



## **CCS Grant Report, 2004**

This report was submitted in fulfilment of a research grant received from the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu Natal.

The Centre for Civil Society Grant Programme was established in 2002 to support research on Civil Society issues in South Africa. It is funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies.

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# **EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL UNIONISM IN THE CONTEXT OF NEO-LIBERALISM**

**Investigation of the Engen strike of 2001 as a focal point for emerging  
politics in Wentworth and Social Unionism**

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*“If you don’t know the people you are legislating for or against, you either rule  
maliciously or in ignorance”—Derrick McBride<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview 23/04/03

## **ABSTRACT**

In 2001 the township of Wentworth south of Durban emerged as one of the powerful sites of struggle in the post-1994 period because of the Engen strike. This struggle was fought on many material and ideological grounds. For the workers who initiated the strike, the demands were modest but with far-reaching implications. The initial sources for discontent were the reduced take-home pay because of tax deductions and mistreatment under the contract system. The workers actions challenged the effectiveness and legitimacy of the contracting system employed by Engen in carrying out maintenance work and with it the nature of the relationship between Engen and maintenance workers.

On a national level the strike articulated the growing impatience at unfulfilled promises of a “better life for all” amongst the poor including those communities that had been considered strongholds of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). What it also meant was that people were willing once again to embark on civil disobedience and to reject the institutional provisions for managing dissent.

The strike acted as a lens that brought into sharp focus many of the elements of communal discontent in Wentworth: the struggle for better working conditions; for social and environmental justice; for fair treatment by the police, as well as an improved quality of life. The strike also enjoyed widespread support from the media, public figures and activists. The fact that the workers gained little having managed only to keep their jobs and secure their salaries, without resolving the original grievances, make it seem that the strike was a failure. However, the fact that a downtrodden community could stand up to a multinational giant and the police, was considered a tremendous victory.

For these reasons the strike has acquired mythical proportions. The researcher was interested in finding out what conditions made the strike possible and what lessons could be drawn from it. What emerged was a less triumphant picture than had been reported. While such discoveries do not diminish the heroism and importance of the strike, a more holistic assessment of the strike’s effect was necessary.

The study also revealed some discontent with the leaders in the community. There appeared to be a superficial participation by the poor in structures that are supposed to

represent their interests. There also seems to be a host of individuals both inside and outside Wentworth who pursue personal interests under the pretext of fighting for the betterment of the community. Many leaders are complicit in this. There are also the divisions in community organisations that tend to hamper progress because leaders are engaged in power struggles. Both Engen and the government have exploited these divisions to limit community participation on issues that have a direct relevance to them: i.e. development and the environment, and to question the legitimacy of leaders who challenge their policies.

Some sections of the Wentworth community aligned themselves with the Concerned Citizen's Forum (CCF). The CCF is a loose association of community organisations. The common element among them being resistance to the effects of cost-recovery and privatisation of basic services which in most cases manifest in water and electricity cut-offs, environmental injustice and evictions. Through this network of other organisations such as Jubilee South, the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, Youth for Work, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Landless People's Movement as well as the Social Movements Indaba poor communities have been challenging the ANC's macro-economic policy as well as the entrenchment of neo-liberalism as the only viable economic model.

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

In May 2001 the maintenance<sup>2</sup> workers<sup>3</sup> at the Engen refinery in South Durban downed tools in protest to inhumane treatment by Engen management. Because of the contract system used by Engen to carry out maintenance work, workers are not directly employed by Engen but by construction and engineering companies. At the time of the strike there were 5 such companies servicing Engen. The first group of workers to go on strike were in the employ of the contractor Frazier and Chalmers. In a matter of days other workers contracted to other companies had joined the strike, bringing the maintenance work on the Engen refinery to a virtual standstill thus forcing Engen to employ scab labour. A large proportion of workers from “African” townships of Umlazi and Lamontville also took part in the strike. Though many of the striking workers were artisans, like pipe fitters, boilermakers, welders etc. there was also a contingent of labourers like sweepers.

What was important about the strike is that sections of the community<sup>4</sup> joined the pickets in solidarity with the workers and some community leaders had also undertaken to negotiate with Engen on behalf of the workers. Intimidation and arrests by the Wentworth police and Engen added fuel to the fire thus soliciting the support of sympathisers, activists, observers and the media. What had started as an ordinary strike quickly developed into a major campaign.

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<sup>2</sup> The Engen refinery, like all fuel refineries has to carry out periodic maintenance work. During this time normal production ceases. Hence it is often referred to as a shutdown or shut and sometimes a turnaround. For this operation the refinery employs additional workers mostly artisans and labourers for the duration of the shutdown.

<sup>3</sup> Maintenance workers are temporary workers employed by engineering and construction firms in order to work on shutdowns. They are also referred to in this document as shutdown workers or simply the workers.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the diversity of residents in Wentworth a clearer definition of “the community” needs to be established. The author of this paper has, largely thorough the 2001 strike, forged relationships with residents of Woodstock, a small area of Wentworth who together with other poor sections of Wentworth community who have identified themselves with the anti-neo-liberal social movements particularly the CCF. The term community referrers to them and other residents, who identified with the cause of the striking workers, attended meetings, took part in the strike mass action.

Wentworth is a working class township situated in South Durban. It was created in the sixties an area designated for Coloureds<sup>5</sup>. Residential areas like, Merebank, the Bluff and Treasure Beach as well as industrial areas like Jacobs surround the township. On the eastern side Wentworth borders the Engen refinery. There is also a Sapref refinery nearby as well as the Mondi paper mill. These three industries have been responsible for much pollution in South Durban and Wentworth being the closest residential area to these industries has borne the brunt of this pollution. The acrid smell of sulphur dioxide awaits to give any visitor to Wentworth a most unwelcoming taste of what it's like to live in Durban's death zone. There, according to Sven Peek 180 (Peek et al: 2002) other industries in South Durban that pose a health risk to surrounding communities including "African" townships like Umlazi and Lamontville which are also located in South Durban.

The population is estimated at 23 000<sup>6</sup> with a diversity of cultural, religious identities and economic status. For instance there are residents in council flats, who are usually the most economically depressed and those residents who have bought previously council-owned houses. There are also many unemployed residents, many of them being the youth and a large group in low-income jobs like labourers and artisans.

The relationship between Wentworth and industry in South Durban, especially the Engen refinery has oscillated between lukewarm and antagonistic. The main reasons being that Engen as a multinational company has the ability to provide jobs and funds for social upliftment yet unemployment statistics in Wentworth are amongst the highest in Durban. As an added dimension Engen is the most proximate and most notorious (due to its size) polluter. For this reason it has been identified as bearing some responsibility for the welfare of Wentworth. After all, Engen has benefited from the cheap labour that Wentworth offers and the lenient treatment from past and present governments.

For a long time Engen management were dismissive of demands made by the community. The few attempts made by Engen to engage with some community members on these issues were interpreted as insincere and as a public relations exercise. The refinery has maintained, in contrast to what the residents' experiences,

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<sup>5</sup> As could be expected the residents of Wentworth belong to diverse cultural and religious groups, so the term "Coloured" is used in this study as a historical term rather than a racial term.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.urbstrat.org.za/urban\\_web/contact.htm](http://www.urbstrat.org.za/urban_web/contact.htm)

that their pollutant emission levels were within acceptable standards but failed to provide proof of its assertions. Similarly attempts by maintenance workers to secure better working conditions and permanent jobs at Engen were treated with disdain by management. Workplace forums were seen as ineffective and subject to the whims of management. The simmering tensions between Engen and Wentworth finally came to a head in 2001.



