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**Workers and ‘Subalterns’:  
A comparative study of labour in Africa, Asia and Latin  
America**

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## **Introduction**

by Colin M. Lewis

What were the defining experiences of ‘labour’ in Africa, Asia and Latin America? How did workers regard themselves and how were they perceived by others? What was their place in the economic and political universe within which they operated? In addressing these, and related questions, this Working Paper attempts to provide a ‘view from below’. Besides pointing to the distinctness of national experiences, it also seeks to identify particular debates in the literature on Colombia, Japan and South Africa that may resonate in the history of labour in other countries, thereby moving beyond the ‘path dependence’ that characterise much of the national historiographies. Taken together, the collection is a contribution to labour history, working class history and ‘popular’ history. There is also a great deal about the political consequences of activity by organised labour.

In part, this collection of papers derives from the impact of Subaltern Studies on approaches to the history of labour. While the contributions may not be located within ‘subalternism’, to differing degrees they reflect responses in the literature to that paradigm. At the very least, there is an effort to tell a story ‘from below’, to reassess action and to reconstruct motives using elements of the subalternism approach. Reflecting the origin of the term and its usage by Antonio Gramsci –subordination on the basis of class, caste, gender, race language and culture, subalternism has long influenced the study of colonial India<sup>1</sup>. Recently, however, aspects of the approach have influenced analyses of ‘struggle’, ‘resistance’, ‘apartness’ and ‘cultural distinctness’ in writing on other areas<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, R. Guha & G. Spivak (eds.) *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York 1988); R. Guha *Dominance without Hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass. 1997); H. Schwartz *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and postcolonial India* (Pittsburgh 1997); R. Chandavarkar *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: class, resistance and the state in India, c.1850-1950* (Cambridge 1998).

<sup>2</sup> From examples of the diffusion –and relevance– of the approach, see D. Chakravarty *Rethinking Working Class History* (Princeton 1989); D. Washbrook & R. O’Hanlon ‘After

Eduardo Posada Carbó focuses on an under-studied aspect of the history of labour, namely, the electoral engagement of organised workers in Colombia.<sup>3</sup> He shows how attempts to establish a labour-based political party in the 1920s (and earlier) were frustrated by the loyalties of labour to the traditional parties that had dominated Colombia politics since the 1830s –Liberals and Conservatives. Popular and labour participation in electoral politics dates from the Independence period at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This participation has either been largely neglected by historians of Colombian political and labour history or been depicted as largely co-optive. Most accounts present workers as ballot fodder, mobilised through traditional patronage networks or by force. Given the nature of Colombian constitutional and electoral history (elections were held regularly and, after mid-century, the franchise was not subject to property and literacy tests), Posada demonstrates that artisans and labourers used their electoral weight to press for public and social rights, including the extension of the franchise, increased educational provision and an extension of civic freedoms (including freedom of conscience and association). In short, available opportunities were used to create more ‘space’ within the system. Nevertheless, whether these changes were driven by worker and artisan ‘victories’ or resulted from co-optive responses by the dominant oligarchy, popular sector adhesion to

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Orientalism: culture, criticism and politics in the Third World’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XXXIV (1992); P. Gyan ‘Can the “Subaltern” Ride?: a reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XXXIV (1992) pp.173-84; R. Chandavarkar ‘The Making of the Working Class: E.P. Thompson and Indian History’ *History Workshop Journal* 43 (1997) pp.177-96; T. Raychaudri ‘Dominance, Hegemony and the Colonial State: the Indian and African experiences’ in S. Marks & D. Engels (eds.) *Contesting Colonial Hegemony* (London 1994); E. van Young ‘The New Cultural History Comes to Old Mexico’ *Hispanic American Historical Review* LXXIX 2 (1999) pp. 211-47; F.E. Mallon ‘The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: perspectives from Latin American History’ *American Historical Review* XCIX 5 (1999) pp.1491-1515.

<sup>3</sup> For revisionist interpretations of the electoral history of Latin America see A. Annino (ed.) *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX: de la formación del espacio político nacional* (Buenos Aires 1995); E. Posada Carbó (ed.) *Elections before Democracy: the history of elections in Europe and Latin America* (London 1996); H. Sabato (ed.) *Ciudadanía política y formación de las naciones: perspectivas históricas de América Latina* (Mexico 1999). Part of the new literature is indebted to aspects of subalternism, particularly when attempting to re-interpret motives and action.

the traditional parties consequently inhibited the emergence of class-based politics. This said, a ‘reading’ of the documents suggests that organising labour was able to develop something approaching an autonomous project.

Peter Alexander examines a pivotal event in South African history (and in the history of [white] organised labour), the so-called Rand Revolt of 1922. The repression of an eleven-week strike by white gold and coal miners marked the end of a period of working-class militancy. The immediate consequence was greater management control of the labour process in the mines (management considered that its ability to control had been eroded during the First World War) and the passage of the Industrial Conciliation Act which established the framework within which labour relations would be conducted for the remainder of the century. In the medium-term, the Revolt contributed to the collapse of the Smuts administration. Hitherto, the activities of gold miners have attracted most attention in the literature, which has tended to portray white worker militancy as a strike against the advancement of blacks. Alexander extends the scope of the discussion by including activities in the coal mines and by placing the event within the context of domestic and international readjustments flowing from developments in the sector during the First World War and post-War slump. He argues that the militancy of white miners arose from the fact that they functioned as supervisors (of black labourers) but had the status of workers. The ‘subaltern class’ of the mining economy, squeezed between the power of mine owners and the potential of black workers, the white miner was neither villain nor hero of history. Rather he was a victim. This approach is indebted to Thompson’s notion of ‘class experience’, as distinct from class consciousness<sup>4</sup>. Alexander argues persuasively for a revival of the Thompsonian perspective, a set of ideas that have had a huge impact on South Asian history.

Janet Hunter considers the gender division of labour in the Japanese textile industry during the inter-war years. Women constituted the majority of workers

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<sup>4</sup> E.P Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (London various editions).

for the whole of the period, though there were considerable variations in the proportion of men and women in different branches of textiles –women predominated in reeling, spinning and weaving, both men and women had a large representation in garment-making while men constituted a sizeable majority in most branches of finishing. Nevertheless, over time there were changes in the composition of the workforce: the representation of young (particularly young female) ‘temporary’ workers increased; within the different branches of production the range of tasks performed by women narrowed; and men increased their representation in the more mechanised branches of production, enhancing their dominance of tasks associated with skill acquisition, technical expertise and status. Hence, there was a tendency towards greater homogeneity in the labour force across the sector as the gender division of labour became more polarised. These processes owed their origin to the long tradition of temporary employment of young female workers in textiles in Japan, to stereo-typical attitudes to women workers (docile and nimble) and ideologies relating to gender roles in society, to mechanisation and to larger macroeconomic changes (development of heavy industries and mobilisation). In exploring the changing relationship between men and women, and in attitudes to the gender specificity of different tasks, to a degree Hunter echoes issues of ‘status’ and ‘race’ (as well as ‘consciousness’) developed by Alexander.

Several common themes link the papers. These include the rural origin of most groups studied, elements of unity and conflict (not least in the evolution of conflict), connexions with community and larger polity, ideology and aspirations. All the papers emphasised that for most groups of workers –even Japanese textile workers in the 1930s– village and rural community rather than industrialisation and urbanization were shared experiences. If white immigrant coal and gold miners in South Africa differed in this respect, the majority of workers on the Rand –blacks (the silent observers in Alexander’s paper) were of recent rural origin. Virtually all groups were closer to the farm than the factory. What are the implications for the study of labour history (in terms of class identity) if, due to

successive waves of migration to the mining camp or textile mill compound, the workforce was overwhelmingly of recent rural origin and maintained close links with family and community in the countryside?

However, as Alexander, Posada and Hunter show, community support (where every community was located) was of critical importance to ‘struggle’ and ‘collective action’. But was identity forged in the factory, in the community or in shared political action? Posada considers how political participation generated ‘space’ and ‘opportunity’ for labour. In Colombia, ideology (in this case nationalism) was a vehicle for mobility, unifying groups from different backgrounds –a cement conspicuously absent in the South African mining sector. But did nationalism or party political loyalty –suggestions of crypto populism [?] –discourage the formation of class-based organisations? Nationalism (and militarism) was a potent force in Japan during the inter-war period and, as Hunter shows, reinforced concepts of gender and family, limiting ‘appropriate’ work for women outside the home. This raises the issues of whether or not the study of the impact of nationalism, engendered by struggles for independence in Africa and Asia in the twentieth century, upon working class formation and labour history been exhausted? Will renewed interest in cultural history and the diffusions of ‘subaltern studies’ rekindle an interest in the subject? Does Latin America, where the popular sectors played an important role in the struggles for independence but were largely marginalised in the process of ‘national consolidation’ in the mid-nineteenth century, offer any insights?

The impact of technology and organisational change in the workplace features in the papers on South Africa and Japan and is alluded to elsewhere. Were these phenomena more abrupt and disruptive in late-industrialising economies where worker attitudes to community and work still owed more to the countryside than the town? There is violence aplenty in these papers, but the picture that emerges is of division. Alexander’s white miners could not conceive of an alliance with African ‘boys’. In inter-war Japan, paternalism and a shift towards large-scale, capital-intensive patterns of production increased divergence between

the working experience of men and women. And, less so in the Japanese case, labour markets were fragmented. The tyranny of geography and distance were compounded by ethnic divisions and regional affiliations. (Indeed, even in Japan, the recruitment process was influenced by geography and distance.) Skilled male workers in Japanese textiles, white miners on the Rand and Posada's artisans all exhibited characteristics of a labour aristocracy rather than vanguard, though as much 'shaped' by events as 'shapers' of their world. Clearly, they did not know Marx and, despite 'violence' and 'struggle' neglected their historic role. Or, as Thompson might have it, were unknowingly struggling to achieve consciousness.

All contributions point to new initiatives in the study of workers. They also demonstrate the problems –and the rewards– of attempting to write 'history from below'. Data is scarce and voices heard but dimly. What –and where– are the sources and methods that permit a re-construction of the history of labour, the history of work experience and worker views of the universe within which struggled and survived (or did not)?

## **Popular and Labour Participation in Colombian Electoral Politics, 1836-1930**

*by Eduardo Posada-Carbó*

'The electoral heritage has weighed heavily on the labour movement throughout its existence', complained the Colombian union leader Ignacio Torres Giraldo in his memoirs<sup>5</sup>. At the forefront of attempts to organize the labour movement and a class-based labour party, Torres Giraldo had good reasons for complaint - , he had experienced frustration. Although Torres Giraldo and his colleagues had some successes in rallying labourers when negotiating with employers, their effort to establish the Socialist Revolutionary Party (*Partido Socialista Revolucionario* [PRS]) during the 1920s were far from promising. As elections approached, labourers manifest their loyalties to the traditional parties - the Liberals and Conservatives - that had dominated Colombian politics since the mid-nineteenth-century.

