaction of textile workers well ahead of their strikes, and had submitted a comprehensive list of demands to management.¹² Hemson’s argument that

8 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow*. In April 1969 2000 dockworkers struck, at the end of 1971 13 000 Ovambo workers went on strike in Namibia. In October 1972, dockworkers were again on strike.

9 As discussed in the preceding chapter, by early 1973 the Bolton Hall had been established as an important networking space between registered trade unions, African workers, students and academics as well as the new organisers brought on board by Bolton. When the decision to move the Bolton Hall to Gale Street was made, Bolton had had to wage war with the Group Areas Board, because the area was zoned as a ‘White’ business district. This pressure was only to increase over the next few years with the inclusion of African workers. While opening up the Bolton Hall for the use of African workers obviously required the consensus of the Furniture and Garment union executives, the contestations which were to follow in the next few years made it clear that Bolton was the real driving force behind the decision to make the Hall available initially as a meeting space, and later as a base to work out of, for African workers.

¹⁰ An exception to this is the recently published *White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement*. Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich.

11 Davie, Grace (2007) ‘Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33:2, 401 - 420

12 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973*, Human Beings with Souls, 30 (CHECK REFERENCE!)

the strikes were spontaneous, in that they were not planned from a political centre, but that they were not unorganised, is convincing. He points towards a level of underground leadership at the factory-floor level by 'conscientised' workers, and also a degree of coordination by Sactu activists within the workforce.¹³

The strikes generated unprecedented press and public interest in labour issues. Durban's 'White' press, including newspapers such as the *Natal Mercury*, *Daily News* and the *Sunday Tribune* reported on the stoppages extensively, and generally sympathetically.¹⁴ However, this was only in so far as they felt workers to be *legitimately* expressing grievances.¹⁵

It seems fair to say that the press backed the strikers in so far as they were expressing grievances, but not in so far as they were attempting to exercise power.¹⁶

The newspapers' 'sympathetic' treatment of the strikes could also perhaps explain why a survey of white middle-class male opinion in Durban found that the majority felt wages were too low. Most were also in favour of the idea of unions for African workers.

Employer attitudes and responses were generally more ambivalent. While some strikers were fired, most factories affected by the strikes granted small increases of between one and two Rand to workers who had walked out. Increases were also granted to workers in a number of industries as a pre-emptive measure, and some agreements were revised well before they were due to expire. For example, the Natal garment union, perhaps with employers under pressure, achieved an increase of one Rand on all wage rates, including learners. The starting wage moved up to just over eight Rand per week, which made beginner garment workers in Natal better paid than their contemporaries anywhere else in the country. Although the Natal Employers' Association and the Durban Chamber of

13 Hemson, *Capital and Class*, 22

14 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973*, 'Human beings with souls', Institute for Industrial Education in association with Ravan Press, Durban, Johannesburg, 1974. 44. Indeed, some employers apparently put the blame for the spread of the strikes on the press. There were also apparently rumours that pressure was put on newspapers to play down the extent of the strikes.

15 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973*. 44.

16 IIE, *The Durban Strikes 1973*. 44.

Commerce had, prior to the strikes, publicly stated they supported the formation of African unions, a survey of factory owners and management shortly after the strikes led the Institute for Industrial Education to conclude that management at most factories was not convinced of the huge extent of workers' dissatisfaction.¹⁷ "They do not seem to be in touch with the workers' situation, nor with the urgent necessity for immediate and large-scale change ..."¹⁸ Bolton also criticised employers' reactions to the strikes and in particular their claim that 'agitators' were to blame:

The Natal Employers' Association, in its attempts to keep wages down – as it has consistently done at Wage Determination Boards – acts as if it is entirely reasonable and the only unreasonable element is the worker.¹⁹

Therefore, although employers publicly stated support for African unions, on the ground this was generally not followed through. As Sambureni concluded:

Quite clearly, there was a contradiction between the discourse of recognition and the practice of non-recognition and reliance on repression by employers.²⁰

The state's practical responses came in the form of a pledge by the Wage Board to rework their wage determinations, with their first focus on unskilled workers. Government also amended legislation, in the form of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Bill, which was gazetted on July 4th, 1973. The Bill basically extended some of the powers of the Works Committee system and granted, in theory, a very limited right to African workers to strike.

17 A survey of employer opinion a year prior to the strikes found that only 12 percent supported the idea of registered African trade unions, while just less than 60 percent were in favour of Works Committees Survey cited in Eddie Webster, Management's Counter Offensive in South African Labour Bulletin, August 1975, vol. 2 no. 3 29-39. IIE. Employers in the sample generally felt that unions caused unnecessary trouble, and were vulnerable to agitators. However, in late 1972, a few months prior to the strikes, organised Durban business in the form of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and the Natal Employers Association, in meetings and public statements, made it clear that they supported the recognition of African Trade Unions. Post strikes, at a conference in 1974, the Chamber formed a sub-committee to investigate the issue and put forward recommendations. The Minister of Labour responded furiously, and stated that any agreement formed with African unions would be declared null and void. The Chamber back tracked, and soon after this officially endorsed works and liaison committees.

18 IIE, The Durban Strikes 1973. 83

19 Sunday Tribune. 6 May 1973. "It's empty bellies not agitators". Brenda Robinson.

20 Sambureni, 259

Internationally, after several newspaper exposes of the starvation wages paid to South African workers, the House of Commons launched a parliamentary enquiry into wages paid by British companies operating in South Africa. The strikes also re-focussed world attention on the plight of African workers, setting the scene for a tumultuous ILO meeting in June 1973. The debates at that conference and their outcomes will be discussed during the course of this chapter.

In the weeks following the strikes, Bolton's opinion was sought out by academic and more general audiences alike. On the face of it, her comments to newspapers, and her public speeches, did not differ much from other Tucsas unionists' responses, particularly so Grobbelaar. Her public calls for representation for African workers post-strikes were certainly not out of line with Tucsas policy. However, what did set her apart were her forthright attacks on employers. As unfolding events would show, Tucsas seemed unable, or unwilling, to confront and hold to book employers. And despite some of the above seeming similarities, the next few months would see Bolton and the Tucsas executive, and in particular Grobbelaar, on a head-on collision course. I shall now turn to a discussion of Bolton's, Grobbelaar's and other Tucsas officials' immediate public responses to the strikes.

Once the textile workers had negotiated for an increase and were back at work, Bolton assured the readership of the *Natal Mercury* that the workers didn't intend to bring "the people of Durban to their knees":

Mrs Bolton said the strikers had no intention of bringing the people of Durban to their knees. What they wanted to do was draw attention to their plight. "One worker told me: 'We are not striking, we are crying out. They never heard us with words, so we stop work and then they notice us for the first time.'"²¹

In the article, Bolton also reassured the readership by refuting the employer and government line that 'agitators' were behind the strikes.²² She also, however, condemned

21 Sunday Tribune, Brenda Robinson "When the gloating is over let's do something", 11 February 1973

22 This intersects neatly with the findings of a study done into the strikes: *Human Beings with Souls: The 1973 Strikes*. This has, however, been criticised for its exclusive focus on refuting claims that 'agitators' were behind the strikes.

White scabs who pitched in at some of the factories “in a spirit of high adventure” but, she maintained, would never work the long hours for the pitiful wages that workers earned.²³

Bolton was also called on to address university audiences on the state of the trade union movement in March. This was probably as a result of her connections to the university through students working with the Wages Commissions, as well as the new interest in labour issues generated by the strikes. In March she delivered a lecture at the Durban and Pietermaritzburg Campuses of the University of Natal, entitled “The Trade Union Movement in South Africa Today.” While the text of the speech itself has proved elusive, two newspaper reports covering the lectures give us a reasonably detailed picture of Bolton’s talk, which slammed White workers, as well as trade unionists, for opposing the progress of Black workers:

‘White trade unions have selfishly turned the objects and ideals of trade unionism to their exclusive purpose and have ignored the mass of the population,’ she said. Describing the vision of success in South Africa as being ‘as rich, greedy, protected and as White as possible,’ Mrs Bolton said that trade unionism should be a force which knew no racial barriers.²⁴

Bringing up the Durban strikes, she again blamed them on the lack of communication between workers and management. She added that those trade unions who had offered assistance, helped to avert a deepening crisis.²⁵ A month later, Bolton addressed a symposium on “Black Trade Unions” at the Pietermaritzburg campus. Here she stressed the legality of Black unions and appealed to employers to assist, rather than hamper them. She also warned of a looming confrontation between “responsible” unionists and employers who still treated African trade unions as illegal.²⁶ A common theme of her insistence on the *legality*, and hence respectability, of African unions is evident. Bolton was also a guest speaker at the (coloured) Labour Party’s annual conference in April, where she spoke on challenges facing the trade union movement. She was also invited to

23 Sunday Tribune, Brenda Robinson “When the gloating is over let’s do something”, 11 February 1973

24 The Mercury, Mercury Reporter. “End race barriers, unions told” 23 March 1973

25 The Mercury, Mercury Reporter. “Union leader slams white workers” 8 March 1973

26 The Mercury, Mercury reporter. “African unions legal – secretary”. 12 April 1973

present a paper at the NIC's annual conference in July, which dealt with wages and trade unions for African workers.²⁷

Two months after the upheavals of January and February, Labour Minister Marias Viljoen again put the blame for the strikes on "agitators". In a feature article in the *Sunday Tribune* which quoted Bolton at length, she slammed employers for using the word agitator for anyone who wanted better wages, for failing to pay reasonable wages, and for not establishing proper liaison with Black workers. She also criticised government's favoured works committee system, saying they were open to grave abuse and victimisation.

The only "agitators" involved in Durban's industrial unrest is the Black man's empty belly, says Mrs Harriet Bolton ... "Agitators? Employers keep talking about agitators, but who are they? If they mean people who want better wages and conditions of employment, then most workers in South Africa – Black or White – are agitators."²⁸

Bolton blamed the "industrial impasse" on the obduracy of employers and again called for an amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act to include African workers.

Tucsa had long paid lip service to the ideal of African unions registered under the same legislation as White, Indian and Coloured unions, and the strikes provided another platform for this line. Buoyed by a mandate in favour of organising African unions from the overwhelming majority of affiliated unions, the Tucsa executive felt empowered to repeatedly call for government recognition of African trade unions in the months following the strikes. While the labour minister condemned Tucsa as having "leftist" agendas, the executive positioned the organisation as a responsible and experienced trade union organisation who "(could not) allow the labour situation to drift into aimless chaos, and thus Tucsa must pursue its responsibilities to its members, and to South Africa, by continuing to press and work for reform,"²⁹.

