

Regional labour solidarity and a new regional moment in post-apartheid Southern Africa:

Retail workers in Mozambique and Zambia¹

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Our investigation into the long-term dynamics of world labor will thus be on the lookout for...the struggles of newly emerging working classes that are successively made and strengthened as an unintended outcome of the development of historical capitalism, even as old working class are being unmade (Silver: 20).

South African multinationals in Southern Africa are opening up new possibilities for regional trade unionism. With South Africa's democratisation in the 1990s, pent-up capital in South Africa expanded northwards into the Southern African region – including the 14 countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). In contrast with historical patterns, South African multinational companies expanded further northwards beyond their traditional trading partners in Southern Africa into countries north of Africa. These South African multinationals have brought new economic investments into stagnant African economies and provided an impetus to economic growth.

The impact of these South African multinationals on their foreign locales has been significant. As new shopping centres, fast food chains, banks, refurbished and new manufacturing plants have been opened, local environments have registered the new foreign investment in different ways. While governments have welcomed foreign investment, workers have welcomed their new workplaces with a mixture of optimism and resistance. South African multinationals are agents of a new kind of regionalism that has opened up new possibilities for workers and their trade unions in Southern Africa.

In a few workplaces, a new regional imaginary has emerged amongst workers at these new, foreign firms. These firms are unleashing a regional geographic imaginary that entails a set of 'regional claims' to the South African company. The ability of these 'regional claims' to translate into regional trade union solidarity, however, is limited by the uneven development of trade unions in the region. Drawing on the case study of workers at Shoprite, a South African retail multinational, in Zambia and Mozambique, this article shows that South Africa is a central reference point and regional standard-bearer for workers at these firms. While workers at Shoprite in Mozambique have been unable to mount a successful strike against the company, workers in Zambia have organized militant national strikes, regenerating their trade union leadership in the retail sector. The stronger South African trade union movement, on the other hand, has had little resources to harness this new regional political opportunity into a combined challenge to South African capital at the regional level, given its defensive national stance.

The case-studies presented below try to show that the regionalism of workers differs with the regionalism of capital. While South African companies argue that national standards should determine the wage demands and expectations of workers at their foreign branches, workers in post-Apartheid Southern Africa have a new and different set of regional expectations. They expect the company to have uniform, regional standards, rather than differentiating between workers in different national contexts. A number of factors have contributed to this tendency among workers to set South Africa up as the regional standard-bearer: better conditions (both imagined and real) of South African workers; South Africa's economic status as leading regional power; and the reputation of its trade union movements as militant and democratic. The competing regionalisms of South African companies and workers at their foreign branches have set the stage for a political conflagration.

In this article, the first section presents the case for a new regional moment in Southern Africa after South Africa's democratization. The second part of the article identifies some of the similarities in the demands and claims of workers at two Shoprite supermarkets in Maputo and Lusaka. This is followed with a discussion of the uneven class capacities of Shoprite workers in Mozambique and Zambia, pointing to some of the differences between the two locales. The third section provides an illustrative case of the new regional faultlines by reporting on the strike of Shoprite workers in Zambia, where workers compared their wages with Shoprite workers in South and Southern Africa. In the fourth section, a theoretical analysis of worker's claims is presented using the concepts of 'regional claims' and the 'politics of scale'. The article then concludes with the issue of regional trade union collaboration and the possibilities for and obstacles to regional solidarity amongst workers. To some extent, the failure of the trade unions to make good on this new regional moment leads to the isolation of such new proletarian militancy. I argue that regional claims, although similar amongst Shoprite workers in Zambia and Mozambique, produce different outcomes and capacities for resistance depending on the national differences, capacities and regional imaginaries in each context.

A new regional moment in post-Apartheid Southern Africa

Since democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the economic expansion of South African multinationals into Africa has increased significantly. About four times more is exported from South Africa to other parts of Africa than is imported. South African investment has increased from R9bn to R30bn between 1997 and 2002. While many observers expected stronger economic links between South Africa and Africa as one consequence of democratic transition, the surge of South African capital into Africa was an unanticipated outcome of democratic South Africa. Contrary to the trope of African stagnation advanced by 'Afro-pessimists', new geographical imaginaries are forming out of this confluence of shifting regional dynamics.

Opinion in the past has been divided about the significance of the post-Apartheid South African investment. In the last decade, new shopping malls have been opened in at least fifteen African cities where none previously existed. While shopping malls and department stores are not a new phenomenon in Africa, the new shopping centres have extended the reach of malls in the continent. In the midst of Africa's economic and social decline, the shopping mall materializes with all the glitz of the Manhattan mall - marble-tiled entrances, bright neon lights, wide aisles and thousands of new commodities from which to choose. These malls follow the contours of uneven regional development, what Cooper calls sites of 'lumpy capitalism' (Cooper, 2000) where dynamism and change co-exist with stagnation.

In the investment-starved countries of the region, the significance of any new investment is enormous in social terms, often representing the only sites of formal sector job opportunities and some - even though limited - prospects for a career. In the case of retail sector investment, "bricks and mortar" development are a huge transformation, bringing consumer-friendly environments and expanded consumer choices. With the persistent decline of formal sector employment in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s (World Labor Report, 1997-1998), any new growth in employment has a significance beyond what the economic statistics suggest.

While comparatively small amounts, these new investments have an important qualitative impact. South African companies have a high level of social visibility. One of the key sectors of the new investment is retail and services. These shops and stores also have a high level of physical visibility in urban environments. Consumptive patterns and imaginations change dramatically with new shopping malls, even for those who are unable to afford these new products.