Figure 1: A map showing the Austerville/Wentworth area<sup>7</sup>

The value of the 2001 Engen Strike<sup>8</sup> on the community depends very much on who one speaks to. Whereas most people that were interviewed agreed that the terms of the agreement between Engen and the workers favoured Engen, some of them are more upbeat about it, others are more ambivalent. While the strikers did score some points, there were significant losses also. For the 200 workers who led the strike there was the infamous 'blacklist', which meant that 200 workers could no longer work on the Engen site. There was also a worker that got stabbed during the strike, another died in an accident and another injured on site, In addition to this Engen, as a result of the strike,

<sup>7</sup> Map of Austerville obtained from: [http://www.urbstrat.org.za/urban\\_web/contact.htm](http://www.urbstrat.org.za/urban_web/contact.htm)

<sup>8</sup> In this document also referred to simply as the strike

opted to limit the duration of subsequent shutdowns which has brought more insecurity to already uncertain job prospects and lower wages.

In light of these losses, the extension of the area covered by the National Key Points Act<sup>9</sup> across Tara road which separates the Engen refinery from Wentworth may seem like a minor issue but what it means is that people can no longer hold pickets on Tara road or risk being arrested.

One may well ask: what, if any, gains arose out of the strike. According to the sociologist, writer and activist Ashwin Desai<sup>10</sup>, one of the significant gains was that Engen, which had tried to insulate itself from labour issues relating to workers, was forced to come to the negotiating table. Secondly, the strike brought to the attention of the world not only the plight of workers but the environmental concerns of the community. It has also been argued that the strike brought together two forces within Wentworth i.e. workers and community organisations. In other words, two constituencies that had not had much in common suddenly found reason to act together thus forming a new radical social consciousness that goes beyond just labour rights or reformist community issues.

Many activists who were involved in the strike readily concede that the strike arose more as an act of frustration rather than a carefully orchestrated campaign by the workers. They are willing to admit that this newfound synergy between community organisations and workers was more of a fortuitous occurrence rather than a deliberate strategy. Thus while the possibly still exists for other such occurrences, the two constituencies have not acted in concert since the strike. These synergies do not seem to have lived beyond that particular strike.

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<sup>9</sup> The National Key Points Act was designed under Apartheid as a measure against terrorist attacks. Indeed in 1984 there was a grenade attack on Engen. But this legislation is now being used by the new government as a way of preventing picketing and/or an excuse to arrest anyone who is perceived as a threat to Engen, including striking workers.

<sup>10</sup> Ashwin Desai, *The Poors of South Africa: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002). The researcher also conducted an informal discussion with Desai (13/01/04)

But as Heinrich Bohmke<sup>11</sup> (Interview: 14/01/04) pointed out, struggles are not always rational occurrences but they can be valuable as spontaneous reactions to an untenable situation. And sometimes, important events do not necessarily signal new beginnings but only moments when people suddenly become aware of their power. One such moment was the attack of the Wentworth police station by residents angered by the South African Police Service (SAPS) collusion with Engen during the strike. As it has been reported at the closing stages of the strike one of the workers asserted that the strike was not just about wages but about dignity (Desai: 2002).

Whichever way one might look at the strike what is clear is that the strike had unprecedented attention from the media, support from leftist organisations and prominent individuals, which included Prof. Fatima Meer, Bishop Rudin Philips, representatives from Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and political parties like the DA and the IFP as well as a variety of social activists. The strike has become the stuff of legends in some circles, in particular the emerging social movements<sup>12</sup>. As CEIWU<sup>13</sup> President Alan Moolman (Interview: 16/01/04) noted: people in the social movements have come to think of the 2001 strike in similar terms to the mass anti-corporate protest such as those seen in Seattle, Davos and Genoa. This was aided in no small part by the involvement from an early stage of the strike by people like Ashwin Desai who has documented the events of those two weeks in May 2001 in *The Poors of South Africa*.

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<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Bohmke is one of the legal representatives who took part in the negotiations with Engen on behalf of the workers and an activist with the CCF.

<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this paper the term 'social movements' will be used to denote the whole range of social organisations and alliances resisting neo-liberalism and corporate hegemony, often called 'anti-globalisation' movements and which are associated with mass/multilateral protests in Seattle, USA (1999) and Genoa, Italy (2001).

<sup>13</sup> The Chemical, Engineering and Industrial Workers' Union (CEIWU) is the union which represented the 700 shutdown workers during the 2001 Engen strike.

## **BACKGROUND**

The years immediately following the demise of Apartheid have been dominated by the agenda of transformation. This has been expressed not only in terms of transformation from White minority rule to non-racial majority rule but also in terms of redressing the economic and institutional imbalances between black<sup>14</sup> and white. What this transformation also implied (in theory) is greater involvement of the populous in decision-making. This is reflected in the use of slogans and names given to government programmes like Batho Pele (People First), Khomanani (Caring Together), Masakhane (Developing each other) and other feel-good phrases such as 'a people-centred government'.

This has also been the time when civic organisations and NGO's (many with historic ties to the ANC) were redefining their role in the new South Africa. In an interview with Keith "Skido" Joseph (17/06/03) he noted that some NGO's in Wentworth like the Legal Resources Centre served a variety of interests giving people legal support, conscientising the public on political issues and recruiting members for the United Democratic Front. While in the past they had been engaged in the struggle to topple the Apartheid regime, they are now more concerned with assisting or monitoring government in implementing the transformation agenda. Accordingly, a number of former activists became part of the new government, from municipal to provincial to national government. This has produced a shift in the language used by the leadership from confrontation to cooperation. Wentworth has been no different. It has also produced is a tension between the activists turned politicians/bureaucrats and the communities they left behind.

Previously militant members of the community became temporarily demobilised in the immediate aftermath of the 1994 election in anticipation of delivery, by the ANC, on its election promises. This did not last very long. In communities such as Wentworth the realities of everyday life stood in stark contrast to the rhetoric of 'a better life for all'.

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<sup>14</sup> Black in this context is used as a generic term denoting those people whom the Apartheid regime had described as being African, Indian and Coloured. It is worth noting that while Wentworth residents are generally referred to as Coloureds, they are both racially and culturally diverse

Previously committed ANC members began to express disappointment at the slow pace of social progress or as some Wentworth residents see it none at all. Having been a committed campaigner for the ANC Keith Joseph did express disappointment in the fact that the ANC had abandoned the ideals of the Freedom Charter. Similarly Derrick McBride has also deplored the way in which the ANC-led government has abandoned the principles that he had fought for.

The determination of the eThekweni Municipality to push through its strategy of cost recovery has put the municipality at loggerheads with the community especially after it became apparent that the municipality planned to evict people who had not paid their rents and relocate them to Marianne Ridge near Pinetown.

Meanwhile the South African economy had shed thousands of jobs since 1994 and those who still had jobs faced the prospect of less frequent work, poorer working conditions with less pay because of casualisation and Limited Duration Contracts (LDC's) that are now favoured by industry as a way of remaining internationally competitive. These LDC's tend to affect unskilled and semi-skilled workers the most but also the highly skilled workers (like artisans) who found themselves at the wrong end of 'right-sizing' or 'rationalisation'<sup>15</sup> processes. But employment statistics only tell half the story; many of the employed support other family members who are unemployed. Social services like pensions and child support grants are meagre and offer little relief from day-to-day expenses like school fees, rent, water and electricity, food etc. The child support grant for instance is a mere R150 per month. Bureaucracy and corruption also impact on these services. Cuts in state spending and the sale of state assets and companies have also affected jobs and livelihoods. These and other developments in the South African macro-economic policy have been identified with broader developments elsewhere in the world under the heading of neo-liberalism. In South Africa in particular these tend to deepen the already disproportionate relationships between rich and poor. Due to government's desire to make South Africa an attractive investment destination labour unrest is looked upon as a negative factor in the economy and does not enjoy much support.

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<sup>15</sup> These are terms used by industry which have entered the public domain describing a process by which companies seek to make themselves more competitive and improve profit margins through retrenchments and casualisation of workers

In 2001 a routine<sup>16</sup> strike by shutdown workers at the Engen refinery snowballed into the biggest mobilisation of the community since the days of Apartheid. The strike seemed to signal a new chapter in the life of the community. No longer were they passive, demoralised and powerless. But also of more interest to observers; it seemed to mark a turning point in the sense that strike constituted a challenge, though be it on an unconscious level, to the relentless progress of neo-liberalism. Furthermore the strike saw the advent of a revival of a communal spirit of defiance that transcended the limits and divisions caused by organisational and personal politics.