27 The Leader, April, The Leader, July

28 The Sunday Tribune, 6 May 1973, "It's empty bellies not agitators", Brenda Robinson.

29 Tucsa, Report of Proceedings, 1973 Annual Conference, 139

Their attitude to the strikes, and suggested way of dealing with African workers, was put in a nutshell in the NEC's report to the 1973 Tucsa Conference, which stipulated that the strikes were caused by a combination of the high inflation rate and fewer jobs available, and the fact that workers did not have another means of expressing their "economic grievances".

They resorted to the final weapon of normal collective bargaining procedures, namely, striking, which was the only course open to them. Tucsa holds the view that with adequate collective bargaining machinery, viz. trade unions for African workers, these strikes would not have occurred, or been very limited.³⁰

As already mentioned, at their 1972 conference Tucsa had requested their affiliates to indicate whether or not they would be willing to assist in organising African unions; however they had not yet gone so far as to call on their member unions to do so. Only Bolton's furniture and textile union, as well as the tin workers union to a lesser degree, offered any assistance to workers during the 1973 upheavals in Durban. In Johannesburg, the garment union also assisted in settling disputes daily during February and March. The generally lax response of Tucsa unions to the strikes was an indication of their non-involvement with African workers at factories where they had membership. That Tucsa's stance was more to do with pragmatic self-interest than a serious commitment to the rights of African workers is reflected in a letter to the Labour Minister, quoted in part below, requesting an interview to discuss the representation of African workers. Their reasoning was that if African workers were granted registration, Tucsa unions would still wield influence on industrial councils, and the position of White and Indian workers would be protected.

It must be mentioned that Tucsa is just as vitally concerned about the maintenance of existing trade union rights for its White, Coloured and Asiatic members, as well as the need for equitable treatment for the Bantu workers. The erosion of those rights caused by the loss of proportionate representativeness, requires early remedial action.³¹

30 Tucsa, Report of Proceedings, 1973 Annual Conference, 136 – 137

31 Tucsa, Report of Proceedings, 1973 Annual Conference, 22

Their consistent call for 'responsible representation' is also reflected in their objections to the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Bill, gazetted on July 4th, 1973. The Bill basically extended some of the powers of the Works Committee system. Under very stringent conditions, the right of African workers to strike was also theoretically recognised. Tucsa's NEC report to conference warned of the "very grave dangers" for South Africa of the new Act.³²

That Tucsa was not a homogenous organisation has already been pointed to in preceding chapters. As of 1973, Tucsa comprised 64 affiliated unions claiming 197 923 members. Of these, the Natal garment union was second in size only to the Western Province garment union, and marginally to the South African Typographical union, a national union which had only 33 more members.³³ The garment and textile unions, generally made up of a large number of low paid and unskilled workers, the majority of them Black, were a more progressive grouping within Tucsa, and an important force due to sheer numbers.³⁴ The leadership of these unions seemed generally to think Tucsa's head officials (Grobelaar, Scheepers, Murray) were out of touch with the needs of their poor and disenfranchised constituency.³⁵ This was generally only spelt out publicly, however, by the number, and nature, of resolutions put forward at Tucsa conferences.³⁶ In terms of responses to the strikes, a few hours were dedicated to a discussion of their impact at a meeting of this more 'progressive' grouping in March.³⁷ The strikes had brought home strongly the weakness of the registered unions, particularly so in the Natal textile industry, where African workers vastly outnumbered newly organised Indian and

32 Tucsa 1973 Conference. Report of Proceedings: 142 - 143

33 Tucsa, Report of Proceedings, 1973 Annual Conference. 21.

34 As shown in the previous chapter, these unions combined to form the Garment Workers' Consultative Committee in 1968. At their March 1973 meeting it was resolved to change the name to the Textile and Garment Consultative Committee to include Daniels' union.

35 HP GWU 2 Cba 1.2 Letter to Harriet Bolton from Anna Scheepers, 2 May 1972.

36 Qualify this: Cape union not necessarily so, Johannesburg union despite having a long history of militancy by this stage were much less so ...

37 The GWUCC - as shown in the previous chapter - consisted of representatives from Clothing and Textile unions in South Africa. At this meeting it was resolved to change the name to the Textile and Garment Consultative Committee because Daniels' union was involved. Judging from the resolutions taken and the discussions, the GWUCC was generally a more progressive organization than Tucsa. This alliance of unions could be seen as a progressive grouping within the Tucsa fold. Indeed, they preempted Tucsa's resolution to help the textile workers ... etc.

Coloured workers. As Daniel's commented: "Although membership [was] on strike most unions seem to have felt that the initiative was in [the] hands of unorganised African workers."³⁸ He went on to state that the strikes had provided a much needed morale boost for the national textile union, and served as "a good lesson to the employers". He added that Durban's African textile workers "were owed a debt of gratitude because of the direct effect the strikes had on everyone else in the country."³⁹ Daniels also stressed the point that the workers "acted in a responsible manner and at no stage could they have been called irresponsible in their actions."⁴⁰ This appeal, perhaps to government, perhaps to the public, seemed to be a consistent theme in registered union officials' responses to the strikes. Bolton left the meeting early and hence did not comment on the issue, but her assistance to the strikers, together with Cheadle and the GWIU executive, was acknowledged and placed on record. It was also at this conference that the GWUCC took the step of inviting the National Union of Clothing Workers to join their ranks as a constituent union. The decision followed a discussion of the new Tucsa policy in favour of organising African workers into parallel unions. It was stressed at this meeting that Tucsa advocated that African workers should "join registered unions in preference to separate African unions."⁴¹

[Women workers. Here I still need to discuss how this section below relates to Bolton's stronger stance in defence of worker rights and interests – in comparison to other union/Tucsa officials] Another issue which was high on Bolton's agenda during this period was the plight of women textile and garment workers. At this stage, African women workers made up at least half of Frame's workforce in the textile factories, while Indian women workers formed 75 percent of the 25 000 garment workers.⁴² While the 'rate for the job' had been secured for Natal garment workers in the 1950s (confirm this

38 AH 1999 B12.2.2 TUACC Dealings with Tucsa Memoranda. Tucsa and the Durban African Trade Unions

39 KG 1 folder 63 Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers' Unions' Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg. 6th March 1973

40 KG 1 folder 63 Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers' Unions' Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg. 6th March 1973

41 KG 1 folder 63 Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers' Unions' Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg. 6th March 1973

42 Insert reference and more accurate stats...

date!), effectively terminating wage discrimination between White and Black workers, there was still some pay disparity between male and female workers, particularly at factories in the border areas. The Natal garment union had fought for some equality in wages in their past negotiations with employers but I would suggest that the women textile workers' involvement in the strikes brought the issue of pay disparities home more forcefully. An arbitration award, effective from 1966, governed wages in the textile industry. Among other things, it dictated that women workers in certain grades earned twenty percent less than the prescribed wages. With a majority female workforce in the garment and textile industries, one would have thought the issue would have been tabled earlier by the Consultative Committee. The first time it was brought up, however, was during this meeting, where Bolton suggested eliminating the different wage rates for men and women doing the same work. She added that during the Natal union's latest negotiations, they had brought the wages of males and females on a par, in the categories of cutters and Grade II employees.⁴³ Johanna Cornelius, who was in the chair, remarked defensively that the Natal union was fortunate to have so few categories in its agreement, as this made it much easier to negotiate the rate for the job. However, she concurred that efforts should be made to stop the practice of paying lower wages to women workers.

In April, Bolton brought up the issue of pay disparities between men and women again. Speaking at a meeting of the Durban branch of the National Council of Women, she was frank in admitting that unions had supported "the delusion of employers that women are inferior workers and secondary earners" but said research indicated that many women were the sole breadwinners. In early 1973, women made up around 75 percent of the total number of workers employed in the clothing industry.⁴⁴

Women are afraid to ask for more money for fear of being replaced ... They are regarded by employers as nuisances, for they ask for time off to see to their children (although the time is unpaid), and months off to have babies.⁴⁵

43 KG 1 folder 63 Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers' Unions' Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg. 6th March 1973

44 The Mercury, Women Reporter (sic) "Men's work, but not pay". 20 (?) April 1973. 75 percent of the workforce translates to 19 500 out of 26 000 workers.

45 The Mercury, Women Reporter (sic) "Men's work, but not pay". 20 (?) April 1973

Building the unions

Bolton's commitment to unorganised workers in Natal was already well established through her work with publicising wage board hearings, her association with student activists in the form of the wages commissions, her vocal denouncement of employers during the strikes earlier in the year, and her support of, and involvement with, the Benefit Fund.⁴⁶ The strikes added important momentum to these projects, and Bolton's assistance, both financial and practical, in forming a number of worker organisations and new unions from the Bolton Hall in 1973 put her even further at odds with the rest of the established registered trade union movement in South Africa. It was not the fact of these new organisations that distressed Tucsa, so much as their employment of white intellectuals and ex-Sactu unionists as officials, their relative independence from registered unions, and a focus from the outset on principles of union democracy and the ideal of power ultimately being in the hands of workers.⁴⁷

Post strikes, with a new sense of their potential to act collectively, workers flocked to the Bolton Hall to sign up with the Benefit Fund. Membership grew from two-thousand before the strikes, to six-thousand in August and ten-thousand by the end of 1973.⁴⁸ Realising the need for co-ordinated and effective administration for the Benefit Fund, as well as other anticipated new worker organisations, Bolton poured her energy into forming Central Administration Services (Cas). According to Cas pamphlets, their objective was to provide clerical and organisational administration to the "smaller and

46 Cheadle and Robert Lambert were at this stage employed full-time by the textile and furniture unions.
47 **It is my intention to re-work this section to include a more in-depth discussion about the politics of the white officials in the new unions, and particularly their relationship with Bolton. See, for instance:** Hemson et al, *White Activists*, Friedman, see also Johann Maree 'Rebels with Causes: White Officials in Black Trade Unions in South Africa, 1973 – 94. A Response to Sakhela Buhlungu. *Current Sociology*. May 2006. Vol 54 (3): 453 – 467. Sage (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) and Sakhela Buhlungu, 'Rebels without a Cause of Their Own? The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973 – 94. *Current Sociology*. May 2006. Vol 54 (3): 427 – 451. Sage (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi). The strikes also reverberated in Cape Town, where Cape Town Wages Commission students, working with ex-Sactu unionists, formed the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau (253) The office was provided by a coloured Labour Party person. In December 1973, Wits Wages Commission students and Sactu members formed the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) "which sought to provide a radical alternative to the UTP" (Hemson et al 250). The Black Allied Workers Union's Drake Koka was banned in March 1973

48 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 43; Hemson et al. *White Activists*, 257.