New regional possibilities for workers in Zambia and Mozambique

To the extent that workers at Shoprite in Lusaka and Maputo imagine a utopia on earth, South Africa is the geographic reference point and the standard-bearer of a better life. The new regional moment opened up by post-apartheid South Africa has signaled new possibilities to African workers. If anything new is happening in the midst of Africa's marginalisation, then these workers are at the helm of one dynamic process, what may be referred to as the 'mall of Africa'. In this sense they are like Bergquist's² strategic workers in enclave economies, enjoying an enhanced status because of the importance of their sector to the national economy. This section begins with the backdrop of Zambia's economic reversals and Mozambique's devastating civil war and the new South African-owned shopping malls in the 1990s. Reporting on interviews with stratified samples of workers at these firms, the main part of this section elaborates on the regional expectations of workers in these two contexts.

Zambia and Mozambique are amongst the poorest countries in the region, emerging from phases of severe economic decline that structural adjustment exacerbated. Securing foreign investment is a central strategy of both these countries for future economic growth. In the 1990s peace, democratic elections and relative economic stability have stilled the trauma of war and transition in Mozambique. With the lowest South African investment from the Apartheid era compared to other countries of the region, liberalization of the Mozambican economy since 1985 has allowed a dramatic increase in South African investment.

At the height of Zambia's growth in the 1970s, workers were optimistic about the future. Modern life was within their grasp, particularly for workers on the growth-generating mines. The failure of copper industrialization and independence-led modernity has made Zambians look to foreign investors for Zambia's return to the 'modern' world. The turn to structural adjustment in the 1980s opened the way for South African and other multinationals to re-enter the Zambian economy on highly favourable terms. While independence and the struggles that emerged over the direction of the Zambian economy brought an awareness of the importance of the national economy, public discourse advocates the idea that external assistance is indispensable for the country's survival. South Africa has emerged high up on the list of external rescue parties. Workers focus on the principal international investors, who also hail from southern Africa.

Historically, Mozambique has been a pivotal part of the regional migrant labour system. Like in Zambia, workers in Mozambique have served South African multinational capital, mostly in South African mines as migrant workers. In post-war Mozambique and post-Apartheid

Southern Africa, however, South African capital is flowing inwards into Mozambique. Labor's outward flow as migrants to South Africa is now being superseded by a new segment of waged workers inside Mozambique working for South African multinationals.

Manda Hill Complex in the capital city of Lusaka is a centerpiece of Shoprite's Zambian investment, with a cost of US\$20m for the shopping centre. Employees and managers were drawn from state-owned wholesale shops when the company first started out in Zambia. The center takes up 22 260 sq m, of which Shoprite occupies 4 608 square metres (Email communication, Center Manager, Kangwa Mukuka, 5 October 2002). The complex is 20% owned by Zambia Venture Capital and 80% Commonwealth Africa Investment, the name under which Shoprite trades in Zambia. There are about 56 tenants at the store. Shoprite and Game (general merchandising retail multinational) – both South African-owned - are the two anchor tenants. Shoprite-Manda Hill (in Lusaka) is by far the largest of the firm's eighteen Zambian supermarkets. (The three other medium-sized outlets are in Lusaka and in the Copperbelt towns of Ndola and Kitwe. The remaining fourteen stores employ fewer than a hundred workers each.) It is not only Manda Hill's larger physical size that makes it Shoprite's Zambian flagship, but also because Manda Hill has been the only shopping mall of its kind to date in Zambia.

Modeled on the US shopping mall, the Shoprite Center in Maputo - *Centro Commercial* - takes up about 12 500 sqm for the shops and 12 500 ha for the car park of downtown municipal property.³ The Center entailed an initial capital outlay of R5.4m (less than US\$1m at the time).⁴ The Central Business District in Maputo is spread out rather than concentrated in a cluster of shops. The Shoprite store is situated on the edge of the CBD, in the downtown area. It is located in an L-shaped, single-storey mall of shops, many of them South African-owned (Truworths, Pep stores). Flanked by a diversity of housing, the Center is sandwiched between beautiful houses and middle-range apartments on its east - what Mozambicans have called "cement city" - while to its north and west there is a sprawling, high-density township abuzz with people and informal markets. *Centro Commercial* (Maputo) is smaller than Manda Hill (Lusaka) in both size and capital investment. Both centres are located on the outskirts of the central business district with a predominance of South African-owned retailers and a few locally-owned stores. Despite their geographic separation, different histories and languages, however, the similarities in the claims and perceptions of workers at these two stores were striking.

Shoprite's food supermarkets in African cities are located in the suggestive ambience of the shopping mall. Being part of a shopping mall locates these Shoprite workers in the heart of urban capitalism. Working in this 'space of consumption' places the employee in the midst of this promise of modernity. Retail workers share this space of consumption, even when they are excluded as consumers. Unlike the dreary smokestack environs of the factory worker, the mall employees' labour power is consumed under glamorised conditions. Workers are aware of their relatively privileged position, not least because they were specially selected from around the country to make up the staff at this store. They are aware of the improved retail ambience of Shoprite. In the twelve stores that I visited in Zambia and Maputo, workers followed the uniform dress code of the company, projecting a pristine image that corresponded to the upmarket environs of the mall. Going to work links Shoprite workers to the country's newest economic developments, the 'developed' shopping mall, material evidence of new investment and the economy's new 'spaces of hope'.