## ***AIMS OF THE RESEARCH***

This research was undertaken to find out how community members remembered the strike and if it had indeed left an indelible mark on the memories of Wentworth residents. In addition to this the author also set out to discover whether such memories are positive or ambivalent. In the course of such an investigation it was necessary to understand just what motivated the strike to begin with, to see if those grievances had been resolved on the part of the workers and to find out what tangible difference it has made to the social life of Wentworth as a whole.

Thus the research also sought to verify whether those synergies lived beyond the strike and whether these synergies and this newfound spirit of defiance had the potential of being adopted in other communities where a new sense of militancy was emerging.

In trying to understand some of the interdependent dynamics between government, contractors, labour brokers, Engen, Wentworth residents, leaders of community organisations, the role of NGO's as well as the how both political and non-political pressure groups redefined themselves post-1994 and the structures of participation in decision-making; the author has used the concept of polyarchy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For reasons outlined below (see Labour History) strikes at refineries became frequent in the mid to late 90's and into the new century.

<sup>17</sup> "Polyarchy," a US-favoured "system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision making is confined to leadership choice carefully managed by competing elites. The polyarchic concept of democracy," notes sociologist William I. Robinson, "is an effective arrangement for legitimating and sustaining inequalities within and between nations

This concept has been used by the author beyond its intended use by Robinson and Street which is national politics. In this study it has been applied to local politics in order to describe a set of scenarios, such as stakeholder forums, that are billed as democratic and inclusive whereas in actual fact community participation is controlled and superficial, in this case by Engen or the government. It was appropriate because of the shift in local and workplace politics from the purely authoritarian system of management to a participatory model. This concept was found to be useful because it helps to unpack some of the infighting between community structures, how Engen has used the labour broking system not only to divest itself from Human Resources (HR) concerns but also to use them as a regulatory mechanism to keep workers in check under the guise of empowering the community by giving them business opportunities. It is also helpful in explaining the favouritism shown by both Engen management and government by declaring unilaterally that some leaders are legitimate and others not. Polyarchy also explains the frustration of young people at being prevented from meaningful participation in community structures by leaders within the community as well as the problems of the stakeholder forums, which were designed to determine the future development of South Durban.

## ***METHODOLOGY***

There are always dangers when an “outsider” does research in situations where personal relationships between the researcher and some informants are already established and where the researcher was involved, even in a minor role, in the events they seek to research. But there are special insights that might be gained that might have escaped the notice of more objective research. There are also dangers when “outsiders” claim authority over subjects that are as complex and transient as social dynamics of a particular community, without having spent a few years or a few months there. The researcher does not claim any such authority but merely seeks to bring to light other dimension of communal life that mediated the strike and its outcomes.

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(deepening in a global economy) far more effectively than authoritarian solutions" Quoted from an article by Paul Street.

In order to understand these developments the author interviewed the following groups of people: youth, residents, workers, and managers at the refinery, union officials as well as community leaders and activists. This report rests on the testimonies of these individuals, but in trying to understand some of the broader social context it was felt that it is necessary to consult other sources, such as literature on South Durban, newspaper reports pertaining to the strike and to major social issues in the community. As a way of comprehending some of the concerns raised by the leadership and to some extent community members, government websites were also visited.

Although the intended content of the research has remained the same, there has been since the start of this research, a shift in emphasis of the objectives of the study. While previously the author had looked at social formations and relationships as a way of explaining how and why the strike started, how and why it had such mass support and what has happened in its aftermath; the emphasis has changed to looking at the strike as a focal point of processes, relationships and social dynamics within the community. In other words rather than looking at the social formations as a way of understanding the strike the author has looked at the strike as way of understanding some of the social dynamics within Wentworth.

## ***RESEARCH TOOLS***

### **Sampling**

The author was concerned with the testimonies of a diverse range of participants in the strike. The target groups of people were: residents, shutdown workers, youth, activists, leaders of community organisations and union representatives. An added dimension in the case of this study is that workers are also residents. Accordingly, it was important to interview some of the people who are neither Wentworth residents nor workers but were participants in the strike. What was the nature of their involvement and their relationship with Wentworth, considering that some of them are former residents?

While the study was conceived as a representative of different groups of people who were either directly or indirectly involved in the strike, it was immediately apparent that these groups are permeable. Consequently the study is not representative of distinct groups but of individuals within certain relationships.

A visit to the Engen website will reveal that Engen is proud of their social responsibility programmes. Certainly, one must wonder what the attitude of Engen managers is towards their neighbouring community and their employees. But it was also important to discover how Engen management had responded to the strike, thus the managers from Engen were interviewed in order to discern the character of the relationship between Engen and the community.

### **Primary sources**

Primary sources consisted of 20 interviews and newspaper reports regarding the strike. The interviews were handled in an open-ended manner. In other words the interviewers did not attempt to limit the scope of the responses to questions asked. Some interviews were recorded electronically whereas other interviews were recorded by hand, especially in cases where recording devices were not allowed like the Engen managers or where the respondent felt uncomfortable with these devices.

Newspaper reports were consulted at the Independent Newspapers, which publishes two of the Durban's English dailies: The Natal Mercury and The Daily News. These two dailies comprise the main source for media reports. The reasoning behind consulting these sources was to provide a background and support the information given during interviews, to discern how the strike was reported in the media as well as to gain a better understanding of some of the long-standing issues in Wentworth. Thus, the search in newspaper archives was not limited to the period of the strike but was also used to determine the history of labour relations at the refinery and the history of social activism in Wentworth.

### **Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources consisted of reviewing books and papers that have been written about Wentworth, South Durban and the strike. These were consulted in order to understand on a conceptual level the trends and forces local, national and international that had a role in precipitating the strike as well as in the manner of its resolution. In addition to this, also to come to some understanding of how the strike impacted on the social life of Wentworth after the strike and on the politics of social movements.

This search also yielded a fuller picture of the government's planning in terms of structures and in terms of future developments in the area. These websites gave the author the opportunity to see how Engen in particular regards its role as a neighbour and how it defines its social responsibility.

## **LABOUR HISTORY AND THE STRIKE**

The labour landscape since the democratisation of South Africa has changed radically. The labour movement has secured significant changes but in other respects very little has changed. Significant among these is the lower than inflation or even non-existent wage increases, the increased casualisation of the work force, skills oversupply in some sectors, significant job losses especially in mining and textiles. In addition to this the Labour Relations Act of 1996 along with the institutions it created like the Council for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) and NEDLAC as well as collective bargaining councils have ensured the formalisation of labour disputes between labour and management. The consequence of this formalisation has been that only large unions and sector unions have enough power to affect policy. It has also made dissent within affiliate unions more difficult. And reduced the scope of industrial action.

Casualisation of workers with the attendant limited term contracts has made casual workers shun unions. As welder and shutdown worker Andrew Johnson testified:

*"I think in engineering they don't have unions. I would say you can join a union and three months down the line...case closed, you see... the union can't do nothing because that job is finished and you can't continue contributing to the union if you're not employed ...so it's a waste of time." (Interview: 18/04/03)*

This has further weakened the smaller unions. According to the president of CEIWU, Alan Moolman, the workers at Engen do not have a sense of their power and they do not know that they can challenge unfair labour practices by contractors. The smaller unions also do not have the numbers to make them able to participate in stakeholder forums

and collective bargaining especially in engineering. Thus the focus of CEIWU is on work place disputes such as unfair dismissals, compensation for injuries etc.

Many in the trade union movement feel that many of the gains won are compromised by losses in other aspects. The Labour Relations Act for instance while giving the workers the right to strike also gives employers the right to lock out. The LRA has also posited a lot of power in the hands of institutions such as the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) in resolving disputes between management and workers. If proper procedure is not followed, the workers can be fired for taking part in an “unprotected”<sup>18</sup> strike. The tandem struggles against the Apartheid state and the labour movement were the most productive in securing workers rights and the struggle for better wages and that since the democratic process began some of these gains have been rendered ineffective because the contracting system severs the employer/employee relationship in favour of a client/service-provider relationship. Many individuals and organisations opposed to government economic policy see the alliance between the ANC and COSATU as compromising the position of the unions and denuding workers power.