poorer worker organisations”.⁴⁹ The reasoning was that unions were only as strong as their membership, but also only as effective as the efficiency that their administration allowed.⁵⁰ The Cas constitution very specifically stated that membership was open to any organisation representing workers in Natal, and it was stressed that affiliation to Tucsa was not required.⁵¹ In an overt attempt to “bind the registered unions to Cas’ adopted role”, Reg Vial, who was then the assistant secretary of the GWIU, was appointed secretary of Cas.⁵² Bolton was in the chair, a position she held until her move to England in 1975. Unions including the Garment, Textile, Furniture and Motor Assemblies were involved along with the Benefit Fund, Urban Training Project and Wages Commission. The latter provided support specifically around wage research and through their newspaper *Isisebenzi*.⁵³ (Cas represented a specific attempt to coordinate registered unions assistance to emerging African unions). Support given to unions at the Bolton Hall from various sources is indicated in correspondence between Gordon Young, Nuswel coordinator, and Vial: In July 1973, the salaries of three organisers were paid by Nuswel, one was paid from donations by UND lecturers, two by the GFWBF, three by Cas itself and one by donation from the NIC.⁵⁴ Jeanne Lomberg, herself an ex-garment worker and later union administrator, maintains that Bolton contributed some of her salary to the new organisers’ wages too.⁵⁵ The Institute for Industrial Education was set up soon after Cas. Its stated aim was to provide much needed education to workers:

These workers both need and want the kind of information that can help them to organise constructively and to acquire some say over their conditions of work and their wages ... Our intention is to introduce an educational programme which will fill this gap.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Fosatu 1 AH 1999 B12.2.2.1 A brief history of the TUACC Union’s Relationship with Tucsa, Tucsa Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75... It was essentially established as an administrative hub which would provide services for the Benefit Fund, and for the anticipated new unions. This assistance included providing secretarial services, office space, meeting venues, arranging representation and transport.

⁵⁰ Fosatu 3 AH 1999 D 3 (?) 3 November 1973 (Circular?) signed C.R. Vial

⁵¹ Fosatu 3 AH 1999 D1 Constitution of the Central Administration Services

⁵² Fosatu 1 AH 1999 B12.2.2.1 A brief history. Vial later admitted to drinking with the Special Branch on a number of occasions ...

⁵³ Fosatu 1 AH 1999 B12.2.2.1 A brief history of the ...

⁵⁴ KG 5 A2 675 IV 110 Letter to Gordon Young from C.R Vial 10th July 1973.

⁵⁵ Interview with Jeanne Lomberg with Hannah Keal 24 January 2007

⁵⁶ KG IV 71

The IIE was a coordinated effort between academics and trade unionists. Sociologist Fozia Fischer headed up the institute, while the Bolton Hall group's relationship with the KwaZulu Homeland government was formalised through the appointment of Buthelezi as vice-chancellor, a position which they felt would lend credibility to the organisation in the eyes of workers.⁵⁷ The institute was affiliated to Ruskin College in England.⁵⁸ The Institute soon after started up the South African Labour Bulletin, which is still published today.

At a Benefit Fund meeting in Pietermaritzburg in April, metal workers from two factories called for the establishment of a union. Two months later, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) came into being, while a Durban branch was launched later in the year.⁵⁹ As mentioned before, the Benefit Fund was set up to attract members with tangible benefits such as life and death insurance and to serve as a platform for contact with African workers with the ultimate aim of forming unions. Following the development of Mawu, a report on the role and future of the Benefit Fund, dated May 1973, suggested that a new strategy should be adopted. Trade unions should be formed first, and benefits should follow. The report, of unknown authorship, reflected the bolder atmosphere:

The Durban Strikes have radically altered the political climate in which the African worker found himself before the strikes ... The African workers ... have now realised the value of concerted action. Encouraged by the success of the Durban Strikes and the calls of their political leaders in the 'homelands' African workers for the first time in 13 years appear to be ready and keen to form unregistered Trade Unions. The Metal workers have laid the way and others will ... follow.⁶⁰

Textile workers did follow suit in July of the same year, forming the National Union of Textile Workers, with the close cooperation of the registered union. The Union of Clothing and Allied Workers was formed in late August, and the Furniture and Timber

⁵⁷ This section will also include a further exploration of Buthelezi and Dladla's involvement in unions

⁵⁸ The college would later reject this association after a lobby to sever their connections from Sactu.

⁵⁹ This created tension with the UTP and their linked union the Engineering and Allied Workers Union, which was affiliated to the international IMF. They felt they had been deliberately excluded from extending into Natal. Hemson et al. *White Activists*. 257.

⁶⁰ Fosatu AH1999/C1.13.9.13.4 Report on the State, Role and Future Requirements of the Benefit Fund. May 1973

Workers Union in September.⁶¹ The new unions were shaped under constant surveillance and harassment from the Special Branch, as attested to in numerous interviews with Bolton, as well as meeting minutes. Employers too were hostile, and often worked with the Labour Department and police. Frame factories in particular were ruthless. For instance, African textile workers set up a caretaker committee as the first step towards forming a union in June. Frame management got hold of a list with the names of all the workers who had attended the meeting, and threatened to fire them.⁶²

The importance of Bolton providing space for the new worker organisations at the Bolton Hall should not be underestimated. Intimidation from the security branch was a constant, and Bolton Hall support allowed them some form of legitimacy and protection. Indeed, Friedman suggests that different strategies adopted by the WPWAB and Natal unions were directly linked to the support given to the latter from registered unions.⁶³ In many ways, however, Bolton was leaving her Indian and coloured worker constituency behind her. That they were ultimately not prepared to accept the changes Bolton was pushing for, was amply illustrated in the years to come.

Bolton's public war with Frame started in May 1973 over conditions in one of his factories. Frame management were notorious for their resistance to any form of worker organisation, and often had the backing of police. Frame was a powerful figure; as one of the largest blanket manufacturers in the southern hemisphere, he had the full backing of

61 The GFWBF would ultimately become the Transport and General Workers Union when the organisation came under pressure from government in 1974.

62 Fosatu 6 C1.13.9.13.2.2. Minutes of the Branch Executive Council Meeting of the Above Union (Textile Workers' Industrial Union of SA (Natal Branch) James Bolton Hall, Sunday 17th June, 1973

⁶³ During this period a debate raged on whether to support works committees as a first step towards building unions, or whether to reject them. A policy document released in October 1973 reveals that at the outset, CAS supported the establishment of works committees (Fosatu 3 AH 1999 D 3 (?)) However, events between March and October led to them shelving this initial guiding principle in favour of unions. In the policy document, Cas rejected works committees as "both paternalistic and impractical". But more importantly, the committee acknowledged, was the fact that workers had mostly rejected works' committees, while management generally used the organisations as "a weapon against African trade unions." Fosatu 3 AH 1999 D 3 (?). The WPWAB, on the other hand, favoured works committees. Friedman argues this was first as a necessity, and later a principle. "The area was dominated by 'top heavy' Tucsa unions which were controlled by a few officials and the WPWAB activists were determined that their organisation would be different. They stressed grassroots organisation more than any other group ..." (Friedman, 58) The UTP also favoured this system.

government.⁶⁴ Meeting minutes as well as reports in the *Textile Forum* from June through August show clearly the battles which the registered union had against victimisation of its members and refusals from employers to cooperate with the union, for example by refusing to grant stop orders.⁶⁵ Works Committee members were also not exempt from employer pressure. Frame's threat to fire workers involved with setting up the African textile union, as well as a number of incidences where workers had been unfairly dismissed, prompted the national organiser, Halton Cheadle, to put forward the idea of setting up a victimisation fund at the June meeting of the Branch Executive Committee for the Natal textile union. This was supported. Furthermore, Mr Rampersadh, an organiser at Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mills reported that a policeman in plain clothes had been posted outside the factory gates: "he said that he was placed outside the factory to pick up any pamphlets which would be handed out by Mrs. Bolton."⁶⁶

On 22 May the *Textile Forum* ran an article on the expose of abysmal conditions at Afritex, one of Frame's factories in Mobeni. *Forum* made the point that it was only in Frame factories that the union was banned from holding meetings. Instead, they were forced to "hold their meetings outside the gates, half in the road, sometimes even in the rain."⁶⁷ The union took the issue up with various Frame managers, but to no avail. On May 15th, the union decided to force the issue and hold a report-back meeting in Afritex. Bolton recounted the story at length in a number of my interviews with her:

I said to Halton "now, what we do is we've got to get *into* the factory and tell workers what's happening" we only could see them when they come out on shift you know

⁶⁴ James (Paddy) Carol McDowell.. A History of the South African Textile Industry. The pioneering Phase, 1820-1948. Master of Commerce (Economic History) University of Natal, Durban, 2000.

⁶⁵ Soon after Bolton took over the reins of the beleaguered textile union in January 1973, the union's *Textile Forum* newspaper was re-launched. Published on a roughly monthly basis, the Forum was distributed to factories and aimed to keep union members and potential members up to date with union and factory news. It was also an important space which the union used to lobby for acceptance of the idea of an African union and cooperation between all workers. Over the next few months, it became an important point of contact for the union and members. For the historian, too, it provides an intimate picture of factory battles during 1973 and 1974.

⁶⁶ Fosatu 6 C1.13.6.21 Minutes of a Meeting of the Branch Executive Committee of the Natal Branch of the above union (Textile Workers' Industrial Union – Natal Branch) 26 August 1973.