Torres Giraldo's own account illustrates that labourers's political behaviour in the 1920s was not without precedent. On the contrary, popular and labour participation in Colombian electoral politics dates back to the 1830s, when partisan loyalties were originally being forged. Yet the historiography, with a few exceptions, has failed to appreciate the significance of electoral politics or the role of the popular sectors in elections<sup>6</sup>. Although the presence of workers at polling stations could not be ignored, given the early expansion of the suffrage, it has often been assumed that they were there just as part of a captive electorate, usually

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<sup>5</sup> Ignacio Torres Giraldo, *Los inconformes. Historia de la rebeldía de las masas en Colombia* (Bogotá 1973), vol. 3, p.177.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David Bushnell's essays: 'El sufragio en la Argentina y en Colombia hasta 1853' *Revista del Instituto de Historia del Derecho* (19), 1968; 'Las elecciones presidenciales, 1863-1883' *Revista de la Universidad Nacional de Medellín* 18 Nov. 1984; Malcolm Deas 'Algunas notas sobre el caciquismo en Colombia' *Revista de Occidente*, October 1973; Patricia Pinzón de Lewin *Elecciones y ejército en Colombia* (Bogotá 1994); and C, Bergquist 'The political economy of the Colombian elections of 1897' *Hispanic American Historical Review* LVI 1 (1976).

mobilized through traditional patronage or crude force. Modern scholarship on the history of labour has therefore tended to concentrate on issues of labour organizations, social protest and industrial action<sup>7</sup>. Very few efforts have been made to understand the conditions under which popular sectors were involved in electioneering. David Sowell's recent book, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement* is indeed unique in the ways it systematically looks at the role of artisans in the politics of Bogotá between 1832 and 1919<sup>8</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the nature of popular and labour participation in Colombian electoral politics from a long historical perspective. It tries to show how the competitive features of Colombian elections to some extent conditioned the early incorporation of popular sectors in partisan politics<sup>9</sup>. As popular sectors continued to be politically involved - either through recurrent civil conflict or electioneering, they established long lasting links with both the Liberal and Conservative parties. In the first part of this paper, I examine how this process went hand in hand with the adoption of a relatively wide suffrage from the first decades of the nineteenth-century, although the history of suffrage in Colombia is not a linear, progressive one. In the second part, I discuss what might have motivated the popular sectors to participate in elections. Whatever these reasons were, when the new class-based parties like the PRS emerged in the second decade of this century, they had to compete for an electorate whose sympathies had been

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<sup>7</sup> For a text in English on the Colombian labour movement, see Miguel Urrutia *The Development of the Colombian Labor Movement* (New Haven 1969). On the early twentieth century, see Mauricio Archila's essays; for example, 'Barranquilla y el río: una historia social de sus trabajadores' *Controversia*, 142 (Bogotá 1987). Among the recent monographs, see, for example, Mario Aguilera Pea *Insurgencia urbana en Bogotá* (Bogotá 1997), and Alberto Mayor *Cabezas duras y dedos inteligentes* (Bogotá 1996).

<sup>8</sup> David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement. Artisans and Politics in Bogotá 1832-1919* (Philadelphia 1992).

<sup>9</sup> In this paper, the expression 'popular sectors' is employed in a broad fashion to include artisans (mostly tailors, carpenters and the like who were to be found in urban areas in the nineteenth-century) and workers in the industrial sector, which grew in importance in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. Nevertheless, given the early expansion of the suffrage, 'popular' participation in elections also involved other actors such as the peasantry and the urban poor in general. The focus of the paper, however, is on 'organized' labour - artisans during the nineteenth-century and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the early union movement.

long cultivated by the traditional parties.

## **Elections and the Electorate**

At the outset, it must be emphasised that Colombia exhibits a long and intense electoral history, which stands out in Latin America –comparable only to that of Chile<sup>10</sup>. Between 1836 and 1930, the country went to the polls 27 times to elect presidents; and probably a similar number of occasions (often on different dates) to elect senators, representatives, provincial deputies, and local city councillors. There were periods of frantic electioneering. From 1863-1885 the constitutional term for presidents was only two years: the country therefore experienced an almost permanent state of electoral flux. Despite civil wars, a considerable degree of violence at election time, and major constitutional change (from the centralized system set up in 1832 to an extreme version of federalism after 1863, and back again to centralism from 1886-1930), only once during the period 1836-1930 was a government overthrown by force. The fate of rulers was mostly decided by the ballot box. The country never experienced lengthy periods of rule by military strongmen (caudillos), a form of dictatorial regime that came to symbolize nineteenth-century Latin America: for example Rosas in Argentina (1829-1853), Gabriel García Moreno in Ecuador, or Porfirio Díaz in Mexico (1876-1910). In Colombia, elections remained central to the political process throughout the period under study.

Moreover, for the most part, these were not elections with predictable results. On the contrary, elections evolved into highly contested events involving two parties, which had taken an identifiable shape by the

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<sup>10</sup> An English text on the history of Colombia that pays considerable attention to election is D. Bushnell *The Making of Modern Colombia. A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley 1993). Two recent works offer some fresh perspectives on the history of elections in Latin America: A. Annino (ed.), *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX* (Mexico 1995); and E. Posada-Carbó (ed.) *Elections before democracy. The history of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (London 1996).

mid-nineteenth-century<sup>11</sup>. As such, they differed substantially from those carried out by Rosas in Argentina or Díaz in Mexico, state-managed charades to legitimise their respective regimes. Colombia elections even differed from those in Chile, where - in spite of the development of electoral competition, the president and the minister of the interior openly granted ‘official support’ (*venia del ejecutivo*) for the ‘right’ candidates<sup>12</sup>.

Popular sectors - mostly artisans from urban areas, already figured prominently in the first Colombian competitive elections that took place in 1836-37, after the disintegration of Gran Colombia (Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador). As was the practice elsewhere, suffrage was restricted by income and, in theory, literacy qualifications. The application of the latter, however, as in many Latin American countries, was postponed - until 1850 in the case of Colombia. The income restriction was sufficiently vague to allow the enfranchisement of all those who were not economically dependent as ‘servants’ or day-labourers (*jornaleros*), basically rural workers. This meant that carpenters, tailors, shoemakers and other craftsmen in similar positions, as well as public office-holders, teachers and small traders, were all in possession of the vote. They made their voice heard in 1836, when artisans were accused of having been manipulated by General José María Obando, the candidate backed by President Francisco de Paula Santander - a liberal of anti-clerical disposition. ‘Born free by nature and acknowledged as such by our institutions’, the charge was rejected by some artisans: ‘we will always support the popular cause against the party of the aristocrats... we are aware of our rights and obligations, equals under the rule of

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<sup>11</sup> Modern scholarship has paid little attention to the history of the Colombian political parties, particularly during the period under study. Exceptions include: H. Delpar *Red against Blue. The Liberal Party in Colombian Politics, 1863-1889* (Tuscaloosa 1981); C. Abel *Política iglesia y partidos en Colombia, 1885-1953* (Bogotá 1987). On the social origins of the parties, see Frank Safford ‘Social aspects of politics in nineteenth-century Spanish America: New Granada, 1825-1850’ *Journal of Social History* V 3 (1971).

<sup>12</sup> The power of the executive to intervene in the electoral process in Chile diminished, however, over time, and was severely curtailed after 1891. The complexities of the process are best explained in J. Samuel Valenzuela *Democracia vía reforma* (Buenos Aires 1985).

law, without class distinctions,<sup>13</sup>.

Obando carried some popular support throughout the country, although in the final results he lost the election to the opposition's candidate, José M. Márquez, in a heavily disputed contest which had to be decided by Congress as none of the candidates received an absolute majority<sup>14</sup>. Indeed the different political factions - above all those around Obando and Márquez- felt obliged to enlarge their electorates in their search for power. This became even more evident as the 1838 congressional elections approached. Fearing the return of Santander and Obando's factions - known as 'progressives', the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church allied with Márquez and his followers - the 'moderates'. The Catholic Society was organised in May 1838 to rally support behind the candidates that favoured clerical interests. 'Moderates' again carried the elections, in spite of the efforts by 'progressives' to mobilize artisans through political rhetoric that pitted 'nobles' against 'plebeians'. Following electoral defeat, the 'progressives' set up the Democratic-Republican Society of Artisans & Progressive Workers (Sociedad Democrática-Republicana de Artesanos i Laboradores Progresistas) with the object of instructing the popular sectors 'in the maintenance of their interests, in the knowledge of their public rights'<sup>15</sup>. The Church was also a successful mobilizer of artisans, as demonstrated by their support for a 1839 petition to Congress in favour of religious education sponsored by the hierarchy.

Popular mobilization for electoral purposes gained momentum during the following decade, particularly at the time of the 1849 presidential campaign. The Society of Artisans, set up in Bogotá two years earlier was soon to be embroiled in electioneering. The artisan vote was split among various candidates; but a crowd of about 3,000 - including a significant number of craftsmen - surrounded Congress

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<sup>13</sup> "Al pueblo granadino", Cartagena, 8 August 1836, in Constitucional de Cundinamarca, Bogotá, September 1836, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogotá, CBLAA.

<sup>14</sup> Until 1853, presidential elections were indirect. Sufragantes voted for members of electoral colleges, which gathered approximately 1,600 electors who voted for the presidential candidates. If none of them received 51 per cent of the total votes of the electoral colleges, the final decision went to Congress.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Sowell *The Early Colombian Labor Movement* p.35.

on 7 March 1849 to press for the election of José Hilario López, a Liberal reformer, close to the *Obandista* faction of the party. The election of López encouraged further partisan activities. The experience of the Society of Artisans, now renamed the Democratic Society of Artisans - linked to the Liberal party, was replicated elsewhere in the country<sup>16</sup>. The Conservatives, in turn, allied with the church, supported the establishment of the Popular Society of Mutual Instruction and Fraternal Christianity. *El Artesano*, the voice of the Sociedad Democrática in Cartagena, warned its members about the hypocrisy of the *serviles* - as the Conservatives were called: ‘they have always despised artisans, workers... and popular classes in general... But in spite of this... we see them mixing with us during election times, flattering us... in search of our vote... Now, facing defeat after López won the popular vote..., they dare to come down to the *canalla* (the populace), and they establish societies and promise to support the unhappy artisans’<sup>17</sup>.

The available information does not permit an estimate of the size of the general electorate. However, the evidence does show that electoral campaigns involved a relatively large number of Colombians of all classes, undoubtedly including artisans. In any case, the electorate expanded even further when male universal suffrage was adopted in 1853, as the system gradually moved towards federalism (increasing the number of posts to be filled through the ballot box) and then to direct presidential elections. During the 1856 presidential elections, some 210,000 went to the polls. With an estimated potential electorate of about 500,000, the rate of electoral participation was over 40 per cent, an extraordinary level of participation particularly when considering poor transport conditions, even more extraordinary if set against the experiences of Colombia’s neighbours<sup>18</sup>. Both in absolute and relative terms, Colombia had by far the largest electorate in

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<sup>16</sup> Seven societies were established just in Bogotá, including the ‘Congregación’, set up by the Jesuits. For a brief contemporary descriptions of their gatherings, see Bernardino Torres Torrente, *Sombras i misterios. O los embozados* (Bogotá 1859).

<sup>17</sup> *El Artesano*, 17 March 1850 and 24 May 1850.

<sup>18</sup> See David Bushnell ‘Voter Participation in the Colombian Election of 1856’ *Hispanic American Historical Review*, VI 2 (1971) pp. 327-49.

Latin America, with the exception of Mexico. Only some 4,250 voted in the Peruvian presidential elections of 1851 - a similar size of voters to that of mid-nineteenth century Ecuador and Bolivia. The Chilean electorate was larger: between 24,000 and 30,000 voted in the 1840s and 1850s. The second largest electorate in mid-nineteenth century South America seemed to have been the Venezuelan: more than 60,000 people voted in 1846. Argentina also adopted male universal suffrage in 1853 but the electorate remained small as foreign immigrants, an increasingly significant portion of the population, did not have the vote. The extraordinary size of the Colombian electorate, in a highly divided political nation, resulted in intense levels of popular mobilisation at election time as parties fought to recruit voters.

The size of the electorate was somewhat curtailed after 1863, when an extreme federal constitution was adopted. Having decentralised the electoral system, some of the nine states that then formed the United States of Colombia reintroduced restrictions to the suffrage, though others remained attached to universal male universal suffrage. Popular sectors, however, were not fully disenfranchised; artisans continued to be heavily involved in electioneering. Indeed, throughout the period known as the Radical Era (1863-1885), a period of extreme liberal reforms, Colombia experienced significant levels of popular and social mobilisation. In Panama, formally part of Colombia until 1903, the ‘mixed races’ were politically in the ascendant: ‘public offices are almost filled by coloured or black men, who, as a rule, are of the “Liberal” party’<sup>19</sup>. Heavily contested elections, like that of 1875, occasioned the highest levels of electoral mobilisation<sup>20</sup>.