Another factor denuding workers’ power is the increased pressure on governments wanting to attract investment to relax labour legislation especially in terms of minimum wages, overtime pay, number of working hours, and basic conditions of employment. These changes have been located within the wider context of neo-liberal economics, which both government and business subscribe to. The second development being increasingly weakened position of trade unions because of dwindling memberships and the unaccountability and lack of democracy within large unions such as Cosatu. The third being the increasing reliance on the legislative framework in resolving labour dispute rather than the direct action favoured by the worker’s movement in the decades preceding the democratisation of South Africa.

There are many regulations that govern what constitutes a protected strike. These entail certain time frames within which the employer could threaten workers and strike

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<sup>18</sup> According to the Labour Relations Act of 1996, an employee may not be dismissed for taking part in a strike provided that they have followed the proper procedure. If proper strike procedures are followed, the employees are said to be “protected” by the law and “unprotected” from dismissal if procedures are not followed.

organisers with dismissal. It also gives the employer time to hire scab labour. For workers on Limited Duration Contracts (LDC's) being a unionised worker attracts the unwelcome attention of the employer and compromises the chance of ones contract being renewed. Agitating or instigating industrial action becomes a virtual guarantee that one will not be rehired. For these reasons union support is often weak. It has been noted in the case of contracts in the refining industry that often workers sign contracts they have not read or as long as they can get the job.

LDC's relieve companies from the responsibilities a company might have towards its permanent staff, such as pensions, medical aid paid sick leave. Furthermore as in the case of petroleum shutdown workers, the same contractor may hire a person for several LDC's over a number of years and still that person would have none of the benefits a permanent worker might expect. For many one's only sense of security is the salary that one gets. As it has been noted before some of the older workers have been on shutdowns for more than ten years and they are still don't have benefits and access to facilities on site like proper toilets and have to use portable toilets (Interview 08/05/2003). LDC's also allow workers to sign away rights that would be considered standard in permanent jobs like working hours, the duration of breaks, safety consideration etc.

At the same time this same neo-liberal planning affects the communities in which workers live especially in terms of access to housing, services and amenities. The thrust of cost-recovery has seen many people's electricity and water cut off and children unable to attend school because they cannot pay school fees.

However, the community does live under the shadow of a giant industrial complex which includes oil refineries which further compromises the quality of life of its residents. It is thus a momentous event when these apparently beaten people stand up and confront the banes of their existence in collective action. In 2001 the Wentworth residents, though motivated by different objectives, managed to confront a multi-national company such as Engen, the police, a number of labour brokers and contractors.

The contracting system allows for the devolution of power, consistent with polyarchic systems. At Engen for instance, Engen is merely the client to construction companies,

who in turn may out-source the hiring and HR work to a personnel company, who in turn hire labour brokers whose jobs are also temporary. In other words there is no employee/employer relationship, they are all to some extent or other clients and service providers. At the bottom of the pile is the worker who then becomes subject to the whims and requirements of each of the above strata of management. Resistance or even relaying grievances becomes a mammoth task.

It has been said that Engen has had a strike by shutdown workers every year since 1997 (Interview: January 2004). In 1997 the forerunner of CEIWU, the Engen Maintenance Workers Union (EMWU) in the same year embarked on work stoppage. In an open letter the union appealed for public support saying:

*“Engen (formerly Mobil) for cutting safety personnel on site by 30% and thereby posing a severe threat to our safety and to the safety ...threat of instant dismissal under labour brokers...whites hold all management jobs, Indians are next on the hierarchy, artisans are mostly 'coloured' and Africans do the heavy manual labour. ...Although many of us have worked on site for 10 years or more, we have drifted from the employ of one labour broker to another... management imported a number of "experts" from Houston, Texas who kept trying to introduce multi-skilling (which seems more like demotion or deskilling as they have fitters also doing welding etc). Management has also linked up with dubious "community groups" in the Wentworth township; gangsters loyal to a town councillor named Bella Jacobs.... Engen has been on a mad "productivity" drive, bullying us into overtime, neglecting key maintenance work. This had already led to the death of cde [comrade] Sandile Ngema this year when a pipe on the main line from the acid unit ruptured. When measured it was found that the thickness of that pipe was 0.08cm, instead of the prescribed minimum, 0.65cm. “*

*- Francis Williams and Patrick Msomi (EMWU Representatives)*

There are conflicting reports as to how many workers are called in for shutdowns at Engen. Some figures indicate that there are three thousand workers during the turnaround. Some of these workers have been working on turnaround for more than ten years, according to Mr D'Sar and Reggie Poutley. There are also very limited prospects of upward mobility within the engineering industry. The best that most engineering or shutdown workers can look forward to is a position as a foreman.

There is also quite a blatant racial stratification of the workforce. The managers are usually white, artisans and foremen are coloured whereas the labourers like cleaners are almost exclusively African. It is also reported that Engen only employs one thousand permanent positions. Previously this was not so much of an issue since the shutdown workers were relatively well skilled they could get jobs in other refineries around the country in places like Sasolburg, Richards Bay, Cape Town and even places as far away as Mozambique and Namibia.

But since there has been a decline in engineering jobs generally, these workers are now primarily dependent on Engen for their livelihood. On the other hand Engen management has been adamant that it does not make sense for them to employ workers for the whole year that they would only really need for a month. David Goldstone also argued that hourly wage rates during shutdowns are much more lucrative than the industry standard and therefore do not owe the community of Wentworth permanent jobs.

Amongst the things that Engen representatives point to as a solution to the problems of unemployment, (which stands at 68% amongst women and men of employable age)<sup>19</sup> is the Engen Training Centre. The Training Centre offered computer literacy training and also a variety of artisan training programmes, e.g. welding, pipefitting etc. However the community feel that this training centre was nothing more than a public relations exercise on the part of Engen since there is already an over-supply of artisans in the area with less jobs available. Other respondents complained that they still had to pay tuition fees when they are already unemployed and that it had been relocated to Isipingo, which required even more funds for travelling. It is common to hear people say that Engen is training people for unemployment. But even this training centre has been closed now for two years.

Engen managements retort to this accusation has been that the refinery industry, which incorporates refineries in Durban Richards bay, the Eastern Cape and Gauteng, is in the process of setting up a database of a constant labour pool with qualified workers and an identification system similar to a bar-coded credit card that would give employers all the information pertaining to the worker. And in that way the skilled and productive workers

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<sup>19</sup> Research conducted by the Institute for Black Research

could get employment in any refinery and other opportunities in the petroleum industry. Engen representatives have said that, in effect, this system would amount to constant and permanent work. Workers are sceptical arguing that it is one more empty promise by management. But such a system does not respond to the many issues the workers have with labour brokers as well as work pressures they have to put up with nor does it address the issue of employment benefits like pensions, medical aid, etc.

According to Derrick McBride and Reggie Poultney both of whom have had employment as shut-down workers at Engen the shut-down workers used to be the permanent employees of engineering and construction companies. So when there was a turnaround or shutdown they would be taken from their normal jobs to work on the refinery and return to it after the shutdown was complete. Gradually, around the late 80's construction companies started to use labour brokers too and limited duration contracts were introduced instead of permanent employment. As Reggie says in the past his work used to pay only for the big boss. But now his work pays for the boss, the sub-contractor, the broker and the foreman.