⁶⁷ Fosatu 4 AH 1999 C1.13.6 3

Phil Phillip Frame didn't allow us into the factories, and we didn't have the Industrial Council on the Textiles [cotton section] so, I said "Halton what we do is, when the workers are dashing in" they had old white guys at the gate there seeing, the workers going in and coming out one at each side, and at like a turnstile I said "now Halton we just go, dressed like the workers are," and there were coloured women co men coloured men some, Africans and so on, I said "but go in with a crush of them but just dress ordinary in our takkies and our ordinary clothes and so on, and we'll we'll get through and we'll get into the factory", so we did this and, Halton got through quite easily because there were you know more, men and although he was quite pinkish and fair ... but they didn't notice him at first but, he noticed me because there weren't as many white women you see and office workers didn't go that way, so he "Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!" he said but we *rushed* and we went, the workers had said "we'll open the back doors and you zip up and come right to the top to our can" they wanted to show us the canteen, their so-called canteen, they said "you know when we're sitting there eating our sandwiches, the birds fly through these" they had little windows like this with no glass in them "the birds fly through, we don't have to put salt and pepper, the birds salt and pepper the food for us unless we're very careful" ... and they were they were right we went up there and the birds were flitting back and forth through there, um and I mean as for the wash basins and the loos there weren't any doors on the loos and there were (HK: Terrible ja) ahh! Some of the wash basins didn't have I mean he'd never attended to those things, factories inspectors obviously which could were supposed by law to go ev into *every* factory had obviously never been in there, out of respect for Mr. important Mr. Frame, and in about fifteen minutes of us speaking to workers and our shop stewards who we had collective we'd told them where to be and we'd talked to them in their places, we aimed it for you know the time when they could leave their machines like tea-times and and lunch-times, and we were in the factory and they couldn't find us then *up* came Mr. Frame's uh right-hand man from the office his man managing director, and said "what are you doing here? I said "we're speaking to our workers", "you're not supposed to be in here!" we said "yeah well we is you know it's their lunch-time", "will you please go out!" and we said "when we're finished we'll go out" we were very polite, I mean he couldn't forcibly removed us he couldn't lay hands on us, so then we said to the workers "ok" and he said "and *where* are you going now?" I said "I am going to the other factory to do the same thing" (laughs) *whew!* He was so cross but we weren't we were going home ... uh oh God we got such a, rocket from them about, you know going to their factory with no uh permission and blah blah blah, you know wending our way in when it wasn't allowed anyway we ignored all that, *but* I was on the phone soon as I got back to Gale Street phoning the Labour Department the divisional inspector and saying "why have your inspectors never gone into those canteens there were *hundreds* of workers there and the place is a bloody disgrace", you know ...⁶⁸

Bolton also contacted *the Mercury*, who ran a story two days after the union's visit. The story, entitled "'Probe filthy plant' plea" quoted Bolton at length. Journalists from the

68 Interview with Harriet Bolton, Hannah Keal, 10 August 2006

paper were barred entry to the factory. In the article, Bolton called for action from the Labour Department, and described the conditions in detail:

Cobwebs of dirt hang in festoons from the ceiling. It looks like something out of the Middle Ages, instead of a factory belonging to one of the richest men in South Africa. There is filth everywhere.⁶⁹

The Mercury followed their initial story up with another article which stated that there would be a formal investigation by the Labour Department into conditions at the factory.⁷⁰ That the Natal textile union was committed to taking a public stand for workers was now obvious. In the months to follow, this struggle would intensify.

The 1973 International Labour Organisation (ILO) conference was another public platform where fissures between Bolton's role as a member of the Tucsa executive, and her work with Natal's emerging unions, became more obvious. She was officially there because of her position on the Tucsa executive, but was focussed on making a distinction between Tucsa and the work that the Bolton Hall unions were doing in her appeal for aid from international unions.⁷¹ In a later interview, Bolton remembered discussions with ICFTU's Andrew Kailembo about Tucsa and the direction they were taking, and in particular the influence of Arthur Grobbelaar:

... that is what I said when we went to Geneva. I said to Kailembo, "you could not reason with this man, his brain has calcified on this matter, he has gone as far as he could go with change, he is a desk man, to me he would never negotiate in the rough and tumble of the factory ..."⁷²

The Tucsa observers to the conference in Geneva were met with hostility. The strikes earlier in the year had focussed organised world labour's eyes on South Africa, and Tucsa delegates found themselves even more unwelcome at the conference than in previous years. Grobbelaar later commented in a report-back to a Tucsa conference that Bolton, Scheepers, Mvubelo and himself had "experienced ... a torrid time in pleading the case

⁶⁹ 'Probe Filthy Plant' Plea. Mercury Reporter. May 17, 1973.

⁷⁰ Check on Frame factory. Mercury Reporter. May 18, 1973.

⁷¹ Bolton was overseas to attend a meeting of the ITGLWF in June. She also had a Leadership Grant through Tucsa to spend some time in the USA after the ILO conference.

⁷² Harriet Bolton, interview with David Hemson, 16 July 1993. Transcribed by Peace Cele.

for democratic trade unionism in South Africa”⁷³ Stringent sanctions against South Africa were agreed to at a meeting called specifically to determine the ILO’s policy towards Apartheid. Tucsa was firmly against sanctions, believing they would spell economic collapse for South Africa. To add insult to their injury a strong lobby from Sactu members prevented Lucy Mvubelo from putting her case before delegates. Tucsa’s line at the conference was that breaking off contacts in South Africa would not assist change, and advocated instead “a strengthening of these contacts with those forces seeking change which would be effective and responsible.”⁷⁴ In this appeal, they only officially secured the assistance of the United States’ worker delegate. Sactu at this stage claimed the status of the only legitimate organisation representing South African workers, and hence the control of funding from international labour. As Southall summarises, aid from western trade unions was a continually contentious issue.

(Sactu) therefore initially contested the legitimacy of the emergent democratic trade unions whilst, none the less, western trade union aid went ahead and in so doing breached the boycott of contacts with South Africa for long advocated by the liberation movements. Nor were matters rendered any less difficult by the fact that as the democratic trade union movement developed, it gave form to competing tendencies which meant that external assistance was almost always potentially divisive, especially when the unions themselves adopted rather different attitudes towards the issue of international labour aid.⁷⁵

Much as Tucsa’s delegation was met with hostility, it was arguably also at this conference that the first cracks in Sactu’s monopoly began to show.⁷⁶ On her return from the conference, Bolton suggested to the *Natal Mercury* that:

delegates from the rest of Africa, a lot from Britain, Europe and even some Americans have never believed before that there was anyone in South Africa who was, or even could, fight for labour in this country. “Now they want to know more.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Tucsa annual conference Report of Proceedings August 1973 Durban, 152

⁷⁴ Tucsa annual conference Report of Proceedings August 1973 Durban, 150

⁷⁵ Southall Roger. *Imperialism or solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions*. 1995, Cape Town: UCT Press (Pty) Ltd. 28.

⁷⁶ Sactu was denied UN status as members of a Special Committee “established to coordinate world worker action against South Africa.” (Tucsa annual conference Report of Proceedings August 1973 Durban, 151)

⁷⁷ ILO warning for S.A: Your time is running out. *The Natal Mercury*, Mercury reporter, 28 June 1973.

As pointed to above, Bolton's role at the conference was somewhat more ambiguous than the other Tucsa delegates. Through her work as the South African representative on the ITGLWF, she already had several contacts with international unions and used these to put forward the case for assisting the handful of new African unions being formed out of the Bolton Hall.⁷⁸ Her requests were not always successful, as evidenced by her correspondence with the International Metalworkers' Federation. The IMF, after consulting with their affiliates in South Africa as well as with the Urban Training Project, declined to give funds to the newly formed Mawu. Their reasoning was that the registered Metal unions should form parallel unions, because the IMF was "aiming at the highest possible degree of unity, instead of having a variety of small and weak organisations."⁷⁹ Later in the year, however, Bolton secured funding and support for the Bolton Hall unions from the ICFTU, a relationship which was to last over the next decade. In stark contrast to Grobbelaar's assertion that Sactu's 'propaganda' campaigns "against South Africa" were turning world opinion, Bolton hinted in a later newspaper interview that the credibility of Sactu was being questioned by sections of world labour.⁸⁰

"Even the leader himself admitted that he was out of touch with conditions," said Mrs Bolton. "They are a group of tired old men, and heartbreakingly homesick,"⁸¹

1973 Tucsa conference

In many ways, the 1973 Tucsa conference in August marked an important opportunity for the council to become a representative worker organisation. Significantly, in articles

⁷⁸ The ITGLWF was called on to assist African textile workers by the Natal students' Wages Commission in 1972. They also provided modest financial assistance during textile strikes in early 1974. However, Southall points to their relationship with the registered garment and textile unions in South Africa as complicating their assistance to the emerging unions during the course of the decade. "support by the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) for the emergent unions was tempered by its concern not to clash with its numerically weighty TUCSA affiliates, notably Lucy Mvubelo's NUCW which from 1975 claimed a membership in excess of 20 000 workers" Southall, Roger. Imperialism or solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions. 1995, Cape Town: UCT Press (Pty) Ltd. 168.

⁷⁹ This could also be seen as an attempt by Bolton at damage control. As already shown, it was more than likely that the UTP still felt slighted at Natal's decision to form Mawu without consulting them first ... Fosatu 5 AC1.13.6.19. Letter from Werner Thonnessen, Assistant General Secretary of the International Metalworkers Federation to Harriet Bolton, August 30 1973.

⁸⁰ Tucsa annual conference Report of Proceedings August 1973 Durban. 151.

⁸¹ ILO warning for S.A: Your time is running out. The Natal Mercury, Mercury reporter, 28 June 1973.

following the conference, Durban newspapers suggested that nothing short of the council's reputation was on the line. According to the *Natal Mercury*, Tucsas follow-through on a number of resolutions taken at the conference would ultimately determine how the organisation was viewed.⁸² Of particular note was Tucsas strongly worded pledge of "war" on Phillip Frame. However, the warning signs that Tucsas was not committed to the changes promised at the conference were already there. Tucsas conferences in the twenty years prior to 1973 had been the scene of fierce debates between more progressive trade unionists, and those invested in retaining the status quo. Some of these arguments have already been detailed. However, I would argue that this rift had never been more evident than it was between the 'old guard' and the Bolton Hall group at the 1973 conference.

A week before Tucsas annual conference was due to get underway in Durban, five-hundred textile workers were fired from the Frame group's Wentex Mills in Jacobs. Dissatisfaction with wages and the inability to get a hearing from Frame's management, stemming from similar grievances in June, finally boiled over into a walk-out on the 8th August. According to *Isisebenzi*, workers had demanded increases of between five and seven Rand, and received less than a Rand increase.⁸³ The workers were sent home and invited to reapply for their positions the following week. The majority were re-employed, but between sixty and eighty of them were not granted a position.⁸⁴ Among those refused were nine out of the thirteen members of the factory's Works Committee, who felt they had been victimised. Five of the workers were also charged with contravening the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act during the strike. This led Bolton to comment to *Isisebenzi*: "If the employers demonstrate this total lack of respect for their Works Committees, then what respect are workers expected to hold?"⁸⁵ A letter from the union to Frame management following the strike stated that the issue of substantial wage increases had been raised a number of times, long before the strike, and the union had

⁸² The *Natal Mercury*, August 20, 1973. "Reputation of Tucsas at Stake" Corine Jessup.

⁸³ *Isisebenzi* (1973 – not dated otherwise) KG 7 A2 675 116. *Isisebenzi* reported that, contrary to newspaper reports, workers were getting an average of twelve to fifteen Rand, and not the twenty to thirty Rand that Frame management claimed in the papers.