Worker respondents believed that conditions for South African workers are vastly superior. Shoprite workers believe that Shoprite-South Africa workers are able to afford cars and drive to work, get loans and own houses, whereas they cannot even own bicycles.

Here in Zambia once you are seen with a car, then you are a suspect of theft. They'll definitely think you stole something from Shoprite.⁵

When asked whether there was anything they liked about South Africa, workers praised South Africa as a country. When asked whether they expected help from South Africa, many workers answered in the affirmative.

When we heard that President Mandela has won the election, we were very happy that South Africa was going to help us.⁶

These views were echoed in the interviews with permanent, casual and female workers. Workers tied their future expectations for Zambia and Mozambique to South Africa and its ability to extend its development to southern African countries. They idealised conditions in South Africa. They realize that they are disadvantaged when things are taken at a national political or economic scale as the standard of living is relatively lower in their countries. They therefore wanted regional economic parity.

In this sense, their claim is one in favour of regional company-level boundaries rather than being based on regional political considerations. While they said that they were hoping for help from South Africa, they did not express strong feelings of political entitlement because of their countries' respective roles in the anti-apartheid struggle. Their main consideration was that they are serving Shoprite well, the company is prospering and therefore they deserve economic returns for their effort. All respondents believed that they should get the same payment and conditions as workers in South Africa, arguing, without exception, that everyone who is part of Shoprite falls 'under the same umbrella' or 'under the same roof', and therefore should be treated the same.

A number of reasons emerged as the main motive for seeking parity in conditions and benefits amongst workers in the region. Much of their sense of regional entitlement was market-oriented: they worked hard and therefore they should be rewarded. Workers demonstrated a desire to make the company succeed if it would improve their conditions. The geographical expansion of Shoprite showed that it was economically successful. They were contributing to Shoprite's profitability, they argued, and therefore should be treated the same as other workers. In so doing, they wanted to discount national variations and set up harmonized regional standards. Economic viability should entitle workers to the same or better conditions as workers in the same company in other countries, they contended.

Workers have knowledge of their South African counterparts through various means. First and primarily, at least 90 per cent of the respondents in both countries cited the company magazine and its reports on workers as the source of their information when asked how they knew that South African workers had better work conditions. The newspaper is distributed regularly on the shop-floor from head office and workers circulate amongst themselves the copies that they receive and what they have read. Images such as the festivities attached to particular social occasions such as weddings, engagements and birthdays had a profound impact on workers in countries where these crucial social occasions are becoming an unattainable luxury. High levels of local poverty and unemployment and illness and death due to AIDs and other causes stretches workers' wages across extended family and friendship networks, causing stress and high levels of responsibility for these relatively younger workers. Many of the respondents lived together with their partners, lacking the resources for such celebratory luxuries such as weddings.

Second, training counterparts within the company – either employees from Shoprite in other countries that they have trained, or South African Shoprite employees who have trained them – exchange information on work conditions. Workers believe that they have played a major role in Shoprite's growth through their work and their training of Shoprite staff from other

countries (for example, Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe). As already mentioned, they have done the shop-floor sales and they are training workers from other new branches in Africa, including South Africa, and Zambian managers are heading up branches in other countries such as Namibia and Tanzania.

The social connections that both Zambians and Mozambicans have through friends and family in South Africa are a third source of information about South African conditions. They speak to friends and relatives by telephone and compare their working conditions. Some of the workers have visited South Africa, visited the Shoprite store there and asked workers about their remuneration. In one exceptional case, a supervisor in Maputo had access to the Shoprite intranet and used this as a source of information about Shoprite's larger operations. Most workers have not had earlier generations of relatives working in South Africa or in the region, so this historical connection with South Africa is absent amongst most workers interviewed.

Fourth, workers have been powerfully affected by Shoprite's geographical expansion. To them it proves a host of things – expansion equals profitability; Shoprite is a powerful regional and African company; Shoprite is part of the African Renaissance. Shoprite is also training workers from a variety of African countries to be managers or upgrading their skills levels. This expansion has been made possible through South Africa's democratisation. Centralised company control puts South Africa at the centre of employees' workplace imaginaries. Workplace interactions and casual chats between South African transport workers and local Zambians and Mozambicans were also another source of information.

As a relatively highly regulated urban space, the mall offers a more formalised work environment. This affects employees' working conditions positively, with regular pay, formal job descriptions and clear lines of accountability. Some workers liked being associated with Shoprite because it is a big, well-known company with many supermarkets in Southern Africa. They had also learnt a lot about retailing by working in various departments, especially those in more skilled jobs in Lusaka and Maputo.

However, unlike the feisty proletariats of new companies and sectors historically, these newly proletarianised workers saw themselves as humiliated beggars. Their only current choices were Shoprite or the streets. Unemployment was an overwhelming sword of Damocles. Interviews with workers were an emotional outpouring. Across the categories of age, gender, skill and permanent or casual status, workers felt misused and mistreated by Shoprite management. While they had positive comments about the company's strength, its large size and its profitability, they felt that they were excluded from the benefits of work in a sound company. Wages, along with hours of work and overtime pay, were the principal grievances. While the evidence showed that Shoprite was paying well above the legislated minimum wage, the cost of living estimates reported by workers suggested that Shoprite's wages were insufficient for their basic needs.