Following initial attempts in the late 1840s to demobilise the political nation, more serious efforts were made during the conservative regime inaugurated in 1886. Voting restrictions - income, property and literacy requirements - were

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<sup>19</sup> Charles T. Bidwell *The Isthmus of Panama* (London 1865) p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> I have discussed this elections in greater detail in my ‘Elections and Civil Wars in Nineteenth-century Colombia: The 1875 Presidential Campaign’ *Journal of Latin American Studies* XXVI 4 (1994) pp. 621-649.

re-introduced for national elections; but male universal suffrage was preserved for municipal and provincial elections. Political competition was somewhat muted during the late 1880s and early 1890s, given the hegemonic tendencies of the regime. However, as the century drew to a close, partisan conflict intensified, first during the 1898 presidential election and then in the bitter civil war between 1899 and 1902. Once again, restrictions imposed on the suffrage did not exclude the popular sectors from the electoral process<sup>21</sup>. For one thing, as noted, male universal suffrage continued to be accepted for local elections. The restrictions on voting in national elections, moreover, were often overlooked or simply overcome by the passage of time. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the number of voters in national elections seems to have grown more rapidly than the size of the population: it almost doubled between 1914 and 1922, and increased by about 30 per cent over the following eight years, at a time when total population did not even double.

The nature of the data available means that it is impossible to describe the social composition of the electorate, as has been done systematically for late-nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, Chile, Brazil and, of course, England. The evidence suggests, however, that the electoral process was far from the exclusive patrimony of the few. On the contrary, some contemporary commentators complained that it was the better-off who often stayed away from the polls<sup>22</sup>. Social pressure to widen the franchise - like that in European countries, such as Belgium, which suffered serious strikes at the turn of the century - was generally absent from Colombia for one simple reason: large segments of the popular sectors, particularly in the urban areas, were already in possession of the vote<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> This and the following points in this paragraph are discussed in greater detail in my 'Limits of Power: Elections under Conservative Hegemony, 1886-1930' *Hispanic American Historical Review* LXXVII 2 (1997).

<sup>22</sup> *El Tiempo*, 1 February 1925.

<sup>23</sup> J. Polasky, 'A Revolution for Socialist Reforms: the Belgian General Strike for Universal Suffrage' *Journal of Contemporary History* XXVII (1992) pp. 449-66.

## The Franchise and Artisan Aspirations

What drew these popular sectors into successive electoral conflicts varied significantly across time and space. Elections after all were essentially local affairs, touching local interests, and involving local actors<sup>24</sup>. These complexities have hardly received any attention from the historiography, which traditionally has tended to dismiss elections as mere theatre, where elites paraded flocks of submissive electors for the purposes of legitimising their rule. This view presents voters as unaware of their rights and duties, simply driven to the polls by the clergy, landlords or unscrupulous politicians. The argument is an old one. It was often used by contemporary politicians themselves in attempts to delegitimise their opponents. Some nineteenth-century Liberals deployed this argument to oppose universal suffrage after losing the 1853 elections. Others, like the leading Liberal ideologue Manuel Murillo Toro, challenges this view: if clergy and landlords exercised influence, there were compensations for the voters. ‘A priest who wants to have influence has to begin by making himself loved and respected, and in order to do that he has above all else to show himself disinterested, generous, charitable;... If (the landowner) wants to dispose of votes in the elections, it is necessary that he should not charge high rents, that he should open his waste to tenants, that he should pay wages on election day’<sup>25</sup>. This electoral behaviour, which Frank O’Gorman has referred to as ‘rituals of social inversion’, is a subject that merits further attention. It suggests the creation of a space in which artisans had more than a ‘voice’. In part, these processes also reflect the circumstances that conditioned early partisan loyalties.

The politicisation of post-independent Colombia went hand in hand with a

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<sup>24</sup> For these and the following points in this paragraph, I have found Frank O’Gorman’s work very suggestive; see his *Voters, Patrons and Parties. The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England* (Oxford 1989).

<sup>25</sup> M. Murillo Toro ‘El sufragio universal’, El Tiempo, 25 Sept 1855, quoted in M. Deas ‘The Role of Church, Army and Police in Colombian Elections, 1850-1930’ in E. Posada (ed.), *Elections Before Democracy. The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (London 1996), p. 165.

set of liberal reforms, first introduced during the Santander administration (1832-36), which took a radical turning by mid-nineteenth-century. These included, among others, changes in education, freedom of religion, expansion of suffrage, and abolition of slavery. Beyond any specific measure, there emerged a vision of society which tended to clash with the perception of the colonial past. As *El Artesano* warned its readers, in 1850: ‘*Serviles* (conservatives) are those in favour of absolutism and dictatorship, of aristocratic distinctions, of constitutions which confer on the executive almost monarchical powers... of fanaticism, the inquisition and the Jesuits’<sup>26</sup>. This was the discourse preferred by the *Obandistas* and by those who rallied behind the candidacy of José Hilario López in 1849<sup>27</sup>. The *Obandistas* campaigned against slavery even after it was abolished by the López administration in 1851, emphasising to their followers that electoral victory by the Conservatives might result in the reintroduction of the institution<sup>28</sup>. Blacks therefore tended to side with the Liberal party<sup>29</sup>.

Another major target of the liberal discourse was the Roman Catholic church. This did not represent a simple ideological difference among the opposing parties. Religious issues were of paramount significance to the lives of most Colombians during the nineteenth-century, as indeed they were for many people in Britain where voting behaviour or ‘politics was perceived to be “an activity of significance mainly because religious issues were so prominent”<sup>30</sup>. In as much as religious issues touched upon the lives of most ordinary peoples, they entered the public debate reaching all social classes. The position of the church was promoted

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<sup>26</sup> *El Artesano*, 17 March 1850. For a similar description of how distinctive the aims of the two camps were, see *El Triunfo del 7 de Marzo*, 7 February 1850 - another newspaper that took the Liberal side.

<sup>27</sup> See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín *Curso y discurso del movimiento plebeyo, 1849-1854* (Bogotá 1955).

<sup>28</sup> See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín *Curso y discurso*. p.99.

<sup>29</sup> The relation between race and party politics in nineteenth-century Colombia has received very little systematic attention from modern scholarship. For some references on the Liberal party, see Delpar *Red against Blue*.

<sup>30</sup> J. Parry *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 5, quoted in M. Cragoe ‘Conscience or Coercion? Clerical Influence at the General Election of 1868 in Wales’ *Past and Present* CXLIX (1995) p. 140.

from the pulpit and through pastoral letters and pamphlets, often with the explicit purpose of mobilising voters. Indeed since the 1830s, as suggested above, the clergy in Colombia had become heavily involved in electioneering, setting up ‘societies’ which became electoral clubs to recruit voters, including artisans. The confrontation between liberalism and the church continued well into the twentieth century<sup>31</sup>. This politicisation of society, through the activities of the church - it must be stressed, cut across class distinctions. Anti-clerical measures, for example, alienated many an artisan who ended up supporting the Conservatives.

There were attempts to organize artisans along class lines, closely linked to some factions of the emerging Liberal party. David Sowell shows, however, that more often than not these efforts were frustrated by partisan divisions: the artisan vote was usually split among the various Liberal and Conservative factions. The degree of mobilisation of artisans - and of popular sectors in general - was certainly extraordinary. Electoral mobilisation was accompanied by a radicalised political discourse, influenced by the European revolutionary movement of 1848 - with an intensity akin to the Venezuelan and Chilean experiences. It is true that some enlightened members of the elites often led artisan societies. Nonetheless, Sowell also shows how artisans did not only vote but they sat on electoral committees, stood as candidates and as leaders in their own rights, some gaining seats in elected corporate bodies, although usually at the local and the provincial levels. Artisan newspapers - *El Artesano* in the 1850s, *El Obrero* and *La Alianza* in the 1860s - served to defend their interests. Politicians also relied on the support of leaders of the artisan community as middle-men: in Bogotá, for example, they courted the favours of Jose Antonio Saavedra, a cobbler, ‘very influential with *la clase del pueblo* (the popular class)’<sup>32</sup>.

One issue that brought Artesans together, probably the most significant one, was tariffs - the fear of free trade, favoured by some Liberal factions. There were, however, other concerns. For example, sources of credit and the establishment of

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<sup>31</sup> See Fernán González *Partidos políticos y poder eclesiástico* (Bogotá 1977), and Abel *Política iglesia y partidos*.

artisan schools. In these cases, political relations, inevitably linked to electioneering, overcame ideological distances. Even regarding tariffs, there were no lasting differences between the two major parties. Rafael Nóez, a dissident Liberal who originally led, in coalition with the Conservatives, the regime that was inaugurated in 1886, was careful to court the artisans against his Liberal-free-traders opponents. Conservatives such as Caro were dogmatic anti-Liberals and anti-individualists, and believed that the state had to play a positive, though paternalistic role, in society. They were also aware that, in order to counter Liberal feelings among the people, the Conservatives had to organise popular sectors in cities and villages. Although it is likely that the Liberals were more successful in the major cities, most artisan associations that had emerged by 1910 had developed links with the two traditional parties.

The early politicisation of Colombians along party lines which cut across class distinctions has to be understood within the context of a society which was still more rural than urban, where social distances were not yet that great, where the national state was weak and the market generally underdeveloped<sup>32</sup>. The geography and vast size of the country, compounded by poor communications, added enormous difficulties to economic development. All these circumstances were rapidly changing during the first decades of the twentieth-century. The success of the coffee economy (and subsequently the production of bananas and oil) helped to consolidate the export sector. As trade expanded, river-and sea-ports became major sources of employment. Modern industries emerged in the largest cities - in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla. Urban growth followed: in 1870 Bogotá had barely 41,000 inhabitants, in 1928, 235,421; during the same period the population of Medellín grew from 29,765 to 120,044; Cali from 12,743

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<sup>32</sup> Sowell *The Early Colombian Labor Movement* p. 87-8.

<sup>33</sup> For a good summary of socio-economic changes between 1830 and 1930, and how to relate them to politics, see the following essays by M. Deas: 'Colombia and Ecuador' in L. Bethell (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Vol. III, from Independence to c. 1870* (Cambridge 1985), and 'Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, 1880-1930' in L. Bethell (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Vol. IV, c. 1870-1930* (Cambridge 1986). See also the relevant chapters in Marco Palacios *Entre la legitimidad y la violencia, Colombia, 1875-1994* (Bogotá 1996).

to 122,847; Barranquilla from 11,000 to 139,974; and Cartagena from 8,800 to 92,491<sup>34</sup>. These were the largest Colombian cities. Yet, as evidenced by the figures, they were not large urban conglomerates. As a delegate to the Congress of Latin American Communist parties in Buenos Aires in 1928 observed, Colombia ‘lacked masses’<sup>35</sup>.

Nevertheless, ‘masses’ were becoming evident in areas where rapid economic growth was occurring: large bodies of workers were concentrated in ports and industrial cities, on banana plantations and at oil sites. These areas witnessed the emergence of a modern labour movement which made some attempts to distance itself from traditional party politics<sup>36</sup>. The Asociación Obrera established at Pereira in 1910, the Unión Obrera set up in Bogotá in 1913, and the Asamblea Obrera also gathered in Bogotá in 1919, all made explicit their intentions to be independent of the historic parties. As illustrated by a manifesto signed by some 600 workers in 1916, they acknowledged having hitherto belonged to the traditional parties but were now convinced of the needs to found a Workers Party, a party which could genuinely represent the interests of the ‘proletariat’. These efforts, however, were frustrated by the survival of partisan feelings, particularly those linked to the Liberal party. Some Liberal leaders, such as Rafael Uribe Uribe, continuing the tradition of cultivating artisans, made significant efforts to attract the support of labourers. In the words of a contemporary union leader, Uribe Uribe spoke ‘the realist language of the masses’<sup>37</sup>. General Benjamín Herrera, another popular figure, considered that ‘all worker aspirations could be addressed by the Liberal party’. Yet the party had to overcome the challenges posed by socialist and revolutionary currents during the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

After the end of the First World War, the country experienced a wave of

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<sup>34</sup> William P. McGreevey *An Economic History of Colombia, 1845-1930* (Cambridge 1971), p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Deas ‘Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. 1880-1930’, p. 660.