⁸⁴ Figures given by newspapers, the *Daily News* and the *Mercury*, differ from *Isisebenzi*. What is clear is that the majority of the Works Committee members were not re-employed.

⁸⁵ *Isisebenzi* (1973 – not dated otherwise) KG 7 A2 675 116

also brought these proposals to the notice of Frame at the National Industrial Council meeting at the end of June. The letter summed up that if management had tried to engage and negotiate a settlement, the situation would have been avoided.⁸⁶ Frame refused to back down, and in response the textile union voted to set up a relief fund to help support those who were fired, as well as provide legal assistance to the workers facing charges. The GWCC had pledged to support the textile workers during a meeting prior to the Tucsa conference. The memory of the strike wave from the earlier part of the year was still fresh, and coupled with the Natal textile union's firm stand; the scene was set for a Tucsa conference where the issue of organising African workers could no longer be swept under the carpet.

Indeed, it was at this conference that Tucsa finally committed itself to organising African workers into unions. However, they stopped short at inviting affiliation: this step was only taken a year later. Tucsa's reputation was in tatters internationally, and new initiatives such as the Urban Training Project and the work being done out of the Bolton Hall reflected an organisation which was increasingly out of touch with the changing labour situation in the country. Tucsa had lost what little respectability they had in Bolton's eyes at the preceding year's conference, when instead of taking action to organise African workers, they got a mandate from their member unions and then sent a letter to government, calling on them to alter legislation.⁸⁷ As usual, they were met with rebuttal. Therefore, the pledge to organise African workers in 1973 was a vital resolution for the organisation to adopt, but it was met with only a brief debate at the conference. This could be read as indicative of the general membership's apathetic attitude as well as unwillingness on the part of Tucsa leadership to seriously engage with the issue. While the resolution was passed with a unanimous vote, the lack of enthusiasm for the majority of Tucsa unions to seriously heed the call to organise African workers was amply illustrated in the years to come. Bolton moved and spoke on the resolution, which tasked individual unions with organising African workers. As she put it in her argument in favour of it:

⁸⁶ Tucsa 7 AH1426 AB 4.2.104 file 3?

⁸⁷ Interview with Harriet Bolton by David Hemson. 1993.

another chance was being given to re-establish the trade union movement, to organise the work-force of South Africa, and a great deal of consultation would have to take place between all the people involved in this concept ... if the programme was going to be successful,⁸⁸

She also called for the registered unions to organise African unions on an industry-wide basis. This was an important and perhaps potentially provocative point for her to make, for many of the Tucsas affiliated unions at the time represented splintered sections of industry, and as a result held little sway.⁸⁹

The proposed resolution calling for support of the Natal textile workers meanwhile became *the* talking point of the conference. Newspapers dubbed it Tucsas's "war on Frame".⁹⁰ Broadly, the proposed resolution pledged Tucsas's full support to the textile workers "in their just struggle for a decent and humane standard of living," and unions were encouraged to generously support the relief fund, which had been set up by the union earlier in the week.⁹¹ Recognition of the TWIU at Frame factories was demanded, and the labour minister was called on to order an urgent Wage Board investigation in to the Cotton Section of the Textile Industry. A negotiated national agreement for all cotton workers was requested, and the resolution pledged Tucsas to make representations to the Labour Minister to pressure Frame into reinstating the recently dismissed workers. The proposed resolution was met with hostility from Tucsas leadership, and was put on hold until the last day of the conference. The Tucsas executive had been in touch with the Labour Department and was more inclined to believe their claims than those of the union. Bolton recalled this in an interview 20 years after the conference:

⁸⁸ Tucsas 1973 Conference. Report of Proceedings:

⁸⁹ The resolution itself read: "Conference recommends that individual affiliates of the Council take steps to examine practical ways to establish parallel Union organisations for African workers. Conference suggests to affiliates that they proceed individually to set up such organisations as agreed to by the affiliates themselves, so that at some future date recognition will be given by Government to such de facto working examples of practical and responsible labour organisation for African workers" Tucsas Conference Report of Proceedings 1973, published 1974 ... Tucsas, Jo'burg

⁹⁰ Financial Mail "An important battle" August 24 1973, the Natal Mercury, the Daily News etc.

⁹¹ Tucsas report of proceedings, Annual Conference 1973, 447 – 448. "Conference considers the attitude of Management in the Frame Group towards the workers, both organised and unorganised, to be completely indefensible ... and Conference is gravely perturbed over the unjustifiable dismissals of 10 of the members of the Works Committee in the weaving, warping and raising sections ... and Vice-Chairman of the Natal Branch of the Textile Workers' Industrial Union..."

we had an emergency meeting, in a special room, there was me, there was Steve Scheepers, and there was Arthur, and he said, “look, everything we have heard, has only been from (one) trade union, and I insist on getting the other point of view,” do you remember that? When he said, “the Department of Labour has given me information?” (DH: I do) He said “everything that I have heard from this place up to now, and I want to present the following facts,” I have forgotten what those facts were because it was like all trumped up. “I think it was going to be a disaster if Tucsa had supported this,” he said, “I want to say that in no way we’ll not be dragged into these kind of things.”⁹²

The Labour Department had apparently told Grobbelaar that the textile union was in a state of upheaval, and the unrest was politically motivated. The Divisional Inspector of Labour also maintained that Works Committee members had not been victimised.⁹³ In an interview with the *Financial Mail* after the conference, Grobbelaar revealed that the resolution had been put on hold as he spent the week during the conference verifying the TWIU’s complaints with the Labour Department and the Frame Group. This in part accounted for what the newspaper termed the “relative indifference” displayed during the early part of the conference to the union’s fight with Frame.⁹⁴

It turns out that Tucsa executives were being deliberately reticent while general secretary Arthur Grobbelaar carefully checked out the TWU’s complaints. As Grobbelaar put it this week: “Tucsa veterans recognised there could be difficulties. If we were going into a war, we didn’t want to go in blindfolded or find our feet in quicksand.”⁹⁵

Ultimately however, Grobbelaar concluded to the newspaper that Tucsa deemed “war was justified”. The resolution was eventually passed on the final day of the conference. In his speech in support of the motion, Grobbelaar said that he was committed to the resolution, which he described as a test “in which the Trade Union movement must show that it could and would take care of employer practices such as were being used by the Frame Group.”⁹⁶ Indeed, Tucsa’s pledge to assist the TWIU marked a potentially

⁹² Interview with Harriet Bolton. David Hemson. 1993

⁹³ Fosatu A short history ... AH1999 B12.2.2

⁹⁴ Financial Mail “An important battle” August 24 1973

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Tucsa report of proceedings, Annual Conference 1973, 450.

important turning point for the organisation, despite it being soured by the executive's initial fierce resistance to the proposal. This is recounted in Fosatu's records of the relationship between Tucsa and the emergent unions:

A tremendous tussle ensued on the Tucsa resolutions committee which ended with the executive backing down completely and resulting in Tucsa voting to support the strikers and donating over R6,000 towards relief pay and legal aid. This was regarded as a major victory in that the "right wing" had been discredited as "sell outs" and forced to accept an outspoken, militant line.⁹⁷

Events which were to unfold over the next few months, however, revealed that Tucsa was not prepared to put its neck on the line in pursuance of this "militant line".

A speech made by David Davis, then employed as an administration officer by the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund, on the second day of the Conference further distanced Tucsa leadership from the Bolton Hall unions. Davis was at the conference as an observer from the Natal textile union. The official Tucsa report of proceedings does not include a transcript of his speech, as he was ruled "out of order", but Fosatu records summarised it thus: "supporting Sactu, ridiculing Tucsa and accusing delegates of being stupid and almost illiterate"⁹⁸. He spoke in response to a resolution proposed by the National Executive Committee, which condemned the "rapid spread of International Communism on the one hand, and the unbridled growth of Multi-national Capitalism on the other hand".⁹⁹ In supporting the resolution, Grobbelaar mentioned the growing hostility to Tucsa of the international labour movement, which he described as a "broadly based Communist attempt to isolate South Africa from the rest of the world".¹⁰⁰ His words can be read as a response to his and other Tucsa delegates' humiliating experience at the recent ILO meeting. Davis' speech in support of Sactu must have stung, as it was largely due to their efforts that the Tucsa delegates were shunned. Unsurprisingly, his

⁹⁷ Fosatu A short history ... AH1999 B12.2.2

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Tucsa report of proceedings, Annual Conference 1973, 411.

¹⁰⁰ Tucsa 1973 Conference. Report of Proceedings: 412

words caused uproar at the conference. Norman Daniels rose on two different occasions to vehemently distance Davis from his union.¹⁰¹

After this suspicions of the Durban unions involved with Africans increased dramatically, and the extreme conservatism of the TUCSA executive was re-enforced. The progressive elements had the ground cut away from under their feet.¹⁰²

Bolton remembered Davis' speech with some humour. She chuckled when she recalled Tucsas delegates' outrage, but then quickly moved to defend the role that she said Tucsas trade unionists saw themselves, and as an extension, herself, playing:

David Davis particularly, was also, one of those quiet but endlessly defiant people I (laughs) ... He um, he insisted on speaking at, the conference ... and he insisted on addressing them because, um of their, he didn't like their policies you know and oh! it caused a big furore (HK: Really) ja David Hemson all he was there too he also did but David Davis was the one who insisted on speaking to the delegates and he wasn't a delegate! And they were furious with him (HK: laughs) about you know their constitution and there were many people in Tucsas ... who didn't agree with all of Tucsas', principles but they came in because we had to have a united movement I mean I didn't agree with all of them but, you know ... you know there were a lot of people who had that sort of feeling you know we've got to, hold it together, uh we can't, withdraw we can't leave we've got to keep it together but we've got to speak out against the things we don't agree with ...¹⁰³

This tied in with a more general attitude of hostility to the young trade unionists working out of the Bolton Hall, which was soon to be overtly extended to Bolton herself. Still on the same issue, in a later interview Bolton recalled the same conference, and the attitude towards the Bolton Hall 'upstarts', which seemed to be shared among most of Tucsas' affiliates:

there was a terrific fight ... some people received them well and others "no, no you know you're young you don't know what you're talking about" ... and then of course I think secretly they were quite thrilled when they were banned ... ja I think I think they were quite pleased ...¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Tucsas report of proceedings, Annual Conference 1973

¹⁰² Fosatu AH 1999 B12.2.2.1

¹⁰³ Interview with Harriet Bolton 4 – 2005 – First Draft. Hannah Keal

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Harriet Bolton, 5, December 2005. Hannah Keal