The issue of labour brokers and sub-contractors has been a thorny issue for several reasons. Andrew Johnson another shutdown worker remarked that if you work on LDC's it compromises ones ability to buy on hire-purchase or to have accounts or secure credit because ones paycheques are not consistent and the continued employment uncertain. Contractors, brokers are also accused of giving different wage rates and sometimes also different rates according to race. In a recent case workers complained that a certain group of workers, mostly white were given a salary increase to the exclusion of other workers. It is said the system of labour brokers (Interview; 08/05/03) disrupts communication channels with management and thus management does not hear grievances by the workers. There is also the issue of competition between the different brokers to do the job better, faster and cheaper and that at the end of the day it is the worker who has to bear the cost of this competition. According to Raymond Damon (Turnaround Communications Manager at Engen), since the 2001 Engen strike all payroll matters are handled directly by Engen (Interview: August 2003)

Respondents have voiced allegations of widespread corruption in the form of bribes to brokers for jobs, foremen for their favourable treatment and nepotism in terms of hiring

relatives and friends of foremen and brokers. This has also become one of the reasons brokers are despised. One respondent gave the account of an unknown person who, posing as a broker, promised to give people jobs at Engen while taking bribes. A few weeks later he disappeared with the money. There is apparently no qualification that is required of a broker only the favour of management in construction companies and most of them prove to be overnight brokers. They are here today; gone tomorrow. Acquiescence to brokers, workers claim, is the only way to get jobs on these shutdowns. If you emerge as someone who complains even for legitimate safety reasons, you don't get called again. Or you may be told that the job is done and the contract over only to find that someone else has been hired in your position. As limited term contract workers many shutdown workers feel completely powerless and at the mercy of the company. They don't have any recourse to complain about unfair treatment, unsafe working conditions. Our informants say they have personally witnessed unsafe conditions and the small number of safety inspectors on site.

They also complained that in 50 years that the plant has been in operation the management at Engen still does not provide them with change rooms, toilet facilities, or a canteen. This is further evidence of management's lack of consideration for the shutdown workers. Especially in considering that sometimes shifts could be as long as eleven or twelve hours.

The workers have also expressed anger at the manner in which they have been treated by foremen and brokers. One of the foremen on the Engen site is reputed to be fond of saying he can shake a tree and a pipe fitter will fall out, (suggesting that there are so many pipe fitters that they are all dispensable). Hence the vulnerability of the workers becomes the basis for all kinds of verbal abuse by foremen. Reggie Poultney has testified that brokers, contractors, and foremen use "bully boy" tactics to effectively silence worker discontent (Interview 08/05/2003). This anger is often compounded by the pressure which is brought to bear on the workers during shutdowns because of the time pressures.

If one considers that in many instances the people who are foremen and brokers were at one point themselves ordinary workers the level of resentment is heightened. It also highlights the fact that contractors are deliberately using workers to oppress other

workers. Reggie Poultney has also remarked that he has been chastised by foremen who have been in the industry with much less experience than he because he has taken the occasional break in order to stand back and inspect or admire his work. A fire marshal said that she used to work from six to six; a twelve hour shift with no breaks.

It is also worth noting that all of the respondents who have been shutdown workers have said that shutdown work is dirty and strenuous. Thus, it becomes necessary to take a break every now and then. Not just because of the blinding light from welding but also from the fumes that come from the pipes.

In addition to this the workers feel that because of the depth of their experience of working in the engineering sector for decades feel that they have contributed to the growth of Engen and since they are also Wentworth residents, they deserve some benefits. To these workers it is not just the wages and the promotions that are important but also to be given the recognition for their contribution to the company over the years. Not just in wages and fair labour practices, advancement etc. but also in terms of job security, respect and common courtesy.

On top of this it is felt that since they, as Wentworth residents have to put up with the pollution that the plant causes, deserve special consideration when it comes to staff development and many of the workers initially were unskilled labourers. Over the years and job reservations started to ease especially in the mid-80's and apprenticeships became available more Coloured people could get certification as artisans.

As it has been noted above, strike action had become routine at Engen since 1997. It is this volatile mix between management labour brokers, contractors and workers that provided the fuel for the 2001 strike. The 2001 strike started as no extraordinary strike. Other strikes have been over hiring practices where foreigners were hired into engineering jobs instead of locals. On another occasion workers accused management of racially discriminatory wage rates.

Because shutdown work is seasonal, there is no guarantee that a worker, even a skilled worker will be employed on other sites. But what often happens is that most workers have to spend the time when they are not working looking for other jobs in other cities

with refineries during which time they have to survive on the pay from the previous shutdown. An added problem is that sometimes the health of the workers declines because of exposure to harmful chemicals and fumes. In such cases the worker's prospects of getting employment are compromised. As Andrew Johnson noted the span of one's employment as a shutdown worker is very short. So if a worker is not able to set aside some money for the future the worker may find themselves without an income and still have to pay medical bills because of ill health.

There are differing accounts of how the strike started. While some people say that it came about as a result of wages and the related tax issue, others say it was Engen's actions that started it. As far as it can be determined the workers at Frazier and Charlmers had declared a dispute with management because of the tax and because they were going to be paid by cheque when some of the workers wanted to be paid in cash. If they were paid in cash then their take-home pay would be greater and they could have it immediately. Some of the workers did not have bank accounts. But while the workers were on a break the management at Engen put up a fence and made a narrow corridor through which the workers had to go when returning to work. This act seemed to have sparked workers' anger as they were trapped and crowded in that fence and they felt they were being treated like animals. Thus prompting the workers to walk out.

The workers were also dissatisfied in the way that there was no transparency with regards to the salary deductions and the unwillingness by management to deal with their grievances led to the strike. However, the workers had not followed labour regulations with regard to calling a strike and were thus taking part in an unprotected strike.

It was only after the strike had already started that the workers approached the union CEIWU to mediate on their behalf. Striking workers also sought the advice of community activists such as Des D'Sar and Ashwin Desai and thus, came the involvement of community organisations in to the fray. While these negotiations with Engen were going on members were picketing outside Engen. During this picketing, members of the South African Police Service in Wentworth arrested several picketers including some community leaders and strike organisers. Later these charges were withdrawn and are now interpreted as a form of intimidation of striking workers.

The excuse that was used in order to arrest people is that they had kept their Engen access badges when they were not in the employ of Engen. The Engen representatives we spoke to said they are always concerned about access badges because anyone could use them to gain access to the plant and cause damage. In addition to that they stated that the picketers were a potential danger to the safety of the plant therefore the SAPS had to resort to the National Key Points Act, a piece of Apartheid legislation designed to protect the refineries from terrorist attack. In fact one of the informants told us that while she was not on strike she was also caught in the dragnet of the access badge arrests and charged under the National Key Points Act.

The community was further angered by the fact that the police were quick to come to Engen's rescue when the plant managers had labour problems but turned a blind eye to the crimes that went on in the community daily. Respondents claimed that police were using video cameras to record picketing outside Engen, allegedly supplied by Engen. Allegations of Engen/police collusion gained further credence when Engen laid a charge against Ashwin Desai for having said: "Fuck Engen", using footage captured by the police as part of their evidence.

At the beginning stages of the strike Engen management had resolutely refused to discuss worker grievances as they were under the impression that these were not Engen workers and that the dispute was between the workers and contractors, not Engen.

This communal anger rose to the surface when the workers were arrested. At a community meeting to discuss the issue, held at the Wentworth community hall, the residents decided to march to the Wentworth police station. Then the commander refused to receive their complaints, the residents started throwing stones at the building and smashing windows and a police car was overturned. In the meantime Engen had also sent in some scab labour.

During the strike two workers at Engen were injured when sulphuric acid ignited and burned one of them to death. Workers claim this accident could have been prevented had Engen not used inexperienced scab labour. Workers also claim that because shutdowns around the country's refineries are scheduled such that as one shut ends

another begins, there was a delay of shuts in other refineries because the Engen shut was not complete. This and an explosion at the Sapref refinery at the same time precipitated a fuel and asphalt shortage in South Africa. It was then that the strike took on national significance and forced management to negotiate.

Finally Engen had been forced to deal directly with the workers. Considering the fact that the strike was unprotected and also considering that the most of the workers were able to return to work with full pay despite the infamous blacklist, the resolution of the strike was a victory. Even the 200 workers who had instigated the strike were able to work at a different site until the end of the shutdown after which they were blacklisted by Engen. The company Frazier and Chalmers where the strike had first emerged lost its contract with Engen. But Brown Root Group 5 has not faired much better since it too has been dogged by strike action like the strike at the end of 2003.