Workers perceived Shoprite's work conditions as dehumanising. They felt that they deserved better treatment as human beings. This assertion of their bodily needs shows workers laying claim to different scales – that of the body and the universal human scales. These bodily claims were not directed at their national state, however, which they felt was too weak in relation to foreign investors and South African companies. Instead, these claims were directed at the company itself, entailing a process of regional boundary-making where all Shoprite workers, irrespective of national boundaries, should be included in equitable company membership. Casualisation and high levels of family dependency due to privatization was pervasive. Most

Southern African countries have no social security systems. Lack of pension, medical aid and funeral benefits are therefore a problem.

Like the Zambian workers, the Mozambican workers realized the extent of South African control over the workplace, with most respondents arguing that the shop-floor is controlled by South Africans. Like Zambian workers, they too argued that effective Mozambican management would be better than “transmission-belt” local management.

I would like Mozambicans to have the liberty to do that job. All the administration is South African and the Mozambican doesn't have freedom or the right of expression. Mozambicans have a lot of limitations and depend on South Africa to take decisions. Mozambicans just take orders.⁷

Both sets of workers felt that the extent of South African control over the shop-floor undermines the autonomy and efficiency of local management for whom they had little respect, with only one or two exceptions. Mozambican workers, like Zambian workers, perceived the South African trade unions as militant and adversarial, and hence more successful in their demands.

Notions that South African companies are perpetuating regional inequality were widespread amongst those interviewed. All the workers interviewed said they would like to leave Shoprite if they had alternative work options. Respondents all criticised the perceived servility of the majority of the black local managers at Shoprite. Although they loved a number of things about the company and about working there, these failed expectations have made them increasingly bitter towards the company.

While Zambian and Mozambican workers use South Africa and the region as a reference point, internal differences in the conditions of retail workers in South Africa point to the idealised notions that workers in the region have of South Africa. Conditions of South African retail workers have worsened since the 1980s, highlighting some of the inaccuracies in workers' perceptions (See Appendix, Table 1). Although South African workers are part of a larger, more industrialised economy and have secured significant gains through their unions, workers' conditions have again deteriorated even after democratization in the 1990s. At the same time as black South African workers were liberated from racial capitalism, they were plunged into neo-liberal economic restructuring that produced growing internal differentiation in the South African working class. The number of permanent, unionized workers declined in the 1990s as the numbers of casualised, unprotected workers grew. Although they are not wrong about their inferior conditions relative to South African permanent workers, the conditions of South African casual retail workers is comparable to their own. Permanent retail workers also lack job security.

Conditions for retail workers – both permanent and casual – in South Africa have worsened in the last decade.⁸ South African retailers are restructuring the labour process and making greater use of sub-contracted and casual labour. In the 1980s, most retail workers were permanents with benefits. Between 1987 and 1997, part-time and casual employment increased from 11.8 per cent of total employment to over 19 per cent, coinciding with the shift to longer store hours in the 1980s. Independent research suggests a much higher prevalence of casual labour, however, ranging from 45 to 65 per cent.¹²⁴ ('Casual labour' refers to those working 24 hours per week or less.) Growing fragmentation has occurred in South Africa's retail sector. Such workplace restructuring has eroded important gains made by South African trade unions.

The worsening conditions for workers at Shoprite in South Africa suggests that the South African reality diverges from notions of South Africa as a 'little Europe'. Wages amongst retail workers in the three countries demonstrate the uneven regional patterns, with better wages for South African workers (see Appendix, Table 1). While wages are higher at Shoprite in South

Africa and workers in the region have a material reason to compare with workers in the same company in South Africa, these higher wages and improved benefits apply to an 'eroding core' who themselves feel increasingly more vulnerable.

Interviewed workers often cited the Shoprite uniform as one reason why Mozambicans and Zambians initially assumed that Shoprite staff were part of a labour elite. The suggestive, imaginary reach of the mall brings the expanded global consumptive universe within the reach of the retail worker. Any perceived or real deprivation due to wage levels is thrown into sharp relief when working in such commodity havens, a contrast that creates the equivalent of Hirschman's 'tunnel effect',⁹ whereby increased hopes for social mobility are frustrated by social inequality.

Claims for participation in these new shopping malls are not directed at the metropolitan scale, however. Workers are not protesting to the owners of the mall (Shoprite Holdings) and the municipal management against their exclusion from this new consumptive space. It is not through metropolitan citizenship but through company citizenship that they seek redress. For the workers, the company that has its headquarters in South Africa becomes the target of their desires for inclusion in the new commodity culture.

Despite the overwhelming similarities in the responses of workers in both countries to the same set of questions, there are differences between workers at Shoprite-Maputo and workers at Shoprite-Manda Hill. Unlike Shoprite-Zambian workers who reported an awareness of their mistreatment amongst the public, Mozambican workers felt that their plight was not understood by the public. The general perception amongst Mozambicans, according to informants, was that working for Shoprite was a privileged position, compared with other local and foreign companies. Without exception workers felt that the perception from other Mozambicans is that they are a labour elite. Unlike Shoprite-Zambian workers who reported an awareness of their mistreatment amongst the public, Mozambican workers felt that their plight was not understood by the public. The general perception amongst Mozambicans, according to informants, was that working for Shoprite was a privileged position, compared with other local and foreign companies. Without exception workers felt that the perception from other Mozambicans is that they are a labour elite.