<sup>36</sup> For the following section I have closely followed the memories of Ignacio Torres Giraldo, a contemporary union leader and co-organizer of the labour movement. See footnote 1.

<sup>37</sup> Torres Giraldo *Los inconformes* p. 692.

strikes, raising concerns in some quarters about the so-called ‘social question’. In cities like in Cali in 1919, Liberal leaders - ‘electoral calculators’ - moved in to defend the interests of strikers, favouring a negotiated settlement. This wave of strikes was already in decline by the end of 1920, reaching its lowest levels in 1921-22 due (amongst other reasons) to ‘electoral factors’ - according to Torres Giraldo. A Socialist Party had been founded in 1919 with a ‘social-reformist liberal’ platform. The party newspaper, *El Socialista*, was severely criticized by Torres Giraldo as the ‘vanguard of electoral opportunism... opening the way for Congress to its members... aiming at securing electoral support from labourers’: what these ‘socialists’ wanted was ‘to rise as leaders of the masses, built on a political career and improve their social and economic position’. Torres Giraldo and some of his fellow partisans, who later joined forces in the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (PSR), favoured the ‘permanent organization of the masses and the socio-economic struggle’ over electoral politics. They despised socialists who got involved in electioneering, including artisans and workers. These were depicted as having ‘*petit-bourgeois* ambitions’<sup>38</sup>. In some cases these ambitions bore fruit: ‘electoral socialism’(*socialismo electorero*) managed to flourish during 1919-21, with significant gains in local elections in Cundinamarca, Tolima and Antioquia.

Yet, as a new presidential election approached - with the popular Herrera as Liberal candidate, the Socialist party lost its appeal. Moreover, as Torres Giraldo acknowledged, the socialists had been working with ‘an electorate on loan’ - voters who returned to the Liberal party in the 1922 presidential election. In the event, the Liberals lost the elections. While this frustrated some sectors, for Torres Giraldo and his colleagues, the defeat of ‘electoral social-reformism’ paved the way to ‘revolutionary socialism’. Indeed the second half of the 1920s witnessed another wave of serious strikes, particularly against workers in the oil fields and banana plantations. Nonetheless, Liberals continued to appeal to workers. Some

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<sup>38</sup> Torres Giraldo *Los inconformes* pp. 700-709.

of their leaders, noting socialist electoral gains, pressed to advance the social agenda of the party. Most of the delegates who attended the National Congress of Workers in 1924 belonged to the Liberal party. When the Conservative government repressed the banana strikers in 1928, it was a young Liberal, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who took the defence of the strikers to Congress and captured popular support. Torres Giraldo and his PSR fellow partisans had made some significant inroads among workers but in 1930, when the Liberals launched the candidacy of Enrique Olaya for the presidency, labourers again rallied behind the Liberal candidate. On this occasion, the Liberals took the presidency<sup>39</sup>. Little wonder that Torres Giraldo felt that ‘the electoral heritage has weighed heavily on the labour movement’.

## **Labour, Electoral Reform and the Expansion of Political Space**

David Sowell has shown how the organisation of artisans in Bogotá between 1832 and 1919 ‘took place within a dynamic political system that enabled artisans to seek goals relevant to their social sectors’<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, as this paper suggests, the picture painted by Sowell could be expanded to the whole country; furthermore, it would be useful to extend the analysis to the 1930s. It has been argued that the competitive nature of Colombian elections, developed from the 1830s, stimulated the early incorporation of popular sectors in the politics of the country. Politicians, in search of votes, were often willing to expand their electorates. Male universal suffrage was first adopted in 1853. Although some restrictions were later reintroduced, popular sectors were never totally excluded from the vote. Moreover a closer appreciation of their participation in Colombian elections is

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<sup>39</sup> According to a British report, the repression of the banana strike in 1928 ‘...led to an enormous increase of the revolutionary spirit, which contributed later to facilitate the triumph of liberalism as the party in opposition with the support of the masses’, ‘Communism in Colombia’, (Bogotá 1940), Public Records Office, F)371/24184.

<sup>40</sup> Sowell *The Early Colombian Labor Movement* p. 167.

essential to an understanding of the politics of the country. How popular and labour participation was articulated through constant electioneering and incorporated into the emerging party system of course varied from place to place and there were significant changes over time. This ‘electoral tradition’, so despised by the union socialist revolutionary leaders of the 1920s, merits closer attention by historians.

## **Coal, Gold and Class: Highveld white coal miners the Rand Revolt of 1922<sup>41</sup>**

*by Peter Alexander*

A series of strikes by white workers, the Rand Revolt, was a pivotal event in South African history. More than 200 lives were lost. Workers and their unions were crushed. An era of working-class militancy was brought to an abrupt close. Major institutional and political change followed in 1924: the passage of Industrial Conciliation Act, which further bureaucratised the mainly white unions, emphasising the divide between these organisations and African workers, and the fall of the Smuts government in the June general elections.

Why did white workers, a relatively well-paid elite, become so militant, whilst the majority of the workforce, poorly-paid Africans, did not strike? This question raises broader, theoretical issues about the relationship between class and race in South Africa. Much has been written about the main body of strikers - the gold miners of the Witwatersrand (or Rand)<sup>42</sup>. This paper is largely concerned with a smaller group, workers employed in the collieries of the Highveld, in the Transvaal and Orange Free State).<sup>43</sup> Paradoxically, though the stoppage by these colliers triggered action in the gold mines, it has attracted hardly more than a passing reference in the literature.<sup>44</sup> Although gold mining was central to the

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<sup>41</sup> An expanded version of this paper is in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* XIX 1 (1999), pp. 31-45. It has benefited from comments made by an anonymous referee of *Comparative Studies* and from subsequent discussion with Caroline O'Reilly and Andrew Strouthous. Research was conducted while the author was a Research Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford, and made possible by a grant from the Oppenheimer Fund. The author grateful for all assistance received.

<sup>42</sup> For recent contributions, see J. Krikler 'Women, Violence and the Rand Revolt of 1922' *Journal of South African Studies* XXII 3 (1996); S. Johns *Raising the Red Flag: the International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1914-1932* (Bellville: Mayibuye Books 1995); B. Hirson 'The General Strike of 1922' *Searchlight South Africa* III 3 (1993).

<sup>43</sup> For a definition of the 'Highveld', see R. Mendelsohn "The Country is Rotten with Coal": Sammy Marks and the Highveld coal industry' paper presented at the *Twelfth National Conference of the South African Historical Society*, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1989.

<sup>44</sup> The principal exception is a paper by Mendelsohn (1989), most of which was subsumed within

economy, the fact that South Africa is the world's third largest exporter of coal and that gold production and other industries are dependent (as they were in the 1920s) on cheap, coal-derived power is often overlooked.

In examining the early-twentieth century history of the Highveld coal mining and the strike itself, this paper fills that gap as well as contributing to an understanding of the meaning and character of *class* by emphasising the employers drive for unfettered control over production and the salience of 'class experience' in an analysis of the strike.

## **White Wage-earners**

There was considerable debate about the class nature of white labour in South Africa in the 1970s. Three approaches emerged. The first regarded all white wage-earners as part of a working class. A second line of argument treated white wage-earners as members of a middle class. A third stance argues against the blurring of class differences between, on the one hand, productive workers, and on the other, that part of the new middle class responsible for the 'control and surveillance', functions of capital. (This position implies that white miners - who, by the 1920s, were chiefly labour supervisors - should be regarded as part of the new middle class, while skilled, white workers, were part of the working class.)<sup>45</sup>

Given the focus of this paper, the third categorisation poses an important theoretical conundrum. How to assess a situation where one section of the middle class fought a bloody battle against another, while a part of the working class allied

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Mendelsohn (1991). Lang (1995) contains interesting data but is dependent upon, and largely uncritical of, a limited range of sources. See R. Mendelsohn "The Country is Rotten with Coal": Sammy Marks and the Highveld coal industry' paper presented at the *Twelfth National Conference of the South African Historical Society*, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1989; Sammy Marks *The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal* (Cape Town 1991) and J. Lang *Power Base: coal mining in the life of South Africa* (Johannesburg 1995).

<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed, and more nuanced, analysis of the historiography see P. Alexander 'Coal, Control and Class Experience in South Africa's Rand Revolt of 1922' *Comparative Studies of South Africa and the Middle East* XIX 1 (1999) pp. 36-8.

itself with elements of the middle class, apparently against the majority of workers?

From about 1980 there was a marked shift in the concerns of South African labour history. The new approach, social history, influenced by E. P. Thompson's antipathy to seeing class as 'structure', viewing it instead as, 'something which in fact happens'<sup>46</sup>. Some writers continued to regard 'structure' as significant, though generally as a backdrop for understanding conflict and culture<sup>47</sup>. Others considered that 'class', in any form, lacked analytical merit<sup>48</sup>. Perhaps 'structure' had become sterile and dull while 'consciousness' has provided a fascinating source of historical enquiry. Arguably, insufficient attention has been paid to 'class experience'. As this paper suggests, 'class experience' is a construct that may be used to form a bridge between 'structure' and 'consciousness'.

## **Coal, Gold and Capital**

The Highveld was blessed with a huge, accessible coal reserves. Initially - perhaps because of the part played by British mining engineers - shaft mines were constructed. However, given the depth of the coal, slope mines were more practical, and by 1931 only two out of 14 Witbank collieries had vertical shafts<sup>49</sup>. However, despite enormous natural advantages, commercial exploitation of Highveld coal only really took off after the growth of gold mining on the Rand. With the added advantage of close proximity to the new market, the Transvaal was soon producing more coal than Natal. By 1893, when coal output from the various

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<sup>46</sup> E.P. Thompson *The making of the English Working Class* (London 1968) p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, S. Marks & R. Rathbone 'Introduction' in S. Marks & R. Rathbone (eds.) *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African class formation, culture and consciousness, 1870-1930* (Harlow 1982), p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> P. Harries *Work, Culture and Identity: migrant labourers in Mozambique and South Africa. c. 1860-1910* (Portsmouth, New Hamp. 1994).

<sup>49</sup> R.W. Grout & R.L. Lechmere-Oertel 'A Brief History of the Progress and Efficiency in South African Collieries in the Last Seventy Years' *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy* May, 1958 p. 493; A.C. Graham & P.N. Lategan *The Coals of the Witbank District*

South African territories was 0.8 million tons, 72.8 per cent was already coming from the Highveld, and in 1921, when the country was producing 11.4 million tons, 69.0 per cent came from the region<sup>50</sup>.

At first, the main area of output was on the East Rand, where coal was sometimes situated directly above gold-bearing reef. From 1904 the well-endowed field around Witbank, 90 miles east of Johannesburg, became the major area of coal production. Witbank was connected to Johannesburg by rail in 1895, but a much shorter link was completed in 1906, and this further boosted production. In 1921 the Witbank district was producing 45.5 per cent of all South African coal, and it was employing 62.4 per cent of all Highveld colliers.<sup>51</sup> In 1920 23.8 per cent of all marketed Highveld coal went directly to the gold mines. Two other major coal purchasers were the Victoria Falls Power Company (VFPC), which, in turn, took 15.5 per cent of marketed output and the state - mainly through South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H). SAR&H not only provided Highveld collieries with their single largest buyer, taking 25.4 per cent of coal in 1920, it also provided them with their main means of transportation<sup>52</sup>. This placed the state-owned monopoly in a strong position.