Another consequence of the strike was that shutdowns were made shorter with a smaller work force. According to Raymond Damon and Neville Eve who are present and former turnaround managers, this was done so as to allow for more efficient management of the shutdown site. Workers see this as a punitive measure designed to frustrate further industrial action. What this has meant for shutdown workers is that there is less money on shutdowns because of their shorter duration and has also meant less workers on site.

It has been claimed by Engen management that the strike occurred because of a few publicity-seeking leaders in the community, but the facts show that long before any community leaders, including the union CEIWU were involved, the inception of the strike was a spontaneous act by the workers. In the end an agreement was reached not because the most attractive settlement had been reached but because battle fatigue had set in on both camps.

## ***SOCIAL HISTORY***

It is quite common to look at Wentworth as a depressed, crime ridden and desperate area. What gets left out is the fact that there is a tremendous sense of community, pride in its identity, racial and cultural diversity, and complex social relations with a rich history

of struggle and success stories. Most literature concerning Wentworth is dominated by the focus on social problems such as crime, unemployment, overcrowding, pollution etc. This is of course true and the variety of community organisations testify to this. However, if one is to come to a better understanding of its complexities one ought to recognise also the power within the community. The power of the workers, of community organisations and their leaders and the community's widening sphere of influence, but also how this power is/has been squandered over the years.

What exactly constitutes this sense of community is hard to define because of the diversity of opinions, class, political affiliation and geographical location (some individuals who no longer live in Wentworth still identify themselves with it). This is significant because a lot of people both inside and outside Wentworth see themselves as advancing the interests of this "community". This question is also important because how the developmental priorities of this township are formulated depend on it. Wentworth as mentioned before is a complex community. But there are certain issues that constitute a source or inspiration for collective identity and action. Though this is true, it is also true that this sense of community is in dispute. Political affiliation is only the most visible part of this dispute. Lately as it has been mentioned above this sense of community has evolved to encompass broader struggles for social justice in South Africa.

But this is only part of the greater Wentworth community. A number of the respondents have also participated in politics as part of the emerging social movements. These community members were aligned with the Concerned Citizens Forum<sup>20</sup>

It is important at this stage to define how the term community has been interpreted in this paper. Since there are a number of leaders and organisations claiming to be the voice of the Wentworth community, it is appropriate to ask how this community is

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<sup>20</sup> The CCF was formed as a response to the attack on communities by government in terms of water and electricity cut-offs and evictions in 2000. It is composed of communities in and around Durban such as Chatsworth, Umlazi, KwaMashu, Mpumalanga Township among others. It was a loose affiliation of community organisations dedicated to reversing or halting. The CCF has morphed into the eThekweni Social Forum. Because of the CCF's political stance it is also aligned with organisations such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg, the Anti-Eviction Campaign in the Western Cape and the national Landless people's movement among others. These in turn form part of another loose affiliation the Social Movements Indaba, along with Environmental groups and leftist groups. These organisations have challenged cost recovery and the economic planning under the ANC's neo-liberal economic policy GEAR

defined. For the most part this study focuses on the people who were participants in the strike but who also participated in events and structures that oppose current formula applied by government and industry to achieve social justice.

### **Origins of the Housing Crisis**

One of the significant and enduring issues affecting Wentworth residents has been the lack of accommodation. This issue has its roots in landlessness and homelessness. There are a number of people in Wentworth who sleep on kitchen floors for lack of space. As one respondent testified: she and her two children sleep on the floor of their parents flat (interview: 17/04/03). One often finds three generations of one family living in the same one-roomed flat. Privacy is unheard of. Because of this overcrowding coupled with the lack of recreational amenities in the area makes hanging out in the streets after school and on weekends inevitable for the youth.

The ripple effect of this is the attraction youth feel towards gangs and drug abuse. According to Patricia Dove: because the homeless of Wentworth do not sleep on the streets, the government is blind to their plight. According to Derrick McBride Coloured landlessness was already well advanced by time of the Native Land Act in 1913, which in effect means that the Land Claims Court cannot hear whatever land claims they might have. Thus Coloureds, like other black South Africans are condemned to perpetual landlessness. Informants told us that the many of the people of Wentworth come from rural areas as far South of Durban as the Transkei and as far north as Ladysmith, some even from the islands of Mauritius and St. Helena<sup>21</sup>.

While it may appear obvious that the relocations of urban Coloured populations was motivated by the need to conform to Apartheid legislation, evidence suggests that the Durban Corporation had a lot of latitude in terms of the application of the Group Areas Act. Many forced removals happened selectively and in piecemeal fashion. These forced removals and land dispossessions in conjunction to rural poverty, especially in the Eastern Cape/Southern KwaZulu-Natal/Transkei area forced many people to settle in Wentworth, which was then the only township in Durban designated for settlement by the Coloured population. Wentworth became the 'dumping ground' for all Coloureds who

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<sup>21</sup> From a report compiled by the Institute for Black Research.

had been forcibly removed from various parts of Natal. Initially some newly urbanised people lived in informal settlements or became tenants to slumlords especially in areas like Warwick Triangle and in free hold areas like Cato Manor. After the land grabs by the Durban Corporation, the clearing of slums, forced removals and relocations as well as the tightening of Apartheid laws, Wentworth being the only township reserved for Coloureds, thus became increasingly overcrowded.

### **The Geography of Durban and Industry**

According to Peek et al (2002) there are 180 smoke stack industries in South Durban. Wentworth was created in the 60's as an area created by the Apartheid regime as an area intended for the settlement of Coloured people. A combination of factors led to the relocation of Coloured families from those areas. There are number of factors that motivated these relocations.

One was the property speculation by the Durban Corporation. Their excuse for this type of action was public health, encouraged by some White and Indian residents as a thinly veiled form of racism especially in Sydenham thus prompting the Durban Corporation to rid the city slums. Public records from 1936 and 1947 indicate that several slumlords from Warwick triangle were called in to answer to the Public health slums Committee and the Housing Slums Committee on the poor state of their properties. Research by Bill Freund (2002) has revealed that part of the reason why the Durban Corporation is the richest in the country lies with the fact that they were able to use property speculation as a means to generate revenue. To this end control over land, especially flat land, which was leased at a premium to industry, became one of its central functions. The Corporation was also able to manipulate granting of licences, permits and leases to industry to promote job creation mainly for whites in what Freund has described as racial Fordism. Bill Freund (ibid.) quotes the example of Mondi paper where Mondi had to provide 600 jobs for Durban residents in order to secure its lease.

Over the years however, this strategy began to falter for many reasons. One of which was improvement in technology which reduced the need for flat land and enabled industry to move to the outskirts of the city. The second was the improving rail and road transport networks that allowed industry to move further out of the city and the harbour in

particular. Another factor was the attractiveness of Johannesburg as a business hub of South Africa, which encouraged many companies to relocate to Johannesburg. In recent years these factors have compromised the ability of the Durban Municipality to attract large enterprises. The consequence of this has been the Municipality's acquiescence to companies such as Engen, especially with regard to providing land for expansion and their silence over the pollution caused by the large plants. The second was a diminishing tax base from which to generate revenue. Thus the city had to confront two major policy issues: one was how to effect the changes that the communities of disadvantaged demanded from the new government and at the same time how to increase the city's revenues to meet those demands. Thus, in the mode of neo-liberal planning it was decided that Private-Public-Partnerships were the way to go. Another was the devolution of revenue collection to the municipalities that constitute the greater eThekweni Municipality. These two factors in conjunction to the expectation of returns from investment by the government's private partners made the idea of cost recovery imperative.

The second factor, which led to the relocation of people to Wentworth, was the emerging force of Apartheid legislation. Whereas previously the city had tolerated racially mixed communities complaints about public health and the growing popularity of Durban as a tourist destination especially for people from Transvaal led to attempts by the municipality to 'clean up' the city, hence the relocations.