Conditions of Shoprite workers in Zambia appear to be the worst amongst the three countries (see Appendix, Table 1). Zambian permanent workers were doing the most overtime and unpaid overtime work for the least wages per month when compared with Mozambique and South Africa. Exploitation of Shoprite workers through the use casual labor appears to be the pattern in Mozambique. Shoprite-Maputo workers are also paid well below averages for formal sector workers in the national labor market. Casual workers in South Africa are paid around 1.7 times more than their Zambian counterparts. Casual workers in Mozambique, although they earn more per month, earn less in real terms as they are working a full week of 49.7 hours. The category of casual worker ("eventuals") is being used in violation of the Mozambican Labor Law through the repeated renewal of these contracts.

Casual workers in South Africa and Zambia work between nineteen and twenty-four hours per week, so there is a relationship between their low wage rates and their under-employment. South African permanents are earning almost twice as much as permanent workers in Mozambique who also earn more than their Zambian counterparts. The cost of casual labor is cheaper in Mozambique but only constitutes a minority of the workforce, unlike in Zambia. This is possibly because these casuals are full-time equivalents, whereas in Zambia two casual workers make up one full-time equivalent. Mozambican workers earn less than other formal sector workers in their national labor market. Zambian permanent workers earn more than the \$59 minimum legislated wage for shop-workers in the grade of cashier. However, this does not

indicate what the actual average minimum wage is in the retail and services sectors. (The wage rates are for workers in the rate of shelf-packers. Clerks earn higher incomes than those cited below.) An approximate regional geometry of standards suggests that Zambian Shoprite workers have the worst conditions when compared with South African and Mozambican Shoprite workers, an important factor in the strike that took place in Zambia in June 2003.

Shoprite workers strike in Zambia

When Zambian workers began a 3-day work stoppage at the eighteen Zambian stores of Shoprite on 21 June 2003, this was surely no extraordinary event. But African labour has travelled a convoluted path. Cowed by chronic unemployment, a discredited ex-president who was elected into government office after being the trade union federation's president, a ravaged economy and aggressive, "no-holds-barred" privatisation, risking dismissal would appear foolhardy for any 'rational economic actor'. Yet these workers put their livelihoods and the livelihoods of the extended families they supported, on the line. This was, indeed, a remarkable dispute. The strike marked a turning point in labor relations for Zambian workers and was one of the first strikes at the foreign stores of Shoprite.

The information below is based on interviews on the June strike that were conducted in Zambia in August 2003 with the Shoprite General Manager in Zambia, the Regional Manager, a branch manager, an administrative manager, three worker leaders, two trade union representatives (from the National Union for the Commercial and Industrial Workers), the Deputy Minister of Labor and a Focus Group comprising sixteen workers (permanent, casual, male and female) from Manda Hill who had participated in the strike.

The strike attracted a lot of public attention. Newspapers headlined reports of the strike, Zambian TV headlined the strike action for two days, interviewing workers on TV, radios ran updates about the strike, and human rights groups also commented on the strike.

After the down-tools we were receiving a lot of comments from the people - the public - saying that the worker is not being cared for. Letters were being written (Interview, NUCIW Negotiation Team Leader and Deputy General Secretary for Finance, Kitwe, August 2003).

The first demand was around wages, the primary issue in the strike. Workers said they were unable to support themselves on their current wages. Casual workers felt particularly aggrieved at their income. Permanent workers also spoke out about the bad conditions of casual workers. The second concern was that the increase should be a large increase – demands began at 300% of existing wages - as they believed only a significant increase would begin to solve their problems. Significantly, they had learnt from their attendance at a South African trade union meeting in South Africa that they were the lowest paid in the region, and were very disgruntled about this. They also wanted the Zambian Human Resources manager removed. Their understanding was that an HR manager should act as a mediator between management and the workers, and therefore also represent their interests. Not only was he not playing the mediating role, he was also a Zambian. As a Zambian, he should be able to identify with the problems of Zambian workers.

Workers expressed strong feelings of bitterness over the company's perceived lack of empathy with the challenges that confront them. From the interviews I conducted with some of the workers who had gone on strike, they argued that the exchange between management and workers has been unequal. The investment has been successful and expansion has been possible for the company. Workers at the company, however, are not surviving. According to these

workers, Zambians have allowed South Africans a period of unfettered access to their national economy. South Africans appear to be abusing Zambia's invitation. In their view, the multinational encounter has been an unequal one.

Workers at Shoprite belong to the NUCIW (National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers Union), an affiliate of the ZCTU (Zambian Congress of Trade Unions). Of the 814 permanent workers, 576 are members (70.7%), so the trade union has a majority at the company. Casual workers are not represented in the negotiations as they do not fall under the union's Recognition Agreement. Trade union respondents felt that the union had lost credibility with the Shoprite workers and needed to work to regain this credibility.

That trust in the trade union is not there. They don't see that we are there to assist them (Interview, Mable Kaloto, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

New officials were elected to leadership positions in NUCIW. The previous trade union official in the Shoprite negotiating team and another senior NUCIW official were dismissed on charges of corruption. It is alleged that management bribed trade union negotiators in past negotiations (Interview, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, 24 September). One of the new incumbents is much younger than the replaced officials. She is thirty-two years old and has worked for the union for twelve years, including as the Head of Accounts. Her description of events shows how the union had to battle to win the confidence of workers after the poor past relationship between NUCIW and Shoprite workers.

In the beginning, workers thought the trade union was betraying them. Management bribed the trade union negotiation team. The National Executive Committee (of NUCIW) sat down to review workers' grievances at the beginning of 2003. They picked a new team leader as the chief spokesperson – the Deputy General Secretary for Finance. After changing the pattern, we kept some of the team and also brought in fresh blood so workers could see a difference in it...The NEC decided on new elections because of pressure from the members (Interview, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

According to Ms Kaloto, once the negotiation team was changed, the union's role could be evaluated more clearly.