The Bolton Hall group was a thorn in Tucsa's side. They were in a sense practising what Tucsa preached in public, but the organisation found it difficult to embrace the Bolton Hall unions, particularly so because of the involvement of the younger trade unionists. Bolton commented in an interview that Tucsa did not want to lose the government contacts and communication channels that they had established, as well as the comfortable relationship with some heads of industry, not least among them Phillip Frame.¹⁰⁵ The direction that the Bolton Hall unions were taking would have created a head-on collision course, which they did not want to risk. The leadership, as well as general membership, of the Furniture and Garment unions, on the other hand, had different reasons for their growing unease at the new developments out of Bolton Hall. Bolton described the predicament she found herself in:

... the workers were afraid of I'll tell you why, that my Indian workers particularly and some of the white workers, but specially the Indian workers, were very afraid of getting too close to African organisations, um that's why I didn't push unionism to them as much, even when they used our hall my chairman called me he was a Muslim, called me and said "I think you're putting us in danger", so I said "no we've always let the hall to anybody who wants to use it", and also he said, he liked these students but he thought we shouldn't have them you know in our offices and so on, um and I said to him "why?" well then the reasons came out because the Special Branch was visiting them at home, (HK: Oh shjoe) ja and harassing them and their wives you know talk knocking on the door and saying "tell your husband I am coming tonight to see him" and blah, you know and so they had and I mean they weren't all as brave as some people can be you know some Indian people were very brave, um but by and large most of them were ordinary workers and they weren't they didn't want to be harassed at home, and they and these were *government people* warning them you know talking to them and they were worried so it was I had to tread very very carefully,¹⁰⁶

The next decade would see attempts by Tucsa unions, to which the majority of Indian workers belonged, to establish African unions on a parallel basis; unions which were largely rejected by African workers. These unions, including the parallel to the Natal garment union, battled to survive and by the late 1980s had mostly either fallen into ruin or had been absorbed into a more progressive union grouping. Freund asserts that this

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Harriet Bolton by David Hemson, 1993

¹⁰⁶ Interview 10, Harriet Bolton, Hannah Keal. 22 August 2006. First Draft

tendency of Indian dominated unions to avoid involvement with the new, more politicised African unions, was deeply entrenched and had a long history. Writing in the early 1990s, he observed then that few unions found it possible to win over and hold Indian members:

Indian workers often have deeply internalised self-images of diligence and acceptance of authority, and this applies particularly to women; the historic fears of being undercut by African workers also run deep. In particular, pro-African National Congress politics, have not been acceptable to Indian workers who continue to understand the unions, most of the time and outside crisis situations, in terms of practical benefits rather than as a cultural component of a new hegemonic approach to South African society.¹⁰⁷

Tucsa and Frame: August 1973 – January 1974

Ironically, it was Tucsa's declaration of "war" on Frame that would ultimately lead to the complete deterioration of Bolton's relationship with the organisation. Over the months following the conference, it became increasingly clear that Tucsa leaders were not prepared to follow through on promises made at the conference. Bolton aired her dissatisfaction with their handling of the situation publicly, which obviously complicated her relationship with her colleagues on the council's executive. The situation culminated in the banning of four white union officials working out of the Bolton Hall at the end of January 1974. This move by the state was to have serious implications for Bolton, Tucsa and Bolton Hall unions, both registered and unregistered. I shall now turn to a detailed exploration of the battles between Tucsa, Frame and Bolton from August 1973 to January 1974.

True to their word, four days after the Tucsa conference wrapped up amid cries of war on Frame, Tucsa sent a letter to Labour Minister Marais Viljoen, detailing their "serious concern" with the Frame Group's lack of regard for labour legislation. In particular, they pointed out that Frame was disregarding the Bantu Labour Regulation Amendment Act of 1973, as well as ignoring the Industrial Conciliation Act, which protected workers from

¹⁰⁷ Bill Freund. *Insiders and Outsiders, the Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910 – 1990*. 90.

victimisation. As had become customary, the Labour Minister's reply to Tucsa was brusque and unhelpful. He said that the issue was between the unions and Frame, and the Department could not intervene. It was, however, pointed out that Cotton Manufacturers had requested a wage order for the Cotton Industry, which was receiving attention.

Soon after this, newspapers made much of what they termed a "secret meeting" between Frame and Tucsa's top brass, Murray, Scheepers and Grobbelaar. The *Daily News* reported that the men met behind closed doors, and added that "Tucsa is trying hard to keep its contacts with Mr Frame secret for the present". Adding to the intrigue, Scheepers was quoted thus: "This is very sensitive and we don't want any Press reports." Following the reports, Tucsa sent out a circular in which they defended their actions, and explained their luncheon meeting with Frame was in keeping with the Tucsa president's verbal undertaking at the recent conference to approach Frame at the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Meeting. It was at this lunch that they arranged a further meeting for September 7th, in Durban. With no records of the meeting save the press reports, it is difficult to come to any conclusions about its dubious, or otherwise, nature. What is apparent, however, is that this first meeting set the tone for the protracted 'battle' between Tucsa and Frame. From the outset, suspicion was cast on the relationship between Tucsa and Frame.

Grobbelaar and Scheepers met with the TWIU (Natal) on the day before the September meeting scheduled at Frame's offices in Durban. Here they agreed that the role of Tucsa representatives would be as 'peace makers'. A press statement in the *Natal Mercury* quoted Grobbelaar calling for "better understanding on both sides".¹⁰⁸ The next day, Grobbelaar, Scheepers, Bolton, Norman Daniels, Halton Cheadle, David Hemson and Johanna Cornelius (from the Johannesburg branch of the textile union) met Frame and his management at his Durban offices. Bolton's memory of this meeting is worth recounting at length. Her comments suggest that she saw Tucsa's involvement as an unwelcome intervention, although whether this is more of a retrospective attitude, formed due to events which followed, it is not clear. Her tone was heavy with sarcasm as she recalled

¹⁰⁸ The Natal Mercury, 7/09/1973. "Frame and Unions Meet"

how Tucsa officials' battled to negotiate with Frame. Despite the serious issue at hand, she still found amusement in the limited success that Tucsa officials had with Frame:

... they came to negotiate between *us* and Phillip Frame and um he was it was quite interesting because he sat behind his huge desk Mr Frame in his *fabulous* office, and he put us all in these quite small chairs like, school children in front of him including, the Tucsa secretary and um I was very impressed with his tactics ... he just sat them there I was very interested in what he did laughed quietly to myself, and we sat there as well now Arthur and them were going to tell us amateurs how you do things "you don't fight with employers you *negotiate* with them" ... so, um sat there and got nowhere with Frame eventually you know he, was very tactful and polite but we didn't get anywhere, and um they said to me "now you keep quiet we will do the negotiate with him", and I mean it was all just put off you know "oh we we will do this when and we will see you then and" you know nothing happened in in fact, then it broke up, uh Arthur did get a bit impatient but the meeting broke up then it was too late Mr Frame said "now, you know he's given us a lot of time, and uh he now has to go, and uh he's got other things to do, meetings board meetings to go to and so on" and so then we all got up and um there were *thousands* of reporters outside and they came to ... all of us and said "would you instead of, facing this horde of uh reporters, would you we'll show you out of the back-door" I said "I have *never* gone out of a back-door in my life! You can if you want" well they did, I just went out and I said to the press "we, have been told not to make a statement at the moment", "where are you going?" I said "we're going back to our office now" we had been there since *five* o'clock in the morning the meeting was ten o'clock we'd been speaking to the workers early in the morning outside as they came in on shift and as the others came off shift, and because you know there were like three shifts a day, and um we told them ... why we were there and why Tucsa were there ...¹⁰⁹

In an earlier interview, Bolton remembered that the meeting started off with Frame furious at her for making statements to the American press about his treatment of textile workers. It is reasonable to assume that Bolton made these comments during her earlier visit to the United States on a leadership grant from Tucsa.

Mr Frame sat at this huge I mean very good tactician you know he's gotta have it hey, he sat at this huge desk and he brought these little chairs for us you know that we sat down, like children at school, listening to their, teacher you know, and I mean the first of all he pulled this, was a press cutting out of his drawer and said "I have, I'm an important man! Um, and the government has respect for me and I go to America, on important business and I've got to see this!" and he threw this

¹⁰⁹

Interview 10 August 2006. Harriet Bolton. Hannah Keal

on the, uh, desk you see. And said “I need an apology!” So I said “well, why don’t you do something about it?” you know, Arthur and the other man were saying “shh, shh, shh, shh” so I said “no, I am not going shush shush shush, I mean, it’s a fact of life.” I said “I am entitled to say, give my opinion, you can give yours if you like.” Anyway they, Arthur and them said they they will speak you know, we had a little recess and they said to me, “you don’t say anything we’ll speak.” Then he (Frame) tried to say, the other people that weren’t, you know, part of the registered union had to leave and, I said “no ways,” you know, and I must say then, Arthur also said “no we’ve all come together and we, we’d like to speak to you” but we got nowhere um after about an hour they could see we weren’t getting anywhere so um, the press were all gathered ... ‘cos they’d heard all this you see, and um, uh, the whole world press was outside and, ... one of his senior people came and said to me you know “... if you and the other trade union people,” ... “would like to go out of the side door, you know or a back door you needn’t face all these, people.” I said “I’ve never gone out of a back door in my life!”¹¹⁰

Similar themes of (male) Tucsia officials trying to silence her, and smooth over relations with Frame, have come up in other interviews. The way Bolton described herself as boldly outspoken in the face of Frame’s authority is also a consistent thread through Bolton’s life story. In our interviews, I have gained a powerful impression of her living her life in constant resistance, and sometime rebellion, against authority. This theme is repeated in a number of her stories. Examples range from her fierce battle with the Group Areas Board to get permission for construction of the new Bolton Hall, her numerous run-ins with the police and security branch during the 1970s, as well as her living and working illegally in Britain for more than ten years. This above excerpt is also interesting because of the sense it gives us of the intense tensions and power dynamics at the meeting, usually conspicuously absent from dispassionate meeting minutes. Bolton’s assertion that she wouldn’t use the back door is also significant. She obviously felt she had the moral high ground in meeting the press head-on instead of skulking around the back. In addition, both of her accounts above are part of a bigger story about the events of that day, which is worth a brief digression. When she and Cheadle returned to the Bolton Hall, they found the place mobbed by reporters. She then, as she put it, “having never been out of a back door in my life”, showed Cheadle out the back way of the Bolton Hall,

¹¹⁰ Interview with Harriet Bolton 3, 11 August 2005. First Draft. Hannah Keal.

which involved a climb down a fire escape and a scramble over a wall, in order to get some much needed lunch at a nearby hotel:

... and we ordered, a lunch or a breakfast or whatever, coffee and, sandwiches and things and um, Halton says to me “have you got any money?” so I said “no! Don’t you?” so he said “no!” and I said “what are we going to do?” so I called the waiter I said “do you know me, waiter?” ‘cos you know the waiters had a very big union [HK: Oh ok] and Louis (Nelson) ... he was their secretary a good friend of mine. Um, he said “yes, I know you. You know our secretary and our union ... you’ve been to our meetings, we know you well.” So I said “well can you go and ask your manager, tell him we’ve got no money (laughs) we’ve just come from a factory, and um, and we, we’ll come back and pay later?” “Only a pleasure,” he said “we will guarantee you,” said the waiter (laughs) and they went along and then we got back and we paid them later (laughs) ... that was getting out of a back door, oh ja! We had some nice adventures, (laughs) in our day¹¹¹

Bolton’s recollection of the waiter’s familiarity with her and her work with the unions taps into a larger story of her closeness to various Indian (communities) in Durban, but also attests to the relatively tight-knit community of Indian dominated trade unions, most of which were Tucsa affiliates. (for example, the municipal and sugar refinery workers).