Confronted by large buyers, coal production and trade was rapidly organised. The Transvaal Coal Owners Association (TCOA), which had been established in 1907 by the major mining companies, standardised supplies of Highveld coal in order to ‘stop the severe and ruinous competition’<sup>53</sup>. Although run as a limited company, the TCOA was a cartel: coal was sold at a fixed price and member collieries were allocated a quota of total sales. In 1920 the

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(Johannesburg : Transvaal Chamber of Mines Collieries Committee 1931) p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Union of South Africa, Office of Census, Statistics *Official Yearbook of the Union III*, 1920 (Pretoria: Government Printers 1920) p. 592, and *Official Year Book of the Union XVII*, 1936 (Pretoria: Government Printer 1936) p. 545.

<sup>51</sup> Transvaal Mines Department *Annual Report of the Government Mining Engineer*, 1904 (Pretoria: Government Printer 1904) p. 10; Union of South Africa, Department of Mines and Industries *Annual Reports 1921* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1922) p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> Union of South Africa, Coal Commission *Annual Report*, 1921 (Pretoria: Government Printer 1921) pp. 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> Mendelsohn “‘The Country is Rotten with Coal’.”, p. 1; Graham and Lategan *The Coals of the Witbank* pp. 80-83.

Association was responsible for 88.1 per cent of all Transvaal coal marketed<sup>54</sup>. The absence of competitive marketing reflected a broader phenomenon, in all likelihood related to patterns of investment and organization that predominated in South Africa. Diamond extraction had long been controlled by one company: the powerful Transvaal Chamber of Mines (TCM) co-ordinated the six or seven houses that dominated gold mining.

Ownership, moreover, provided a further link to gold mining. In 1920 the coal group with the largest output was owned by Lewis and Marks, which also had gold interests (though not on the Rand), and three of the major mining houses on the Rand - Corner House, Anglo-American and Johannesburg Consolidated Investments - owned Transvaal collieries<sup>55</sup>. The influence of gold producers on coal mines existed at another level: labour supply. In 1900 the Chamber of Mines had formed the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, usually called Wenela, to improve recruitment of cheap, African workers. The following year, Wenela secured a recruiting monopoly in Mozambique and was soon supplying 'Portuguese natives' to the collieries<sup>56</sup>. In 1908 Wenela agreed to supply 60 per cent of the collieries 'native labour' requirement; in 1918 the quota was 90 per cent. Though the quota was officially reduced to 80 per cent in 1920, for most of the 1920s more than 82 per cent of the collieries African workers came from Mozambique<sup>57</sup>.

Consequently, far from being a product of 'free market forces', Highveld colliery capitalists of 1922 were a small, tightly-knit group that fixed prices and collaborated closely with their allies in the gold industry to maintain minimal costs of labour.

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<sup>54</sup> Coal Commission *Annual Report*, 1921, pp. 65-66.

<sup>55</sup> P. Alexander "Not Miners, But Officials": South Africa's Highveld Coal Industry and the Rand revolt of 1922' paper presented to the *American Historical Association Conference*, New York, 1997 (Appendix 2).

<sup>56</sup> S. Katznellenbogen *South Africa and Southern Mozambique: labour, railways and trade in the making of a relationship* (Manchester 1982) p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> TEBA Archive, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (Wenela) 'Note on the Preference

## Staff, Men and Natives

Mechanisation began at a relatively late date in the Transvaal. Compressed-air cutters were first introduced in 1904, and electric cutters were probably not used on a regular basis until 1913 (14 years later than in Natal)<sup>58</sup>. Thereafter, change was swift. In 1911 55 per cent of all South African coal was already machine cut, and by 1920 the figure had reached 72 per cent; while for the Transvaal the totals were even higher, 60 per cent in 1911 and 82 per cent in 1920<sup>59</sup>. Since wages were generally lower in South Africa, it is clear that cheap labour did not necessarily prevent mechanisation. Probably, the extensive and even nature of seams, late development, availability of capital, and weakness of trade union organization, all contributed to the rapid mechanisation of Highveld coal mining. In the Transvaal, work was already fragmented into a range of tasks, and this may have assisted the process.

Most South African collieries used the stall-and-pillar method of extraction, which was also common in the UK and USA. In removing the coal, hewers would create a ‘room’ or ‘stall’, about 20 feet wide, leaving behind pillars of coal to support the roof, though these could later be removed (robbed) when the face was abandoned. In the UK and USA, prior to mechanisation, it was general for two hewers, or a miner and his son, or a miner and a labourer, to work together in a room, carrying out all the basic operations - that is, cutting, drilling, blasting, and loading. In the Transvaal, at least by 1910, and probably from the earliest days of the industry, these different tasks were mostly carried out by African colliers, who were specifically designated as ‘square boys’ (engaged in cutting), ‘drilling boys’

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Allowed to the Collieries’ 7th June 1945, File 2A/1Pad 19.

<sup>58</sup> Grout and Lechmere-Oertel ‘A Brief History’ pp. 499-500; Graham and Lategan *The Coals of the Witbank* p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> Union of South Africa, Department of Mines *Annual Report, 1910* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1911) p. 64; Union of South Africa, Department of Mines and Industries *Annual Report, 1919* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1920) p. 69.

and ‘cutting boys’ (engaged in hauling)<sup>60</sup>. As in the gold mines (but not the Natal collieries), it was a legal requirement that blasting be carried by a miner, who, by definition had to be white. In practice - either through laziness or through overwork - the miner often delegated part or all of his responsibility for blasting to a ‘blasting boy’<sup>61</sup>. When cutting machines were introduced, it was a relatively simple matter to replace ‘square boy’ with ‘machine boys’ and helpers (usually working under the supervision of a white ‘machine man’).

According to the general discourse - at least that of the whites - the Highveld collieries, like the mines, contained a status hierarchy consisting of three main tiers. At the top there was the staff. This category included the Colliery Manager, departmental heads, such as the Chief Engineer and the Overseer, and junior staff, such as shift bosses, foremen and clerks. Below the staff came the ‘men’ (though this term sometimes encompassed the staff as well). At the bottom there were the various categories of ‘natives’. The ‘men’ consisted of two main groups - mechanics (skilled workers) and miners, though there were also some semi-skilled workers, apprentices, etc. Whilst the mechanics (fitters, engine drivers, carpenters and so forth) usually carried out their work with the help of one, or perhaps two, black assistants, the main tasks of the miners consisted of supervising 40 to 100 Africans. A typical coal miner’s section might include: one ‘boss boy’, five coal cutters, eight drillers, twenty loaders, and 16 men employed on haulage and other duties<sup>62</sup>. Of the 21,661 people employed by the Highveld coal industry in 1921, 1.5 per cent were classified as staff, 4.5 per cent as ‘men’, and 94.0 per cent as ‘boys’<sup>63</sup>.

Status distinctions related, primarily, to conditions of employment. The staff received a salary: they were paid monthly. ‘Men’ were paid a wage,

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<sup>60</sup> South Africa State Archive, A.O.C. Kindersley, Letter to Native Affairs Director, 17th March 1910, SNA Box 461 File 792/10.

<sup>61</sup> Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics *Official Year Book of the Union, V, 1923* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1923) p.609; *Witbank News* 7th March 1919.

<sup>62</sup> Graham and Lategan *The Coals of the Witbank* p.70.

<sup>63</sup> Union of South Africa, Department of Mines and Industries *Annual Report, 1921* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1922) p. 12, Table 7.

calculated at an hourly rate, and unlike staff could receive overtime payments. Salaried employees had greater security of employment than ‘men’ and they may also have enjoyed better facilities. Unlike contracted gold miners, who were paid according to the amount of work their gang completed, coal miners were paid according to a fixed rate. Unlike most staff and ‘men’, ‘natives’ were generally employed on a temporary basis. Their movement to other workplaces was restricted and, if Wenela recruits, were legally bound to return to Mozambique at the end of their first, or subsequent, contract (which usually lasted for 313 shifts, that is a ‘year’). About 60 per cent of ‘natives’ - those engaged on cutting, drilling and loading - were on piece rates, while others received a flat, daily rate.

All ‘natives’ were paid less than all ‘men’, but clerks usually received less than miners and mechanics. Miners were paid approximately nine times as much as the average ‘native’, whilst receiving only about one-sixteenth the pay of the top manager. In addition, a manager might receive a share of company profits.

The notion of ‘native’ was usually synonymous with ‘boy’, though ‘native clerks’ were not necessarily regarded as ‘boys’. (To confuse matters, an ‘office boy’ was white.) The terms ‘boy’ and ‘native’ were generally interchangeable with ‘labourer’. The latter category certainly included some machine operators, who (if white) were regarded as semi-skilled. It is possible that ‘boss boys’, ‘police boys’ and ‘native clerks’ (three groups that often lived permanently on the collieries) were not always regarded as ‘labourers’. On the other hand, ‘men’ implied ‘workmen’ or ‘workers’: these were all ‘white’ or ‘European’. Exceptions can be found, but they tend to prove the rule.

This discourse underlines the importance of race in shaping the language and thought of colliery strikers. Race meant more than status, and much more than colour prejudice. It was deeply rooted in huge social and cultural differences. Most African workers were transient migrants, who came to the collieries as single men, stayed in compounds, left as soon as their contacts expired. By contrast, the ‘vast majority’ of white colliers were ‘married men, permanently settled on the

properties<sup>64</sup>. Most white employees - whether staff or men - came originally from Britain. Certainly, the culture of Witbank was very British, and union meetings were, with rare exceptions, conducted in English<sup>65</sup>. Black and white colliers ate different food, they engaged in different pastimes, they attended different churches, and they had different legal rights<sup>66</sup>.

For white colliers, contact with African workers was very largely limited to their dealings with subordinate 'labourers' and domestic servants. For most 'labourers', their perception of white colliers must have been conditioned by their experience of the miner who supervised their work. Too little is known about this relationship, but there was certainly some ill-treatment<sup>67</sup>. It is hardly surprising, then, that the skilled workers and supervisors did not deign to include 'labourers' in their unions.

Although the boundary between 'natives' and 'men' was never seriously threatened in this period, that between 'men' and 'staff' was the subject of two challenges that are central to an understanding the 1922 strike. One mainly concerned the mechanics, the other the miners. Both provide valuable insights into the differing 'class experience' of these two groups of employees. The first is revealed in a fascinating set of minutes, those of a meeting between the Mining Department of the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) and the TCM that occurred on 20 December 1921. This appears to have been the last meeting between these two representative bodies before the big strike and considered mainly the 'demarcation of officials'. On both sides of the argument, evidence related mainly to the gold mines, though for mechanics the experience of the collieries was generally very similar, so the dispute is pertinent. Speaking on behalf of 'the men', leaders of the mechanics tried claim for their members a

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<sup>64</sup> *Middelburg Observer* 30th Dec. 1921.

<sup>65</sup> Lang *Power Base.*, p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> P. Alexander 'Race, Class Loyalty, and the Structure of Capitalism: coal miners in Alabama and the Transvaal, 1918-22' Paper presented at the *Socialist Historian Seminar*, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 1998 pp. 6-7.

<sup>67</sup> For violence on gold mines, see T.D. Moodie *Going for Gold: men, mines and migration* (Johannesburg 1994) p. 55.

higher, supervisory status - while admitting that they were not foremen. Representatives of the employers, accepting that miners were supervisors, were none-the-less contemptuous of these pretensions. The peculiar position of miners derived from the Mines and Works Act (the colour bar). It seems likely that this denial of official status - and along with it a denial of respect, job security and higher pay - fuelled a sense of injustice, thereby contributing to the vehemence of the stoppage<sup>68</sup>.