Let's see if we are the problem or Shoprite management. As a trade union we are tired of having our members complaining. This time, if we have to bring the heavens down, we are not ready to give up. Our workers have suffered for so long. They (the company) had five years tax-free, so what are they complaining about. They paid low wages...Basson said Zambia is making money. Why can't we have a piece of the cake?...On the fifteenth of every month, the (Shoprite) shelves are empty. On the twenty-eighth to the first of the month, it's very busy (Interview, Mable Kaloto, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

Shoprite's rapid stock turn-over suggests to local observers, including local trade union observers, that the company is making good profits. Worker leaders also argued that the formation of the interim regional executive "helped to unite the workers, especially at the five stores in Lusaka (Interview, Worker Representative, Bargaining Team, Shoprite, August 2003).

Trade union representatives also emphasized the importance of death and medical benefits in the wage package.

While wages at Shoprite may be better than other foreign and local companies, members were dissatisfied because their benefits are not good. Death benefits and medical benefits are bad. NUCIW employees have a clinic that they can go to. This is one condition that we *must* have (Interview, Mable Kaloto, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

Like the workers, Ms Kaloto also argues that there should be equality with South African Shoprite wage conditions.

Workers know how much they are selling because they are the ones doing the work. It is not fair for Shoprite to pay permanent workers in Zambia the same wages they are paying casual workers in South Africa. If they're going to call it Shoprite Holdings, it should have the same conditions (Interview, Mable Kaloto, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

The union respondent also felt that they had seen a change in the office of the Minister of Labor. Her identification with the workers came through very strongly and worker problems were presented as a problem confronting all Zambians.

We are the ones that feel the impact. Tomorrow I don't want to go to Shoprite and see those conditions. It's going to be my younger brother or my daughter (Interview, Mable Kaloto, NUCIW Regional Secretary for Lusaka region, August 2003).

Indications were that the union was willing to settle on a minimum of K400,000. An increase is K150,000 "is nothing", she said.

Regional Claims and Regional geographic imaginaries

Southern African workers construct idealised notions of South African workplaces and work conditions that often diverge from the actual reality of work in post-apartheid South Africa. Perhaps ironically, such idealised notions create perceptions of a 'labour aristocracy', where the privileged group of workers – in this case South African - are set up as the reference point for comparison, and feelings of 'relative deprivation' arise. These perceptions are ironic as they fail to recognise the poor conditions within the supposedly privileged group. Because workers think or know that another group of workers is being treated better than they are, they are motivated either to claim inclusion within the privileged stratum, or to take action against their employers to resist their exclusion.

While recognising the salience of race, ethnicity and gender as strategic boundaries for making class, the 'geographies of labour' suggest a different approach to the scalar politics that is such an important component of working class action. 'Scalar' translations – pragmatically shifting reference points between one geographical level and another – determine how local resistance achieves national, regional or global purchase. The regional perceptions of workers are tied to a set of regional expectations that have grown out of a definite context. The new moment of post-apartheid regionalism produces southern Africa as a potential new boundary for workers in the region, with South Africa as the reference point.

To understand the geographical moment of worker imaginaries and class formation, it is necessary to pay attention to space and place. Geography and scale are strategically employed in the competing claims of different social classes? While invoking notions of justice, the geographical dimension of claim-making goes beyond a liberal sense of rights. Unlike the abstract universalism of rights discourses, such claims assert a definite geographical moment that gives definition to the strategic political choices that workers elect to make at any given moment, denoted here by the idea of 'boundary-making'.

As revisionist labor scholars have stressed, ideas and imagination are critical in the fashioning of a working class.¹⁰ Regional working class formation is not simply a reflection of transnational economic processes. The first proposition is that there is a reference-point, chosen in a meaningful, plausible way, in the comparisons that workers make. Reference points play an important part in constructing the boundaries of working class imaginations. Perrot²² points to this referential moment in working class dispositions, arguing that workers construct their images of themselves in relation to some other. Examining the French working class, he asks a relevant question: ‘How did he [the worker] conceive of this whole over time and space?’ Dispositions and imaginaries are not simply determined by economic processes but are constructed relationally, with reference to dominant discourses and images. These constructs include some workers and exclude others, and ‘should not be taken as a report of its real and concrete condition’.¹¹

Cooper’s study of ‘the labor question’ in French and British Africa shows how the geographical idea of ‘empire’ was inserted into African working-class imaginaries in the first half of the twentieth century, thus providing useful cross-cultural insights. Through the rhetoric of universal rights and the consequent application of European labour codes to African workers, colonial administrators evoked the notion amongst African workers of equality with European workers. African trade unionists used European labour standards as a reference point for their own claims.