Reading newspaper reports from the 70's makes it is quite clear that the issue of overcrowding had already become a serious issue. An investigation into Durban Coloured Local Affairs Committee records in 1973 also reveals that there was already concern that there was not enough accommodation in Wentworth. Furthermore it was quite apparent that the Durban Corporation had forcibly removed people without adequate alternative accommodation. The establishment of Newlands in the north of Durban did little to alleviate the housing problem in Wentworth. So the issue of housing remains one of the recurring themes in Wentworth politics up to this day. As a result, housing is also one of the divisive issues in the community and amongst community leaders. The political action of the eighties and against the House of Representatives especially with regard to housing issues, constituted one of the earliest disputes between individuals and groups claiming to represent the community. Some for instance

instigated and some still advocate rent boycotts as an act of defiance since the flats residents in particular enjoy poor service delivery (32% of residents are without electricity as opposed to the 100% quoted by city officials)<sup>22</sup>. This is compounded by the fact that some of those people, 58% of residents<sup>23</sup> who have not been paying now have unaffordable high rental and electricity arrears with the eThekweni Municipality. The Institute for Black Research has recorded that some residents have arrears adding up to 30 000 Rands. While some community leaders are in favour of the rent boycott, others are against it.

It will be remembered that many areas supportive of the Mass Democratic Movement and in particular the ANC, strongly agitated for the boycott on paying rent in the 80's and early 90's. When the ANC government came into power, residents were encouraged to resume paying their rentals and rates. Many residents, for various reasons responded negatively this call. Some of those reason are that the government had failed to address the overcrowding, poor service delivery, the poor state that the flats were in. According to Derrick McBride some of the flats had been condemned by the city in the 80's. As a concession in recent years some of the flats were renovated which amounted to painting the exterior walls of the flats. There is also a lack of recreational facilities in Wentworth and for a significant proportion of people interviewed the fact that it has become harder to pay rent because of wide-spread unemployment or insufficient employment (32% of residents earn less than R1000 per month)<sup>24</sup>.

## **Community Organisations, Participation, Infighting and Polyarchy**

Despite the fact that initially the residents of Wentworth were brought together by circumstance and dire circumstances at that, Wentworth developed into a vibrant community and a distinctive, though anguished identity. Many people who have left Wentworth like Sven 'Bobby' Peek, Alan Moolman, David Goldstone and others still regard themselves as part of the community and speak nostalgically of it.

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<sup>22</sup> Research conducted by the Institute for Black Research (IBR)

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

The difference in areas of operation and tactics involved in them goes some way to explaining some of the divisions between community organisation and their leaders. Some like the Wentworth Development Forum were formed in response to social issues whereas others were formed under the banner of the UDF, which was specifically geared towards political change.

In the early 1995 three of Wentworth's community organisation came together to form the Wentworth Development Forum. These three organisations were Austerville Residents' Co-ordinating Forum, The Austwent Civic Association and the Austerville Wentworth Civic Association. These organisations united on the premise collectively challenging government to deliver services and development and would solve the problem of legitimacy when dealing with local and provincial authorities as well as in-fighting between the organisation and the WDF, the Wentworth Residents Association (WRA) joined forces to become one umbrella body. While there were a number of representatives from all three organisations, the three that became most prominent in the new organisation were Desmond 'Des' D'Sar, Keith 'Skido' Joseph and Patrick Mkhize. Later on in the same year, the problem of legitimacy of community organisations resurfaced when the WDF and the Greater Wentworth Development Forum under the leadership of Bella Jacobs argued as to who should represent Wentworth in dealing with KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Administration (KZNPA). Both organisations claimed to have the support of the community. Though it's not clear what the dispute was about, in a Daily News article under the headline "*Groups' Quarrel Could Halt Development*" dated (12/12/1995), Melanie Peters reported that political affiliations had a lot to do with it. Keith Joseph having been aligned with the ANC, Patrick Mkhize with AZAPO and Bella Jacobs with the National Party. In the 1997 poll Ms Jacobs won the Wentworth council seat. The article asserts that the dispute arose, as the KZNPA was about to embark on housing development in Landesdowne Road and upgrading of open spaces.

In the same article, then Deputy Director General of KZNPA for housing is quoted as saying: "the KZNPA will not delay this process because of community representatives bickering about who has the support of the community." Patrick Mkhize is quoted as saying: "KZNPA should stay clear of these dubious groups and individuals, previous agreements must be maintained without interference from every Tom, Dick and Harry," What this story illustrates are instances where the few piecemeal developments that

have been proposed have been hampered by disagreements between leaders. It also illustrates how these disagreements have been used by both Engen and government to play one leader off another, to stall or renege on agreements reached between one or the other organisation, to decide unilaterally which are 'legitimate leaders' and to push through unpopular policies. Almost without exception the voices of ordinary community members are effectively silenced.

In 1996 as a response to the pressure by the members of the community who took advantage of President Mandela's visit to Wentworth as a way of publicising their plight, Engen committed itself to negotiations with the community. As a result a stakeholders Forum was set up. Two years later no agreement had been reached. According to Engen this was due to the fact that there were too many people involved and this had bogged down the process and said they preferred to deal with the legitimate leaders instead. Once again full participation is perceived as an obstacle rather than an asset. In many instances it appears that of the two partners in such negotiations, it is Engen that as dictated the terms of the discussions with community organisations left to fight out which organisation has more credibility and more of a support base to justify their place at the negotiating table.

Other historical developments were the Tricameral Parliamentary System<sup>25</sup> that was billed by the Nationalist government as giving suffrage for Coloureds and Indians. The House of Delegates (HoD) and the House of Representatives (HoR), which represented Indians and Coloureds respectively, faced steep opposition by Indians and Coloureds in the Mass Democratic Movement. These bodies came to be equated with Apartheid itself and were the targets of many protests in the 80's by ANC-aligned activists in Wentworth.

Vasanthan Agamunthu in an article entitled: Families Occupy HoR Offices for the Natal Mercury, it is detailed how the AWCA under the leadership of Keith Joseph threatened a "sit in" at the offices of the House of Representatives if their demands for new homes were not met.

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<sup>25</sup> This was a three-tiered system of parliament designed to give some franchise to Indian and Coloured voters but which was entrenched in the logic of separate developments and rejected by the Mass Democratic Movement as a sham and a device to sow division within these communities as well as being a subtle form of oppression.

In the present some residents of Wentworth are willing to move to other areas. But in order for that to happen it would involve an enormous investment by the state because the people who would be relocating are poor they would need to have accommodation that cost at least as much or even lower than the present flats they live in. Furthermore it would have to be a place sufficiently close to the city that the cost of transportation to the city would not be prohibitive. There would have to be schools, playgrounds and other essential amenities before people consider moving out of Wentworth. The area of Newlands was set up by government in the 80's as an alternative to the overcrowding in Wentworth but because Newlands failed to provide some of the conditions for relocation of Wentworth citizens, few residents made the move to Newlands.

The other obstacle to people moving is fear of Engen's expansion. Some leaders in the environmental groups expressed concern that the government wanted to turn South Durban into an Industrial Development Zone (IDZ). For this reason SDCEA and GroundWork do not see relocations as a solution to the pollution problems of Wentworth because as Bobby Peek points out then industry would simply move a bit closer once that land become available. And besides people in Wentworth like other communities also feel they have some sense of community that they would like to preserve.

The proposed relocation of Wentworth residents to Marianne Ridge just outside Pinetown angered many residents. It was because of this threat that in May 2003 Wentworth residents marched to the office of eThekweni Municipal Manager, Michael Suttcliffe to protest the impending forced removals. Residents suspect that the intransigence of the government which wants to turn a profit from housing, and the expansion desires by Engen, produces the type of attitude from government and industry where residents are seen as obstacles to development.