Once the trade unionists had been escorted out the back door, a press statement, signed by Grobbelaar and Selwyn Lurie, was released to newspapers. It was remarkable in its vagueness, stating only that they had had “open and frank” discussion about recent events in the textile industry, and that they had agreed on “an acceptable modus operandi ... for future discussions between the Frame Group and the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union of S.A”.¹¹² But, most importantly: “The Union sincerely regrets some reports of unfounded and adverse criticism of the Frame Group which have appeared in the press from time to time.”¹¹³ The statement then went on to say that in order to create “a climate of cooperation for proper conciliation”, no further comments would be made to the press. Newspapers were also requested to respect this position.¹¹⁴ Such a statement, inevitably, blew up in Tucsa’s face, with Grobbelaar’s statement at the recent conference that Tucsa

¹¹¹ Interview with Harriet Bolton 3, 11 August 2005. First Draft. Hannah Keal.

¹¹² AH 1426 AB 4.2.104 file 2 (?)

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

was “entering into battle” with Frame coming back to haunt him. Journalists and editors’ hackles were raised by this perceived stab at their freedom to report, and the insinuation that their reporting was somehow to blame for the poor relations in the textile industry. “The battlefield has been the boardroom and the Press the only known casualty. No wonder some trade unionists are uneasy, even alarmed” commented a *Daily News* leader entitled “Some War”.¹¹⁵ Secondly, and more importantly, newspapers took up the issue of the textile union “regretting” some of their criticisms of the Frame group’s horrendous conditions of employment. It was now that reporters recounted Grobbelaar’s declaration of war on Frame just a few weeks earlier, and contrasted this with the very half-hearted joint statement from Tucsa and Frame. While Bolton did not mention it in the interviews I have had with her, newspaper reports suggest that she tendered her resignation to the Natal textile union after the disappointing meeting with Frame. This made headline news in the *Daily News*, under the banner: “Frame row: Mrs. Bolton threatens to resign”:

Several unionists quickly denounced the outcome of the talks as a ‘sell-out’ and referred to the promises made at Tucsa’s annual conference in Durban last month when delegates demanded firm action to end the alleged victimisation of Frame’s textile workers. Mrs Harriet Bolton, who accused the Tucsa secretariat at the time, of being ‘too casual’ said today she would offer her resignation at a meeting of the Textile Workers’ executive.¹¹⁶

In the same article, Grobbelaar dismissed the criticisms from Bolton as being “a lot of malarkey”. He claimed everyone at the meeting agreed to the press statement. Bolton denied this, however. Grobbelaar, meanwhile, blamed reporters for being hysterical and losing sight of the “real objectives”. On the same day the *Mercury* quoted two other unionists, from the Typographical and Engineering union, slamming Tucsa’s actions. Bolton meanwhile claimed she had been gagged: “Mr Frame and Tucsa have told me I may not speak to the media”.¹¹⁷ The *Rand Daily Mail* ran similar stories, and in their leader questioned the “sudden reversal” of the union on the Frame issue:

¹¹⁵ Daily News leader “Some War” 10th September 1973

¹¹⁶ Daily News “Frame row: Mrs. Bolton threatens to resign” Daily News reporter.

¹¹⁷ The Natal Mercury “Unions slam Frame ‘deal’”. 10th September 1973. Mercury reporter.

If a wrong image of the Frame Group's labour practices has been given then let's have the facts. It is too important an issue for the parties concerned to get away with their refusal to say more.¹¹⁸

The *Mercury* leaders similarly denounced Tucsa's actions, and called for an explanation of "their present awkward posture", which they said would be needed urgently, in order to avoid "trouble".¹¹⁹ The next day the *Mercury* sought the opinion of Barney Dladla. He said what the statement amounted to was "an attempt to whitewash the Frame Group". Dladla also made the point that Tucsa only wanted to establish African trade unions so that they could control them. He called for the formation of exclusively African unions, which wouldn't be dominated by White officials.¹²⁰ On the same page, came the assurance under the headline "Bolton will not resign".

In an interview with the *Mercury*, she said: "I certainly felt like doing so on Friday after our meeting with Mr. Frame. "But Mrs. Bolton does not give up so easily," said a colleague, "and she certainly would not allow any action of hers to jeopardise the future of her workers."¹²¹

Therefore despite the statement making it clear that Tucsa would not issue any further comment, Bolton was quoted in various newspapers following the meeting. Her offer of resignation in itself spoke volumes, and her pointed refusal to comment because others had instructed her not to, was also an obvious voicing of her disapproval.¹²² The *Financial Mail*, meanwhile, had a more positive take on the outcome of the meeting. They emphasised the importance of the news that Frame would support a national Industrial Council for the cotton section of the textile industry, which would give protection to one-hundred thousand workers. "Up to now Frame has used its powerful position to block the formation of such a council."¹²³

¹¹⁸ The Rand Daily Mail leader "Needed: The Facts" 10th September 1973.

¹¹⁹ The Natal Mercury leader "A lot to explain" 11th September 1973.

¹²⁰ The Natal Mercury. "Bolton will not resign." 11th September 1973.

¹²¹ The Natal Mercury. "Bolton will not resign." 11th September 1973.

¹²² Hemson also made comments to *the Daily Express*, but was not as obviously critical as Bolton. He denied Tucsa had backed down in the dispute with Frame, and said that they were pursuing all avenues possible, within the confines of industrial legislation. The Sunday Express. "Union man denies Tucsa backdown" Express reporter. 9th September 1973.

¹²³ Financial Mail "Frame and the unions Armistice" September 14, 1973

Grobbelaar was quite obviously incensed by Bolton's refusal to toe the Tucsas line and shut up about Frame. On September 26th, the Tucsas Officers' Committee released a Progress Report on the Natal textile issue. This was necessary because, as they put it, "a considerable degree of misunderstanding appears to have arisen amongst the Council's affiliates (and others)".¹²⁴ They blamed the "misunderstanding" on press reports following the council's meeting with Frame which, they said, were "compounded of a mixture of conjecture, supposition, and fantasy".¹²⁵ The report went on to point a finger at Bolton, although it didn't name her, as one of the people at the meeting who went on to make comments, although she apparently supported the decisions at the meeting. This, the circular maintained, was "particularly distressing". The Progress Report also detailed the agreements that had been reached with Frame during the meeting. They included a pledge from Frame that the group would not oppose unionisation of workers, that they would support efforts to set up an Industrial Council for the Cotton section of the textile industry, that union officials would be given access to senior Frame management if they wished to make complaints or raise issues, and that a general improvement in wages would be considered. Why these - admittedly rather broad - outcomes were not made public to the press in the first place is not entirely clear.

A few days after this, a meeting of the National Industrial Council for the textile industry was held. The General Secretary for the TWIU (SA), Norman Daniels, maintained that "a very cordial and friendly atmosphere prevailed."¹²⁶ At this meeting it was agreed that Cheadle could consult with Lurie, from the Frame Group. During informal discussions with Frame it was also agreed that close liaison should be established between the union and management, and that the union would be allowed to address workers at the factory. This promise was to ring hollow, however, until well into the 1980s. A NUTW booklet, detailing the union's struggle for recognition with the Frame Group, is testimony to this: "today 11 years later these same Frame workers still fight a bitter struggle for the recognition of their union..."¹²⁷ Despite Daniels' positive sounding feedback, no

¹²⁴ Tucsas 7 AH1426 AB 4.2.104 file 4 (?)

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Tucsas 7 AH1426 AB 4.2.104 file 4 (?)

¹²⁷ UkuQaqqa Ifindo Frame – the struggle for recognition. 1984. Fosatu AH 1999 1312.2.1.

significantly new ground seemed to have been covered at the meeting. The Tucsa Progress Report, however, rounded off with the statement: “Tucsa has done everything in its power to meet with the requirements of the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union.”¹²⁸

Floating amidst a sea of official correspondence between the TWIU and Tucsa, is a foolscap page of handwritten notes, apparently Grobbelaar’s. It appears that this page formed his rough draft for the first Progress Report that Tucsa issued on the 26th September, in response to the outcry over the Frame issue. Although it details much that the progress report covers, it is interesting because it makes more direct reference to Bolton’s activities. Also interesting is how Grobbelaar expresses his dissatisfaction with the resolution taken at the conference. Although written in keywords, he clearly states his reservations “by self and others” over the resolution and his uneasiness about the issue, especially as it became “the issue” of Conference. Under the subheading “The Press Statement” Grobbelaar lists the reaction of the *Natal Mercury*, Bolton’s statements, “Tucsa muzzling Mrs. Bolton”, statement of resignation and “further denials etc.”¹²⁹

Meanwhile, the five workers who had been charged under the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act during the August strike at Wentex, were found not guilty of inciting the strike at the Durban Magistrate’s Court in November. The court heard that despite voicing their complaints about low wages to management a number of times, the workers got no reply.¹³⁰ They were asking for R21 a week, or for a combination of the two five percent increases for 1973 and 1974. From a later report to the Natal area division of Tucsa, Cheadle reported that “Under cross examination it became clear that Management had been unreasonable and that workers had attempted several times to negotiate a settlement.”¹³¹ However, during the case five state witnesses claimed they had been forced to make statements against the workers who had been charged. The state promptly charged them with perjury. Cheadle reported that the union decided to provide support

¹²⁸ Tucsa 7 AH1426 AB 4.2.104 file 4 (?)

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Rand Daily Mail “Textile strikers got ‘no reply’ 19th October 1973

¹³¹ Tucsa 7 AH1426 AB 4.2.104 file 4

for their legal defence. Money from the textile relief fund was also being used to support the sacked Frame workers who had not yet managed to find work.