‘Making’ boundaries points to the geographical envisioning – or ‘imaginary’ – on the part of workers. Historically, race, gender, ethnicity and nationality were employed in various ways by workers and labour movements to exclude some sections of the global working class from this associational community. ‘North–South’ divisions and tensions between workers in Northern, highly developed countries and workers in less developed regions of the South are an example of the geographical contours of such boundary-making processes.¹² Pragmatic solidarity strategies between workers of the North and South can be inspired by these differences in the geographies of labour. Making these exclusionary boundaries is often a defensive strategy actively employed by workers themselves, as Arrighi points out with reference to the early days of the neo-liberal counter-revolution:

Whenever faced with the predisposition of capital to treat labour as an undifferentiated mass with no individuality other than a differential capability to augment the value of capital, proletarians have rebelled. Almost invariably they have seized upon or created anew whatever combination of distinctive traits (age, sex, colour, and assorted geographic specificities) they could use to impose on capital some kind of special treatment. As a consequence, patriarchy, racism and national chauvinism have been integral to the making of the world labour movement . . . and live on in one form or another in most proletarian ideologies and organizations.¹³

Thus, divisions within the working class are not made only by ‘class enemies’, but are actively constructed from within. Adapting Perrot’s question, we may then ask, ‘How did she (the worker) conceive of this whole *over regional time and space*?’ How do workers’ notions of inclusion and exclusion take on a geographical character? If working class dispositions and the establishment of collective identities require a common set of values and goals, how do these common objectives become articulated at a particular geographical scale?

I employ the concept of ‘regional claim-making’ as a way to understand regional boundary-making processes. Claims are understood here as a demand for inclusion into a particular bounded entity. Claim-making is an active, strategic process undertaken by groups of workers and based on political opportunity structures: in this instance the new regional moment and the

regional firm. Claim-making is always contextual and referential. Workers construct their political identities through the inclusion of some workers and the exclusion of other workers, establishing a 'community of rights'. 'While capital may treat workers as so many interchangeable instruments of labour, workers actively construct internal differences.'¹⁴

Uneven class capacities and regional trade union collaboration

A number of important observations can be made about the 2003 strike demands of Shoprite workers in Zambia. Amongst Shoprite's Zambia workers, their financial responsibilities had an important health dimension, as their constant, chilling references to funeral expenses illustrated. Zambia's life expectancy is thirty-seven years. The population is being ravaged by the AIDS pandemic. Income earners have to shoulder part of the medical, funeral and orphan-dependant costs for relatives who are AIDS victims. This is a national crisis that workers are bearing without any assistance from the company. The Minister of Labour pointed out that local and state-owned companies had been more empathetic to these local conditions in the past and had generally given assistance to workers with these problems. Interviews with Shoprite-Zambian managers and NUCIW officials who were retail workers before privatization paint a picture of more humane employment conditions, where time and financial assistance for family crises found a place in the company (Interviews, August 2002). At Shoprite, there is a clash over the bounding of the "family". In the South African regional firm, the nuclear family is recognized as management's only formal responsibility. Responsibilities for extended family-related problems are discretionary. In the absence of a national health security system and company assistance, this tiny segment of formal sector workers at Shoprite bears a disproportionate share of the costs of the AIDS pandemic.

An interesting dimension of the strike was not only its local specificities but its regional dimensions. Regional trade union collaboration between South Africa and other Southern African countries emerged as one impetus behind the Zambia strike. In October 2002, SACCAWU (South African Commercial and Catering Workers Union), the South African retail sector trade union affiliated to COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), organised a national shop stewards' council in Port Elizabeth. This 3-day meeting included the attendance and presentations by company head office management on the first day. Represented at this meeting for the first time were trade union and worker delegates from six other Southern African countries (Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Namibia). At this meeting, SACCAWU's Research Unit made a presentation on Shoprite's African expansion. Perhaps more importantly, the Southern African delegation actively and informally exchanged information during their time together at this meeting.

When the Zambian delegates returned to Lusaka, they were armed with a comparative analysis of wages at Shoprite in the region. From this comparison, Zambian workers saw that the company paid them the least in the region. They corroborated this information with their own gathered while training new Shoprite employees from newly opening stores in other African countries. This information was an important consideration for workers when they decided to embark on strike action in June 2003. Workers and the Deputy Minister of Labour¹⁵ also believed that the company should not have been given 'carte-blanche' when they came into South Africa.

It's maybe because of the way they came in. They were given a lot of respect. They were given the freedom to do anything... even if there's a problem they are able to stand; no one will convince them or chase them back to where they came from. So they've got freedom.¹⁶

This use of South African standards as a reference point is what I characterize here as a 'regional claim' that invokes the regional aspects of the company's organization. Choosing South Africa, the region's sub-hegemon, as the standard-bearer, has a regionalist dimension based on regional geometries of power. Workers are 'upscaling' their local problems to a regional level by invoking the company's national base and arguing in favour of harmonized regional standards.

While workers at Shoprite tend to look to South Africa for inclusion, their perceived exclusion and the denial of their regional claims is producing contradictions that have made them turn against the company. As a result of the lack of national expectations, workers have pragmatically set their sights on the regional company. National demands have given way to regional claims. These regional claims are aimed at the company rather than the political institutions of the region such as the SADC (Southern African Development Community). The regional company is the place where their demands for fair working conditions should be met. Growing regional contradictions are embodied in this multinational dispute between Shoprite, and its Zambian workforce. While the strike demands were around workplace issues and wages, wage demands were pegged with a South African comparison in mind, as well as with wages at other Shoprite branches in the region.

Pressure from below has also led to some regeneration in the trade union, contributing to the removal of senior veterans in the union who embodied the union's inertia and bureaucratization. The revitalized trade union has emerged as a more active representative of the workers' interests in this strike, demonstrating the potential for fresh worker militancy amongst newly proletarianized workers to reinvigorate the ailing African labor movement.