## The Strikes

During the war union membership in South Africa grew rapidly: registered membership increasing from 10,538 in 1915 to 77,819 in 1919, peaking at 135,797 in 1920<sup>69</sup>. This was part of an international trend, and even Witbank, in a modest way, was affected. By 1917 there was an MWU branch in the area, though it had not yet been granted autonomy: in 1918 the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) founded a Witbank District<sup>70</sup>. From 1918 to 1920 the unions made considerable gains. The (employers organisation, the Colliers Committee [CC]), held annual negotiations with the SAIF, strikes were narrowly averted, and the wages and conditions of white colliers were improved significantly. There was a substantial reduction in the working week, from 57 hours in 1918 to 48 in 1920 - a major achievement, that was of benefit to black workers, as well as white. Yet 'white' unions failed to consolidate their position, abstaining from the struggles of

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<sup>68</sup> Although 'status' was not raised as a specific demand during the strike (which was largely concerned with a defence of existing conditions) the meeting between the various groups of works and employers offers insights on different 'experiences'. For further evidence and discussion see, P. Alexander 'Coal, Control and Class Experience in South Africa's Rand Revolt of 1922' *Comparative Studies of South Africa and the Middle East* XIX 1 (1999) pp.36-8.

<sup>69</sup> H.J. Simons 'Trade Unions' in E. Hellman (ed.) *Handbook of Race Relations in South Africa* (Cape Town 1949) pp.159-60.

<sup>70</sup> Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics *Official Year Book of the Union III, 1920* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1920) p.315; South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) 'Minutes of the Ordinary Executive Meeting, 4th Sept. 1918, University of Witwatersrand Archive, TUCSA Collection (AH646).

black colliers: the 1922 strikes were undoubtedly weakened by this failure to involve black workers<sup>71</sup>.

The 1922 colliery strike was related to events elsewhere in the world. In 1920, the TCOA had taken advantage of increased international prices to expand export and bunker sales by over 40 per cent. The following year, prices fell, but, as a consequence of an eleven week lock-out of British colliers, the export and bunker trade was only slightly reduced. However, when the British dispute ended, in June 1921, it highlighted and intensified a crisis for the Highveld industry that was already looming. Wages on most British coal fields had been slashed and coal prices.

On 26 September 1921 the CC warned the SAIF that the employers intended to implement an ‘adjustment’ in wages, initially proposing a cut in the general rate for miners and mechanics of 3s, from 30s per shift. This was justified on the grounds of reductions in consumer prices. A year before, the CC had said that the 30s rate was 50 per cent above the pre-war level, and thus broadly reflected the increased cost of living, which had risen by about 56 per cent since 1914. Now, so the employers claimed, prices were only 35 per cent above the 1914 figure, so a wage reduction was reasonable. The SAIF objected that employers data only covered ‘food, fuel, light and rent’, and if ‘sundries’ were included, as they had been in a recent arbitration award for bank employees, the result would be totally different. Working from the full index - the cost of living was now 60 per cent higher than in 1914. The CC was deaf to this line of reasoning and, early in December, proposed a 5s per shift pay cut.

On 24 November 1921, the SAIF gave notice that it would conduct a strike ballot on the collieries. The following day, the CC announced that colliery wages would be cut from 1 January 1922. By December, a stoppage on the collieries seemed inevitable and there was a strong possibility of action on the gold mines

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<sup>71</sup> New evidence shows that Africans stopped work on at least five mines in the course of the white strike, which was probably a higher level of action than previously realised. Whilst this gave inspiration to would-be communists, the majority of white workers were unimpressed. See J. & R. Simons *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (London 1983) p.159.

and at VFPC. To make contingency plans, the Minister of Mines and Industries met with representatives of the coal and gold mining companies, VFPC, SAR&H, and the police and army. On 23 December the SAIF and CC met one more time. Armed with an 18:1 majority in favour of a strike, the unions asked if a smaller cut might be considered. This was rejected by the employers, as was a union proposal for arbitration submitted to Patrick Duncan, the Minister of the Interior. At this point the government sided openly with the employers. On Monday 2 January the strike began.

Among the Highveld collieries, non-salaried white employees support for the strike was overwhelming. Moreover, there was considerable public sympathy. But the strike was confronted with two immediate problems. First, salaried staff helped to maintain production by working normally and, in many cases, by undertaking tasks normally performed by strikers. Secondly, Africans worked as usual. Although some strikers had misgivings about this position, there was not a single instance of violence against Africans during the whole of the dispute. The reasons for the position of white colliers remain obscure, but if they thought they could win without African support, they miscalculated badly.

From the outset, the fortunes of the coal strike were enmeshed with those of the broader struggle: Rand gold miners were also soon on strike. The gold dispute, like that in the coal industry, involved the TCM on one side and the SAIF on the other. Hobson, the principal leader of the coal strikers, had been present at the meeting which agreed to ballot for strike action on the Rand. The timing of the Rand strikes was probably determined, at least in part, by the fact of the coal stoppage. The termination of the Status Quo Agreement - the main issue at stake in the gold industry - was not due to occur until 1 February, and without the coal dispute this would have been the obvious moment to start a strike. In the event, more than 20,000 employees of the gold mines downed tools from 10 January (and they were joined, soon after, by white workers in the power and engineering

industries, bringing the total number of strikers to over 22,000<sup>72</sup>.

During January attention focused on a government-initiated conference chaired by Justice Curlewis, which spent most of its time considering the coal dispute. At one point the Chamber proposed a reduction in the wage cut, pending the outcome of a conciliation board. However, it was unwilling either to be bound by the board findings, or to find work for all returning strikers. Consequently, the proposal was rejected when put to a mass meeting of Witbank strikers<sup>73</sup>. On 26 January discussions at the Curlewis Conference reached deadlock, and the colliery owners announced the immediate sacking of all striking colliers<sup>74</sup>.

On the 31st January, 1922, Witbank strikers were given a boost when General Herzog, the leader of the National Party opposition, express his sympathy on was passing through the town. But there were also a number of blows. On 13 February it was reported that employees on the Natal coalfields had agreed to a wage cut and, two days later, Highveld collieries posted notices stating that only ‘suitable applicants’ would be re-employed<sup>75</sup>. Following the reopening of the gold mines in mid February, there was an increasing level of violence on the Rand and there were instances of intimidation in the Witbank district. On the 22nd, in imitation of their comrades on the gold fields, the Witbank strikers formed a commando, which involved up to 110 men in anti-scabbing activities, drilling, and probably some acts of sabotage<sup>76</sup>. On the 23rd, following the capture of a train driver by the Witbank commando, union leaders were arrested and, to prevent their fellow strikers from rescuing them, transferred to Middelburg gaol<sup>77</sup>. Although some men returned to work, the majority held firm.

On the Rand, events were moving speedily to a climax. On 4 March the Chamber declared that it would no longer recognize the Federation. Two days

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<sup>72</sup> S. Johns *Raising the Red Flag: the Internationalist Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1914-32* (Bellville 1995) p.130; I.L. Walker & B. Weinbren 2000 *Casualties: a history of the South African Labour Movement* (Johannesburg: SATUC 1961) p.125.

<sup>73</sup> *Daily Dispatch* 20th, 23rd Jan. 1922.

<sup>74</sup> *Daily Dispatch* 27th Jan. 1922.

<sup>75</sup> *Daily Dispatch* 14th, 16th Feb. 1922.

<sup>76</sup> *Daily Dispatch* 27th Feb. 1922.

later the Joint Executives of the Federation unions were confronted with two proposals: one recommending a ballot on whether to return to work; the other calling for a general strike. The latter motion had been initiated by a Committee of Action - half of whom were members of the Communist Party<sup>78</sup>. The general strike proposal was carried, but there was little time to make the action effective before a major ‘race riot’ broke out west of Johannesburg. It is possible that the riot was initiated by *agents provocateurs*. The next day, the 9th March, 1922, Martial Law was declared.

In reality, the so-called Rand ‘revolt’ was a defence of working-class districts against superior forces. Well prepared armed forces (including aircraft) - both regular and irregular - were deployed by the state. The result was a foregone conclusion. By 15 March, 1922, the military operation was over. The outbreak of ‘peace’, following one of the ‘most fearful industrial struggles’ the country had known, was on terms that were much worse than those demanded by employers in December, 1921<sup>79</sup>. Derecognition and victimisation became the norm. As on the Rand, the strikers had been humbled. Wages of gold, as well as coal, employees tumbled, the SAIF collapsed, and the mine owners ‘got back control’ which had been eroded during the First World War.

Following the strikes, the government appointed a board of enquiry consisting of a judge, the Government Mining Engineer, a university vice-chancellor, and a rather conservative trade union official from Britain.<sup>80</sup> Although the board (or commission) was sometimes irritated by the coal owners, the final report largely exonerated these men. Specifically, it accepted the contention that falling world coal prices justified a 5s pay cut<sup>81</sup>. The board made

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<sup>77</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 25th Feb. 1922.

<sup>78</sup> Johns *Raising the Red Flag* pp.129-141, 137-8.

<sup>79</sup> *Middleburg Observer* 24th March 1922.

<sup>80</sup> These were, respectively, Sir William Solomon, Sir Robert Kotze, Beattie (from the University of Cape Town), and William Brace (a South Wales miners leader and former ‘Lib-Lab’ member of the British parliament). Although Solomon was the board chair, its findings are sometimes referred to as the Brace Report.

<sup>81</sup> Union of South Africa, Mining Industry Board (*Brace*) Report, 1922 (Pretoria: Government Printer 1922) p.35.

only one, rather mild, criticism of the coal bosses. Implying that some of the union leaders were ‘none too bright’, it argued that greater effort should have been taken to explain the need for reduced wages<sup>82</sup>.

Trapped by the narrowness of their own intellectual frameworks, the commissioners could not bring themselves to consider whether the government should have set a more favourable rate for railage, or whether the coal owners should have been willing to tolerate reduced profits, or even whether it was reasonable to expect the coal employees to meekly accept a frontal attack on their organizations and livelihoods. They equated the prosperity of the mine owners was the same thing as the welfare of the community.

## Conclusions

In attempting to understand the stoppage in relation to the history of coal mining, two themes emerge. First, the industry developed mainly in relation to gold mining on the Rand and, in 1922, the owners of both industries - sometimes the same people - acted with a common purpose. That is, their aim - and the chief cause of the strike - was to prevent any ‘interference’ in what they perceived as their right to absolute control over production. The declining world price of coal provided the colliery owners with a justification for their action, and it probably acted as a catalyst, but it was not the principal cause of the strike. Secondly, the trade unions were defeated by their own failure to reach out and involve the overwhelming majority of the workforce; a weakness which had its roots in the enormous and manifold gulf between their members and African workers. Seen in this light, the white collier appears not as villain, nor as hero, but as a tragedy of history.

The latter point connects with the issue of ‘class’. It is proper to regard coal

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<sup>82</sup> Union of South Africa, Mining Industry Board (*Brace*) Report, 1922 (Pretoria: Government Printer 1922) p.36.

miners as part of a new middle class, with mechanics and semi-skilled whites as part of the working class. However, in order to comprehend the behaviour and consciousness revealed in this case study, an analysis of class structure will not lead very far. It is also need an account of class experience. Following Callinicos, heightened class struggle tends to split the new middle class. Those more directly involved in exercising the function of capital are likely to move towards the bourgeoisie, those below them would in all probability go the other way<sup>83</sup>. This is precisely what occurred in this instance, though specific factors were significant. Whilst coal miners were treated as if they were workers, they were, in reality, supervisors, a middle-class occupation. In Britain, where many of the miners originated, they would have been accorded ‘official’ status. That is, recognized as part of the middle class, a condition that connoted respect, job security and higher pay. It is hardly surprising that, especially for the *coal* miners, tension between class and status should have been a source of militancy. When coal miners described themselves as workers they were not defining their class location, they were recognizing their existing status, and communicating their interest in uniting with *actual* workers (thus improving the odds of aligning status with class).