In early January, the new wage rates for cotton workers in the textile industry were introduced. Although the union had requested that they be consulted on the wages, they were excluded from the process which was finally decided by the Labour minister and employers, dominated by Phillip Frame. This brought into being a wage scale for around one-hundred thousand workers, who previously had had no wage regulating measure. Some newspapers pointed out that the rates set down were an improvement on some of the wages set through the national industrial council in other sections of the textile industry. The new minimum wage prescribed for Border Area factories was ten Rand a week, rising to twelve after eighteen months, and for women eight Rand a week rising to just under ten Rand a week. The TWIU (South Africa) made known their unhappiness about their exclusion from the negotiations, and said the scales “could have been improved considerably.” However, they added they were grateful that over 100 000 workers would now have some degree of protection.¹³² What wasn’t mentioned was the fact that the new wage scales would make little impact on long-term, as well as skilled, urban workers. It was exactly this problem which led to further unrest at Frame’s factories in January 1974. *Isisebenzi* also pointed out that since the wage order had been calculated, the cost of living had increased by 12 percent:

Some workers said that now they were getting a better wage they had lost their bonuses. They didn’t like the way management was implementing this new wage order. So they went on strike to try and get a just wage for their labour.¹³³

Bolton made the point to the *Mercury* that the new wage rates were also met with resistance because of the absolute lack of consultation with the cotton workers; the people who they were intended for.

¹³² Tucs report of proceedings, 1974 conference, pg 67 letter dated 12th October 1973

¹³³ KG 7 A2 675 iv 116. *Isisebenzi*. 1974

The Natal union knew well in advance about worker dissatisfaction and impending industrial action in Frame's factories in January 1974. Post strikes, in a letter to the local Labour Department, Harriet outlined the extent to which union officials went to try and engage management and stop the situation escalating. This included union officials contacting Frame directly to discuss worker grievances. However, Frame flatly refused to entertain Cheadle and Hemson, saying there was no way he could "break" the cotton order by increasing wages so soon after it was implemented.¹³⁴ What followed was to have serious consequences for the union officials, the union itself and finally the direction that Bolton's life took.

On Friday 18th January, 1974, workers downed tools at Pinetex Mills. Union officials met with workers, who told them Frame had instructed them to leave the factory grounds and come back on Monday morning, when he would speak to them. One of the union organisers had also been arrested, allegedly for not having his papers with him. On Monday morning, Bolton, Cheadle and two union organisers waited in vain with workers for Frame's arrival. Meanwhile, workers at Dano Textiles in Pinetown and Hammarsdale had joined the strike. By Monday afternoon, not one of the Frame Group's factories was left untouched by the strike. At Nortex, police cordoned off around 100 workers, and arrested over 200 picketers outside Seltex. Frame still flatly refused to speak to the union. At an emergency meeting held on Monday night, the union decided to call on Barney Dladla for assistance. He addressed around 5 000 workers at the Clermont Stadium on Tuesday morning, and then led them in a march to the Frametex factory gate, where he demanded that management negotiate with workers.¹³⁵ Some union representatives and Dladla were then allowed a hearing, and they negotiated between forty and eighty cents increases for long service workers. A raise which Dladla termed "peanuts". The workers were incensed, and the union directed them back to Clermont Stadium "in order to get them away from outside the factory and to prevent any disturbance."¹³⁶ Here, under heavy police and Security Branch surveillance, Dladla and Cheadle addressed the

¹³⁴ Tucsa AB 4.2.104 file 4 Letter to Mr. R. Jackson, Divisional Inspector, Department of Labour, 28th January 1974.

¹³⁵ Hemson et al. *White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement*. 2007. 269

¹³⁶ Tucsa AB 4.2.104 file 4 Letter to Mr. R. Jackson, Divisional Inspector, Department of Labour, 28th January 1974.

workers again, and convinced them to go back to work. Their reasoning was that not all workers had joined the union, and many were not in solidarity with the strikers. The strike was therefore in danger of being undercut as workers trickled back under pressure from police. This would make negotiation with management impossible. Secondly, “a return to work if we all returned together would not constitute a defeat but merely a draw”. The *Isisebenzi* report of the strike concluded that workers went back to factories the next day with the attitude that the strike was “one battle in the struggle for a living wage.”¹³⁷ Ironically, it was this speech which apparently decided government officials to impose banning orders on Cheadle.¹³⁸ Around 250 workers were arrested during the strikes. In her letter to the Labour Department, meanwhile, Bolton said the union felt very strongly that wage grievances should be settled by the labour department and the trade union “and that the firms should be weaned of the inclination to call in armed police, on wage negotiations, to do the work of the Labour Department and the Trade Union.”¹³⁹ Meanwhile, messages of solidarity from associated International unions, as well as from local organisations, notably the Natal Indian Congress, flowed in to the Bolton Hall. Bolton clearly remembered the pickets, and heading up the march with Dladla and Cheadle:

... the, head of the Special Branch he was there, and they took they picked up some of what they thought were the strike, leaders you know and they had them in the, Black Maria you know taking them off and these workers were singing, you know freedom songs as they were borne off ag they were each fined fifty Rand which the union, paid for them and they were released for being disorderly um, attending the meeting outside the factory was being disorderly and uh, uh, Halton was, no David was taking pictures Halton and David and they, luckily he had taken one reel and he handed me the reel he must still have those pictures somewhere, of the special branch and arresting the people and shoving them into these vans and whatnot and he gave me the one reel and I stuck it down my dress and I think, threw it in the boot of my car but then the next minute, when he was taking pictures they grabbed his camera ... but he had some of them already and uh, that uh there was a lovely picture somewhere which I think David must still have ... then that man said to ... “Are you” that, policeman said to me “are you satisfied now Mrs Bolton?” ‘cos they were taking these workers off in the, police

¹³⁷ Fosatu AH1999 1312.2.1 Textile Forum March 1974 and KG 7 A2 675 iv 116
Isisebenzi, February 1974

¹³⁸ Rand Daily Mail, Did Speech Trigger Unionist’s Banning?

¹³⁹ *Ibid*

van so I know I punched him on the arm David took that picture and saying “are *you* satisfied? You’ve done this!” bashed him on the on the arm ... and, that’s the picture that David must have somewhere if it came out (laughs) (HK: Of you, you punching a policeman? laughs) Ja banging him on the and saying “are you satisfied?” God, he was lieutenant something or other ...¹⁴⁰

Bolton, meanwhile, was criticised by Daniels’ national textile union for her handling of the strike.¹⁴¹

A few days later, Bolton wrote to Grobbelaar, requesting that more money be released from the textile workers’ relief fund to reimburse the Garment union, which had fronted the cash for the bail of those arrested and detained during the strikes. Grobbelaar provided the money, but added that the officers’ committee expressed reservations about doing this:

... since the purpose for which it is required does not fall strictly within the frame-work for which the Trust Fund was established ... Consequently, making this amount presently available in the most recent dispute is hardly justified.¹⁴²

Bolton’s furious reply to Grobbelaar is worth quoting at length. She requested that he convey her message to those members of the Officers Committee who had expressed reservations about the use of the money:

Here in Durban workers are facing every traditional obstruction, that workers have ever faced in their endeavours to make a stand as organised Trade Unionists. The workers concerned are Indian, Coloured and African workers but in their human aspirations and hopes, they are no different to white workers and history recalls the fight white workers had, to secure Trade Union rights for themselves in the 1920-1924 era.

The Constitution of TUCSA refers to all workers irrespective of race, colour or creed when laying down the principles on which TUCSA is founded. Surely all the theories to which we all pay lip service at Conference, and to the Trade Union Movement throughout the World, should be able to stand translation to reality.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Harriet Bolton by Hannah Keal, 11 August 2005.

¹⁴¹ AH 1999 C1.13.6.21

¹⁴² TucsA 8 A.B.4.2.104 (file 4) letter from Arthur Grobbelaar to Harriet Bolton. 25th January 1974.

In Durban in many industries where Unions are being founded, and particularly in the Textile Industry, a number of dedicated Trade Unionists (employed by Unions who pay affiliation fees to TUCSA), are organising unorganised workers into Trade Unions, and what is seen is partly the logical follow-up of workers being organised to deal with situations which they find intolerable (the conditions and the wages in their factories), but which they have to suffer when standing alone and can deal with only when organised. This is a classic Trade Union situation, and if the workers cannot turn to the Trade Union Movement as led to expect, where can they turn?

I know the answer to that, and I am sure the Officers Committee do too. I think it is fairly obvious that the first home for workers is the Trade Union Movement, with support and help from those already there. It is obvious to me that the task of the Trade Union Movement is to give help and advice, and not to stand on the side lines and to be technical or split hairs about which workers should be helped. The workers here are in the struggle together, and all are affected by the events taking place. They are not separate because the law is written down to separate them.

Bolton then extended an invitation to members of the Officers' Committee to come to Durban and meet the union and workers involved in the textile struggle. She concluded:

In my opinion, the workers here are engaged in the struggle of their lives, and they are making history for the Trade Union Movement. We thank the Officers for releasing the money ... I think it can be accepted that being in goal overnight is no joke, especially for Mothers of babies and small children. The workers are making their sacrifices in the name of the Trade Union Movement, and I feel moved to help wherever possible, and I hope the whole of TUCSA feels the same way.¹⁴³

At the end of January 1974, Cheadle, Hemson, Davis and Cunningham-Brown, or the 'Bolton Hall Four', as the press dubbed them, were banned and placed under house arrest. It is generally accepted that the unrest in the textile industry in early 1974 was a major precipitating factor to the bans.¹⁴⁴ In the House of Assembly a week later, Viljoen defended the state's action, saying the four were "trying to disturb industrial peace and order". He added "Whites" had been behind the strikes in the textile industry, "and that

¹⁴³ TucsA 8 AB4.2.104 (file 4) letter addressed to J.A. Grobbelaar, from Harriet Bolton, 28th January 1974.

¹⁴⁴ Hemson et al. White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement.2007.

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they were trying to use the workers to break down industrial peace.”¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the tensions between Bolton and various members of the Tucsa executive, as well as her colleagues in the Garment and Textile Consultative Committee, escalated into full scale war. Bolton was furious with Tucsa’s response to the bannings, and the press lapped up her threats to withdraw the Garment union from Tucsa, dubbing her Durban’s “rebel trade unionist.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Rand Daily Mail, February 7, 1974. “Viljoen defends bannings”

¹⁴⁶ Daily News, “Mrs Bolton foresees Natal’s own Tucsa”. Daily News Reporter. 12 February 1974.