Globalisation analysts often emphasise the effects of local and national work reorganization and neglect the cross-national interdependencies of workers. When confronted with regional possibilities and challenges, national trade union movements are often preoccupied with national, defensive battles and limit their regional interventions. But society and the possibilities for workers and trade unions are also constructed at the regional level. Institutional structures enforce a way of thinking about the region. Regional structures such as SATUCC (Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Committee) give institutional expression to regional power relations. SADC advocates free trade and investment areas as the route to economic growth and development. SATUCC, on the other hand, ventures that workers should have regional harmonization and support each other in their demands for better conditions. These institutions are one level at which regional perceptions are consolidated. Geometries of power govern who has the most institutional clout to back up these perceptions and objectives. Regional perceptions are likely to be shaped by institutions and actors who wield economic or social power.

While the new regional claims of workers at Shoprite may be limited to only those workplaces, new capital investment often brings fresh waves of worker militancy. A focus on national priorities will limit the extent to which trade unions are able to mobilise regional collective action that can in turn enhance national capacities. Regional trade unionism, then, is not only limited by resources and organisational capacity, but by our regional imaginations. If the structure of political opportunity is changing at the regional level, regional trade unionism needs to move beyond institutionalist regional responses such as the policy of regional harmonization, and harness the militant actions of shopfloor workers, including those that embody regional claims.

Perceptions of regional geometries of power are critical in trade union alliances. If Cosatu appears to dominate regional trade union relations, the environment for regional solidarity could be very fractious, with other trade unions distrusting the leadership of the most coherent labour

movement regionally. If unions of other member-states fear that the South African trade union movement will perpetuate Apartheid-inherited geometries of power, they may play dead in regional solidarity attempts, without actually coming out and challenging Cosatu. South African unions enjoy the advantage of numerical strength, financial self-sufficiency, research capacity and international stature. This enables Cosatu to be tempestuous and confident in labour issues, making them vulnerable to perceptions of arrogance, pride and trade union sub-imperialism, the 'Yankees of Africa'.

Regional perceptions about the desirability of state-labour alliances can also divide unions of the region into those who are independent of the state, and those who are closely tied into the state. This may be understood as the extent of post-national sensibilities in the region. Those countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe that have gone through independence and social compacts with the ruling party, and who have since gone into opposition to the state may have one vision of regionalism. Trade unions such as Cosatu and OTM that are institutionalized into state-labour compacts may have very different perceptions of regionalism. Analyzing the contours of these post-national sensibilities may be more fruitful in finding the material and political bases for regional solidarity than a long list of what resources a functioning regional office requires. The ties of Cosatu to the ANC government has led to a strong regional perception or feeling that the South African labour movement is a conduit for propagating the hegemonic regional interests of the South African government. The commonality of position between Cosatu and the state on the social clause is one instance of the regional effects of this alliance. Similarly, resistance to opening up South African markets to imports from the rest of the region also lends credence to this perception.

As the labour movement of the region's superpower, South African trade unions will need to show a simultaneous commitment to regional and national working class interests. South African unions will need to do more to show that their top priority is commitment to the interests of the regional working people by exploiting their organisational and material resources to strengthen their counterparts in the region to become effective representative of their constituencies. While this holds more true for South Africa, it also applies to other trade unions within the region. Collective identities of trade unions need to be extended beyond the national level, and notions of regional citizenship should be explored. Regional standards can then be understood in terms of regional rights and regional claims, rather than only in terms of what national economies can afford, and what national governments may regulate. Trade union membership may also be understood in regional rather than only national terms. Strategically focusing on regionalization processes may help to foster broader regional alliances and strengthen necessary defensive battles at national level. On the ground are the concentrations of newly proletarianized workers at South African multinationals that create a material basis for solidarity amongst workers at these multinationals, in the same way that regional solidarity has emerged in NAFTA. New grassroots movements are emerging such as COLETU in Lesotho (the formation in Botswana of public service associations); in Zambia some unions are reviving to their former strength and representivity; high levels of militancy in Zimbabwe and Swaziland are fuelling a working class challenge to the state; in Mozambique, mobilization for a national increase and protest marches suggest a restive working class. These developments should auger well for the re-emergence of strong cooperation and solidarity work amongst workers and their unions in Southern Africa.

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NOTES

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Table 1: Comparison of Monthly Wages and Hours in Three Countries

	South Africa	Mozambique	Zambia
Permanent	\$271	\$142	\$100
Casual	\$82	\$112	\$47
Hours of work (permanent workers)	45.4	49.5	60

Sources: Kenny, 2001; Research Reports, Ministry of Labor, Mozambique; Statutory Instrument No. 2 of 2002, Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment (General) Order, 2002, Zambia.

4 The Editor of Metical, a local faxed newspaper, estimated that the land cost \$2.20 per sqm. Land in the downtown area normally costs \$100 per sq. m. The cheapest land in that area is \$30 per sq. m. (Interview, Carlos Cardoso, Editor, Metical, Sept 1999).

5 Interview, male permanent sales assistant, Shoprite-Lusaka, August 2002.

6 Interview, male permanent supervisor, Shoprite-Lusaka, August 2002.

7 Interview, male casual stock counter, Shoprite-Maputo, April 2003.

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- 12 G. Arrighi, B. Silver and B. Brewer, 'Industrial Convergence and the Persistence of the North-South Divide', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 38, 1 (2003), pp. 3–31.
- 13 G. Arrighi, 1990, pp. 93–94, cited by Silver, *Forces of Labor. Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003., pp. 22–23 (emphasis added).
- 14 Silver, *Forces of Labor*, p. 21.
- 15 *Interview* (August 2003)
- 16 Interview, Focus Group, Shoprite-Manda Hill worker (September 2003).