There was also the chasm between black and white colliers. In part this is explained by old-fashioned ‘sectionalism’ that discouraged white colliers from Natal acting in solidarity with those of the Highveld - in many respects, these two groups had more in common than black and white colliers on the Highveld. Nevertheless, the experience of class was profoundly shaped by that collection of realities - social backgrounds, conditions of employment, jobs, political rights, accommodation, culture, and so forth - defined here as ‘race’. These cemented the relationship between mechanics and miners, and divided both from ‘labourers’. In addition, the fact that African workers principal experience of white ‘workers’ was through ‘coercive supervisions’ must have militated strongly against the development of a common working-class identity.

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<sup>83</sup> A. Callinicos ‘The “New Middle Class” and Socialist Politics’ in A. Callinicos & C. Harman *The Changing World Class: essays on class structure today* (London 1987).

If the crux of this strike was an assault by colliery owners on the collective organisation of those it regarded as workers, there can be little doubt that this was, first and foremost, a case of class warfare. However, to appreciate the timing of the stoppage, who joined which side in the battle, the ideology of the combatants, and the outcome of the conflict, it is also necessary to understand how class was practised; how it was shaped by race and status, organisation and politics, economic process, international influences, past battles, and much more. Thus, there is much to be said in favour of a revival and an exploration of the Thompsonian notion of class experience.

## **Gendering the Labour Market: Female Textile Workers in Interwar Japan<sup>84</sup>**

*by Janet Hunter*

Using as a basis data drawn from the Japanese censuses of the period (1920, 1930, 1940),<sup>85</sup> this paper analyses the gender division of labour in the Japanese textile industry in the interwar years.<sup>86</sup> This section summarises the main findings that emerge from the data. Subsequent sections discuss the possible reasons for these features and suggest some longer term implications.

### **The Gender Division of Labour in the Interwar Textile Industry**

The following, principal characteristics emerge from an analysis of the census material:

- a) In 1920 there were around two million workers in the Japanese textile industry, declining to around 1.7 million by 1940. Textiles remained by far the largest sector of manufacturing employment throughout these years.
- b) Women consistently accounted for a majority of textile workers, although the proportion of the total textile workforce accounted for by women fluctuated somewhat during these two decades. However, there were considerable variations

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<sup>84</sup> For an extended version of this paper see J. Hunter 'Gendering the Labour Market: Evidence from the Textile Industry in Interwar Japan' in B.Molony & K.Uno (eds.) *Gendering Modern Japanese History* (Cambridge MA 1999).

<sup>85</sup> The volumes used here are Naikaku Tokeikyoku *Taisho 9-nen Kokusei Chosa Hokoku*, *Zenkoku no Bu*, vol. 2, *Shokugyo* (Tokyo 1929); Naikaku Tokeikyoku *Showa 5-nen Kokusei Chosa Hokoku*, vol. 2, *Shokugyo oyobi Sangyo* (Tokyo 1935); Sorifu Tokeikyoku *Showa 15-nen Kokusei Chosa Hokoku*, vol.2, *Sangyo – Jigyojo no Chii* (Tokyo 1962). Except where stated, all the information given in section 2 of this paper draws on these data sources.

<sup>86</sup> Textiles here is taken as including the whole range of production processes through reeling and spinning of raw material (e.g. silk cocoons, raw cotton, wool, hemp, etc.) into yarn, the weaving of yarn into cloth (including the manufacture of knitted goods and hosiery), finishing processes such as fulling, bleaching, dyeing and printing, and finally the making of the cloth into garments, involving individuals such as tailors and seamstresses. The making of other items of apparel, such as hats, gloves and fans, is excluded.

in the proportion of men and women in different branches of textile production, and this variation persisted throughout the interwar years. While women predominated in reeling, spinning and weaving, men played a more equal role in garment making, and constituted a sizeable majority in some of the finishing processes.

c) Young workers (those under twenty years of age) were particularly significant in the industry, and the emphasis on a young workforce was sustained throughout the interwar decades. There was, in fact, a higher proportion of the workforce under twenty years of age in 1940 than had been the case in 1920. The female workforce was particularly characterised by its youth, and significantly, those areas of production with a predominantly female workforce were also those employing the youngest women. By contrast, those employing more men tended to have many more older workers, men and women. Over the period there is evidence of a clear divergence in the age profiles of male and female textile workers; the male workforce was becoming older, while female textile workers (in all branches) were becoming younger.

d) Data on marital status tends in part to reflect these age profiles. Marriage was near universal in interwar Japan,<sup>87</sup> and it is apparent that the shift towards younger women workers meant that fewer of them were married, while the opposite shift is evident in the case of male workers. Within the population as a whole, however, there were many more widowed/separated women than men, and the disparity increased with age.<sup>88</sup> Since more of these women tended to enter the workforce it is not surprising to see this reflected in the case of textile employment. What is striking is that within textiles these women were particularly prominent in certain trades. In 1920 they accounted for almost 40% of all females in tailoring and sewing, and nearly 25% of those in dyeing and finishing. The number of such

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<sup>87</sup> Assessment of rates of marriage is complicated by the existence of both recorded and unrecorded marriages, but Taeuber suggests that ‘marriage remained the status toward which practically all Japanese moved’, with fewer than 5% of women and men remaining single into their late thirties (I.B.Taeuber, *The Population of Japan* (Princeton NJ 1958) p.213).

<sup>88</sup> Taeuber *The Population of Japan* p.213.

women in these textile trades declined markedly over the interwar decades, and the shift away from older female workers across the board may well have meant that it became more difficult for widowed/separated women to support themselves through textile employment. For male workers the proportion in this category is both relatively small (3-6%) and fairly constant across all branches of production.

e) There was a diversity of ownership patterns in different parts of the sector, but the data suggest that as the overall number of ‘owners’ declined substantially during the interwar years, women disproportionately lost out in the process, and by 1940 accounted for a far lower proportion of all ‘owners’ than they had in 1920. The prominence of widowed/separated women in the ‘ownership’ category suggests that many of them were acting in a caretaker capacity (holding property in trust until an heir should come of age), and that they increasingly lacked a sizeable and enduring hold on the production process.

f) Within the different branches of textile production women were increasingly confined to far fewer tasks than men. Women were predominantly found in the core production processes of reeling, spinning and weaving, and in the ‘female’ domains of cooking, nursing and office work. Men had a near monopoly of tasks associated with skill acquisition, technical expertise and status, especially in the more mechanised branches of production.

The evidence as a whole suggests that a degree of diversity in the labour force in different areas of textile production persisted throughout the interwar years. However, there is also evidence that over time this diversity was gradually being reduced, as the pattern initiated in the export-oriented branches of production, which had mechanised first and were involved in large scale operation (cotton spinning and silk reeling) – namely a focus on the employment of large numbers of young women – was gradually followed in other branches of textile production. The interwar years witnessed a trend towards greater homogeneity in the labour force across the textile industry. At the same time, men’s and women’s experiences of textile work were increasingly diverging, and the gender division of labour within the industry was becoming more polarised.

## The Appearance of Diversity: Employment Imperatives in the First Mechanised Industries

The silk reeling and cotton spinning industries had turned to the large scale employment of young women in the years before World War I. Much of the answer as to why patterns in these industries differed from those in other branches of textile production at the end of the First World War can be found in looking at the factors that stimulated these employers into this particular labour-hiring strategy in the first place. The most important of these factors can be enumerated as follows:

a) One highly significant factor was previously established patterns of work. Women had long played a major role in textile production in Japan, dominating the reeling of cocoons in farm households, operating chinbata, looms from putting out masters, or migrating on a temporary basis to work in weaving workshops.<sup>89</sup> To a considerable extent this agricultural by-employment activity by women was adjusted to the agricultural cycle, which in most cases was dictated by the production of rice. However, where family labour was surplus to agricultural requirements (average farm size was small), it tended to be farm daughters who were first released from agricultural tasks. This initiated a ‘life cycle’ approach to women’s work which, as the interwar data suggest, was built on by the large scale employment of young, unmarried women. In pre-industrial Japan, as elsewhere, therefore, a gender division of labour had developed in textile production, and while there were clear regional variations, there is no doubt that the existing gender division of labour influenced employers and employees in the formative years of the mechanised industry. This continuity was also associated with some skill transference. It is not surprising, for example, to find that the famous

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<sup>89</sup> See for example H. Tsuda ‘Bakumakki no Koyo Rodo ni tsuite’ *Tochi Seido Shigaku* 2, 4, 1960; T. Ichikawa ‘Noson Kogyo ni okeru Koyo Rodo’ in T. Ichikawa *et. al.* (eds.) *Hoken Shakai*

Tomioka Silk Mill<sup>90</sup> in the 1870s sought to employ young women who were considered already to have acquired some silk reeling skills. The gender division of labour was not cast in stone. Industrialisation offered a clear chance of breaking with the past, and some of the early mechanised cotton mills in Osaka in the 1880s expressed themselves content to employ appropriate labour regardless of sex.<sup>91</sup> The result was that at least at this time many mills employed equal numbers of men and women. Three other particular factors, however, in the decades preceding World War I stimulated the large scale employment of young women in certain branches of textile production.

b) One of these was cost. In Japan, as elsewhere, women's wages were generally lower than those of men, and those of younger workers lower than those of their older counterparts. Employers in the export-oriented branches of textile production were anxious to reduce their costs to be internationally competitive. Their productivity was relatively low, and their raw materials expensive. In the case of the cotton industry both raw materials and machinery had to be imported at considerable cost. For employers under these circumstances, labour appeared to be the one factor of production in relation to which costs could be pared down. In short, labour cost appeared to offer the flexibility which led to its being squeezed. Purely in wage terms, young women (from the age of about ten) were the cheapest possible source of labour. This was especially true of those who came from rural areas, where average incomes tended to be lower. This emphasis on the employment of 'cheaper' workers became an integral part of the strategy of employers in these industries, a strategy which lasted right through the pre-World War II years.<sup>92</sup> Historians have questioned whether this labour was as 'cheap' as

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*Kaitaiki no Koyo Rodo* (Tokyo 1969).

<sup>90</sup> For Tomioka see Tomioka Seishijo Shi Hensan Iinkai *Tomioka Seishijo Shi* (2 vols.) (Tomioka 1977).

<sup>91</sup> For example, the Osaka Spinning Mill (T. Chokki, 'Labour Management in the Cotton Spinning Industry' in K. Nakagawa (ed.) *Labour and Management* (Tokyo 1979)).

<sup>92</sup> Japanese textile producers were, of course, not alone in pursuing this strategy. Thomas Dublin (*Women at Work: the Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York 1979)) argues that low wages were initially the basic reason for the preponderance of women in the early Lowell mills, although once a gender division of labour had

believed by contemporaries. Recruitment costs were extremely high in the pre-World War I years, while turnover of up to 100% per annum meant that successive cohorts of inexperienced recruits had to be provided with the necessary skills. This was a particular problem in silk reeling and weaving, which required considerable levels of skill. Wages are far from representing actual labour cost, and even into the interwar years labour productivity in Japan was estimated to be considerably lower than in most of Japan's competitors.<sup>93</sup> What is important here, though, is that the decision to focus on the employment of young unmarried women on the assumption that they were cheap was rarely questioned, and this premise established a powerful precedent.

c) Then there was the question of demand. The demand for labour from the mechanised textile industries exploded during the 1890s and 1900s. Existing factories expanded, while myriads of new ones were set up year after year, leading to intense competition for workers. The proliferation of new producers meant finding sufficient workers to initiate production, and then perhaps doubling or tripling that number within the space of a few years. Between 1900 and 1910 the number of factory-based silk operatives increased from 125,000 to 190,000, and of female cotton spinners from 43,000 to 75,000.<sup>94</sup> Local labour supply not only became increasingly expensive, threatening rising production costs, but also became inadequate in terms of numbers. This shortage reinforced the search by employers for young women from rural areas, deemed to harbour ample supplies of 'surplus' labour. As the industrialisation process separated home and work, these newly employed workers were less likely to be married (since only those without domestic responsibilities could leave the farming household), and reinforced the youth of the workforce. The life cycle approach to women's work

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been established, managers' values tended to sustain it.

<sup>93</sup> The issue of recruitment cost is discussed in my papers 'Recruitment in the Japanese Silk Reeling and Cotton Spinning Industries, 1870s-1930s' (*Proceedings of the British Association for Japanese Studies*, vol. IX, 1984) and 'Textile Employers and Female Workers in Prewar Japan: Economic Imperatives in an Imperfect Labour Market' (*Meiji Daigaku Keiei Ronshu* 45, 2-4 March 1998).

<sup>94</sup> S. Fujino (ed.) *Sen'i Sangyo*, vol.XI of *Choki Keizai Tokei* (Tokyo, 1981) pp.300-1, table 58;

– it was assumed that these women would work at most for a few years before marriage – was increasingly built into the operation of the labour market.

d) Added to these factors of labour cost and labour demand was one which related to gender, namely employers' perceptions of the nature of male and female workers. The focus on the employment of young, rural women was sustained by a widely held assumption on the part of employers that female workers were more docile and less troublesome than their male counterparts, especially if they were young and from rural areas. While such assumptions may have in part been a rationalisation of employment strategies which were already being pursued, there is no doubt that they remained a powerful influence in the specific targeting of young women. This belief in the possibilities of control over the labour force dominated the recruitment of female textile labour throughout the prewar years.<sup>95</sup>

Labour unrest and social concern about poor factory working conditions around the turn of the century, and a revival of labour activism in the years after 1917, only served to reinforce this prevailing view.

Overall, therefore, pre-industrial work patterns, cost and the rapid increase in the demand for labour, combined with assumptions about the nature of women workers, served as the main arguments for the mass employment of young women workers in the larger scale, export-oriented branches of textile production. In articulating these arguments employers had adopted a 'life cycle' view of women's work, incorporating in their strategies a belief that manufacturing work was for young women who would work for a brief period before marriage. As suggested above, it is debateable whether many of the above arguments were as valid as employers presented them to be. While actual wage levels were low, high turnover, low productivity and overhead costs meant that this kind of labour was rarely as cheap as it was made out to be. The increased demand for labour slowed

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N. Takamura *Nihon Bosekigyo Shi Josetsu* (2 vols.) (Tokyo 1971) vol.1 p.302ff..

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Dainihon Menshi Boseki Rengokai, *Boseki Shokko Jijo Chosa Gaiyo Hokokusho* (Osaka 1898, repr., Tokyo, 1971); Fukuoka Chiho Shokugyo Shokai Jimukyoku *Dekasegi Joko ni kansuru Chosa* (Fukuoka 1928); Niigata-ken Dekasegimono Hogo Kumiai Rengokai *Chosa Hokoku* (Niigata 1936).

considerably, particularly after the First World War, as the cotton spinning industry engaged in widespread rationalisation in the 1920s, and silk production collapsed in the wake of the Wall Street crash. Nor was female textile labour always as passive as employers liked to think.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the focus on young women never totally excluded older ones from the system, and in some areas factories employed married women with service of ten to twenty years.

By the interwar years, therefore, it appears that much of the earlier rationale for this employment strategy may have gone. However, employers appeared to be locked into a kind of path dependence, in which the costs of change were claimed to be too high to contemplate. Rather than attempting to break out of the cycle of reliance on low wage, high turnover, low productivity female workers, these employers sought instead to refine the existing system and make it work as best as they could. By the end of World War I this strategy was as yet restricted to silk reeling, cotton spinning and some parts of the weaving industry. That other branches of textiles had not had to face these same imperatives contributed to the diversity that can be seen at the start of the interwar period, and which to a considerable extent persisted.

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<sup>96</sup> For information on disputes and other forms of ‘resistance’ see E. Matsumoto *Seishi Rodo Sogi no Kenkyu* (Tokyo 1991); Y. Tojo *Seishi Domei no Joko Toroku Seido: Nihon Kindai no Hen’yo to Joko no ‘Jinkaku’* (Tokyo 1990); E. P. Tsurumi *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton NJ 1990); B. Molony ‘Activism among Women in the Taisho Cotton Textile Industry’ in G. Bernstein (ed.) *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley, CA 1991).

## The Persistence of Diversity: Relative Industrialisation

In sustaining diversity, there is no doubt that the different branches of textile production continued to have different needs in terms of capital, labour and technology, and that these differing needs dictated their labour strategies.

- a) Varying attributes were required of workers. While reeling, spinning and weaving employers spoke at some length of the need for manual dexterity and ‘nimble fingers’ pushing them towards female employment, other textile producers expressed a clear preference for the physical strength associated with male workers. Dyeing and fulling, for example, was extremely heavy work, which had long been undertaken primarily by men, and the slow pace at which mechanisation took place in these areas inhibited any rapid growth in the number of female workers. What started off with concern over the physical attributes of workers, however, increasingly became associated with the degree of investment which employers were willing to make in their workforce. ‘Women’s jobs’ called for natural dexterity that was unlikely to be improved by training, which was in any case hardly worthwhile when female workers were unlikely to stay in employment long. ‘Men’s jobs’ were increasingly associated with skill, and ideas of investment in skill training.<sup>97</sup>
- b) Different branches of textile production continued through the interwar decades to be associated with different rates of capital intensity and scale of production. Cotton spinning and silk reeling had moved first in this direction, to be followed by the thread industries and weaving (which interwar was increasingly integrated with spinning production). The finishing and garment trades lagged in this respect. Here the persistence of more local, small scale operations and family businesses slowed any shift towards the employment of young unmarried women.

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<sup>97</sup> The gendered nature of training in textile production is shown in, for example, H. Hazama *Nihon Romu Kanri Shi Kenkyu* (Tokyo 1964) p. 236ff.. For a contemporary text showing an emphasis on the inherent attributes associated with women workers see Chuo Shokugyo Shokai Jimukyoku Seishi Joko no Noryokuteki Chosa (Tokyo 1929).

c) Associated with this were differing rates of mechanisation. The spread of mechanisation was associated with certain perceptions of the workforce. Technology was widely regarded as a substitute for labour skills, pushing the employment of unskilled young women, who were regarded as not worth investing in. The emphasis instead was in achieving efficiency through shopfloor organisation, Taylorism etc.

d) The supposed ‘docility’ of female workers was mentioned above as a key argument in employment strategies. ‘Docility’, however, was less of an imperative for smaller family businesses and workshops. Employers turned to young women in those branches of production where labour disputes could do the most damage, namely those which were larger scale, capital intensive and export-oriented. Elsewhere in textiles labour unrest was much lower on the agenda.

To some extent, therefore, the persistence of diversity can be explained through a ‘relative stage of industrialisation’ argument. Since different branches of production varied in such respects as degree of mechanisation, scale of operation etc., this was reflected in the composition of their workforces. At the end of the interwar years cotton spinning, dominated by a few huge companies, was located at one end of the spectrum, and sewing, with its myriad individual workshops, at the other. Such a contention, however, also points to a gradual diminishing of the diversity, as most branches moved towards greater capital intensity, scale of production and use of technology. Data on industrial structure during this period make it very clear that production facilities were moving in the direction of greater concentration, and the relative importance of small and family workshops was diminishing.<sup>98</sup> What is also apparent, however, is that we need to look at specific features of interwar Japanese development to explain why the patterns of the large scale producers increasingly spread to other branches of production, i.e. why one particular employment strategy (the use of young

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<sup>98</sup> This is only a relative decline within the textile industry. In the Japanese economy as a whole small firms and workshops were a crucial part of the manufacturing sector, and have remained so

females) became more and more dominant.

## The Erosion of Diversity: Employment, Mobilisation and Rhetoric

Several factors may be suggested as having contributed to the growing inclination on the part of more textile producers to utilise large numbers of young, female employees. The most important of these are indicated here.

- a) One is the growth in alternative employment opportunities for men. Especially in the 1930s, job opportunities for men in manufacturing grew with the expansion of the heavy industries.<sup>99</sup> While alternative job opportunities for women also increased, particularly with the growth of the service sector,<sup>100</sup> their employment was worse hit by the depression, while rationalisation in cotton spinning in the 1920s and the subsequent collapse of silk employment restricted their opportunities further. Many of the jobs available to men were in general more lucrative than those in textile employment, and also higher value-added and associated with greater skills, so it became more difficult and more expensive to procure male workers. While older male textile workers tended to stay, particularly in those branches associated with strength or skill, the result was a decline in the proportion of men in textiles, and the ‘ageing’ of the male textile workforce.
- b) After 1931, and particularly from 1937, the availability of male workers was increasingly affected by mobilisation and war, reinforcing the existing pressures to turn to female, rather than male labour.
- c) The influence of the large textile producers, particularly in cotton spinning, was immense. It was these employers who played a pathbreaking role in formulating

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into the late twentieth century.

<sup>99</sup> See A. Gordon *The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan: Heavy Industry, 1853-1955* (Cambridge, MA 1985).

<sup>100</sup> See e.g. M. Nagy, ‘Middle Class Working Women during the Interwar Years’ in G. Bernstein (ed.) *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley, CA 1991).

and articulating ‘paternalist’ ideas, and in articulating labour relations policies specifically focussed around the employment of young women.<sup>101</sup> This industry was, moreover, attended by considerable business success during the 1930s.<sup>102</sup> Cotton employers became in effect the mouthpiece for highly influential views representing this particular labour strategy as the ideal norm for the textile industries as a whole, and for female manufacturing employment in general.

d) These labour policies were articulated in the context of interwar ideologies relating to gender roles in society. An increasingly strong emphasis on concepts of domesticity and motherhood in this period appeared to conflict with the economy’s extensive reliance on women’s work, particularly as industrialisation increased the degree of physical separation of home and workplace. This apparent conflict aroused major debate not only among feminists, but in society in general.

The solution which emerged – and in this respect Japan is far from unique – was a growing dependence of factory industry on young women who could leave their homes (future mothers), and a reliance on married women (current mothers) in those areas of the economy where domestic and work responsibilities could be more easily combined, for example home working and agriculture.<sup>103</sup>

These factors contributed more broadly to an increasingly formalised division of home and work responsibilities, a shift of males to the ‘outside’ sphere (from the early 1930s there were fewer men than women working in agriculture, for example), a growing polarisation between the work and social roles of non-married and married women, and increasing acceptance of the ‘life cycle’

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<sup>101</sup> Described in H. Hazama *Nihon Romu Kanri Shi Kenkyu* (Tokyo 1964); K. Sugihara ‘Nihon ni okeru Kindaiteki Rodo – Seikatsu Kateizo no Seiritsu’ chapter 12 of Sugihara *Ajikan Boeki no Keisei to Kozo* (Tokyo, 1996).

<sup>102</sup> There is a vast literature concerning the sources of Japanese competitiveness vis-à-vis the relative decline of the British cotton industry at this time. For a summary see A. Robertson ‘Lancashire and the Rise of Japan, 1910-1937’ *Business History* XXXII 4 (1990).

<sup>103</sup> See B. Molony ‘Equality versus Difference: the Japanese Debate over “Motherhood Protection”, 1915-1950’ in J. E. Hunter (ed.) *Japanese Women Working* (London 1993); Y. Miyake ‘Doubling Expectations: Motherhood and Women’s Factory Work under State Management in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s’, in G. Bernstein (ed.) *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*; J. E. Hunter ‘Factory Legislation and the Abolition of Night work in the Japanese Cotton Spinning Industry’ in T. Yui & K. Nakagawa (eds.) *Japanese Management in Historical Perspective* (Tokyo 1989).

view of women's work.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that while diversity in terms of workforce persisted in textile production through the interwar years, there were also considerable pressures making for greater uniformity. That uniformity was based on the pattern established initially by the more highly capitalised, larger scale, mechanised branches of production, namely the employment of young, unmarried females, many of whom worked only for a few years at most. In this process there occurred an increasing divergence between the working experiences of men and women. The interwar textile industry therefore extended and confirmed patterns of employment and labour market institutions which have had a lasting influence on the gender segmentation of the labour market in Japan through to the present.