While other activists have found jobs in government most notably perhaps being Robert McBride who was an Umkhnto weSizwe (the ANC's military wing) operative; others like Keith 'Skido' Joseph and Patricia Dove now act as leaders in community organisations. In the political apathy that followed the first elections in 1994 other political parties such as the Democratic Alliance and the New National Party have emerged. The social movements and their leaders also seem to be tied to earlier political alliances. Allegiances to Azapo, the ANC, the Labour Party, and independent organisations such

as the WDF still mar relations amongst the leaders. Especially with regard to those people who came through the ANC seek to work within the structures provided by the dialogue between the government and the refineries, while others tend to favour exerting greater pressure on the state and refineries to achieve social justice. There is also a significant conflict between leaders and organisations that accept money from the refineries whereas some organisations, especially organisations with an oppositional agenda, perceive such money as be blood money which hampers real and lasting development through piecemeal donations and projects. These donations are also seen as a silencing mechanism to stop residents from demanding more development from government and industry

Despite these divisions which most of the leaders we spoke to readily admit. There are serious obstacles to unity between these organisations even as much as the leaders agree on the need for unified action. What has emerged is a formula or perhaps an uneasy truce which is severely tested from time to time by events such as the Engen strike of 2001 and the periodic sums of money for this or that project in order from Engen, which is: organisations will support each other on certain issues that they can agree on but with the proviso that they be allowed in their own capacity to function independently.

As an added dimension to this mistrust between community leaders there is also a deep mistrust of leaders by the community whom it claims are overnight leaders when Engen starts to throw money around. There are also the accusation that some leaders claim to be unemployed while working for community organisations and sometimes being an office bearer or acting behind the scene in more than one organisations yet live quite comfortably thus raising the suspicion that they are also apart of the higher echelons of the food chain in the Engen/government version of the Wentworth trickle down economics. In support of this notion residents point out that the only leaders who seem to have cordial relations with Engen whose organisations receive Engen support. Engen representative David Goldstone (Social Investment Officer: a position that was instituted after the 2001 strike) said in an interview that Engen as part of the lessons they learned from the 2001 strike that it would be best to deal with what he called legitimate leaders. In explaining what legitimate leaders were he said some leaders during the strike were

not interested in the workers at all and were more interested in advancing their own political agendas.

Therefore much of the political struggles including the strike were mediated by a small group of vocal leaders and much of Wentworth's political and social aspirations are not so much of the marginalized sections of the community, who are often treated in paternalistic fashion by leaders, the government, Engen and political parties, but the of aspirations of a privileged and more vocal sections of the community. Interestingly many in these opinionated circles have long since left the community. Thus certain 'victories' such as the Engen strike must also be appraised with due consideration to this fact. Also arising from this dynamic is the ease with which Engen and government have effectively silenced the multitude aspirations of the residents. It also explains why these leaders have not challenged Engen and governments insistence that it will not deal directly with the community because this leads to disastrous consequences and deal instead with what they deem to be 'legitimate leaders'. Viewed from this perspective it is easy to see why some of the respondents felt that these community organisations are not about uplifting the community because they do not listen to them and that they are there to advance the interests of the leaders within those organisations. Young people we interviewed complained that they were not getting the heard by the older generation within organisations who constitute the leadership.

*"They [the leaders] complain that there is not a lot of people but when you come in [to organisations] ... and you know we're young and we're bright and we got this big vision the old people tend to say no listen here we're focusing on ...lets stick to the basics they're not looking at the broader picture." (Interview: 18/04/03)*

This also lies at the heart of the difficulties of that the community has experienced in organising against its immediate threats like electricity cut-offs and evictions, let alone long-term problems such as accommodation and joblessness. This is also evident in the way Engen and other refinery can glibly claim to have fulfilled their social responsibilities by giving piecemeal offerings to a select group of community organisations. Thus the claims that are often made that the reason why development in Wentworth has been slow is because the community is divided or that it is politically inactive have to be

dismissed. It is not the 'community' that is divided but the competing organisations in the community.

This is due to no small degree to the fact that leaders in Wentworth have a disproportionate amount of the spotlight and attention in terms of recognition by the management at Engen, the media and government representatives. The Engen strike of 2001 did not change any of this. There are competing scenarios for what might constitute a solution to the Wentworth/industry/government stand off. It is apparent that for government, industry as well as some residents relocation is an attractive option. Members of the community and the leaders of CBO's have formulated the demands for social justice differently.

In separate interviews David Goldstone as well as Des D'Sar said that part of the problem in Wentworth currently was the fact that residents had fallen victim to what's been called a 'culture of entitlement'<sup>26</sup> and the 'hand-out syndrome'. While the two respondents were on opposite sides of the Engen Wentworth divide, it is surprising that they both perceive that the poor are inflicting poverty upon themselves. Besides the fact that these statements sound paternalistic, they are generalisations and they seem to suggest that people would subject themselves to poverty in the remote hope of receiving state assistance.

One of the surprising aspects to have come out of this research is that the problems of Wentworth do not only centre around lack of finance either for development or for social programmes but rather disagreements as to how development should take place and how these finances ought to be spent.

Broadly speaking there seems to be two distinct camps in this regard. On the one camp are the environmental organisations and by association (largely through Des D'Sar) also

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<sup>26</sup> "Culture of entitlement is a term that has been adopted to signify the unwillingness of communities to pay for government services, in other words it is thought that people do not pay because they have become used to the idea that government services should be free. But what this often overlooks is that many of these people are unable rather than unwilling to pay for services. IN this instance the "Ten Rand Campaign" launched by the CCF and supported by some organisations in Wentworth demonstrates that people are often willing to pay but only ask that government and business not seek to profit form services to the poor and that those who are ion especially desperate situations, e.g. pensioners ought to be exempted from payment.

the Wentworth Development Forum which have resolutely refused to endorse Engen's largess. Their argument has been that the money Engen throws at the community is divisive, produces fly-by-night leaders and is a diversionary tactic to silence the community over the continuing pollution and a greater financial commitment to the community. On the other side of the fence are organisations affiliated to Wentworth Co-ordinated Services (WCS), which include Wings of Love, women's and HIV/AIDS organisations. Which have accepted money from Engen to finance various programmes. These divisions also seem to centre around how the organisations function. The environmental groups for instance are advocacy groups whose resource base are local and international funding organisations. On the other hand WCS do depend to a large extent on funds raised within the community and the businesses around Wentworth, in particular the two refineries. The two also differ in that while WCS rely on the tactical knowledge and experiences of the community or rather its leaders, the advocacy groups also rely on tactical and experiences of national and international organisations (especially with regard to research and funding) and contacts.

Alan Moolman pointed out, often the WDF is not attuned enough to realise that they are sabotaging their cause when they attack members of WCS because they take money from Engen, thus alienating those members of the community who stand to benefit from those transactions or those whose politics are reformist rather than confrontational.

This dynamic has also affected delivery on housing. The city of Durban has over the past two years committed itself though in its usual paternalistic fashion to two housing projects that have gone wrong. One project is in Woodville Road and Landsdowne.

These disputes were fed by rumours and misinformation and personal rivalry. In the case of the Woodville road flats the problem started when a dispute arose between the city and the contractor hired to build as it transpired that he had not built them according to the specifications in his contract. Occupation of the flats was thus delayed for two years. In a desperate move members of the community who had been promised the flats took the decision to move in regardless of the standoff and the fact that the flats had not been officially handed over. In the case of Woodville road Keith 'Skido' Joseph supported the forced occupation of flats, while Des D'Sar did not. But what was worrying was the appearance of a pamphlet reading: "Skido or Des". To a large extent many of

the conflicts in Wentworth seem to gravitate around these two individuals. Political activity is reduced to giving allegiance to one or the other personality cult.

As one of residents pointed out there has developed in Wentworth 'an industry of the poor'. What she meant by this is that there is a number of individuals, intellectuals, researchers, officials in government and Engen, so called leaders and their organisations and writers whose pursuit of livelihoods and professional recognition prompts them to bill themselves as acting in the interests of Wentworth citizens while the residents themselves gain nothing from them. It is a form of trickle down economics: funds and projects meant for the upliftment of the community either from government, donors, even the petrochemical companies except that the trickle dries up completely when it reaches its intended target: i.e. the poor having been siphoned off by layers of mediators and representatives. There is a growing feeling that many struggles waged by the community since the days of Apartheid have only served to bolster the ambitions of few radical sounding opportunists.

Many community members feel disempowered despite the triumphalism of the leaders. In this regard when we consider who or what the Wentworth community is, it would bode us well to remember that the manner in which the leaders perceive this community and the way the residents themselves perceive themselves are quite different. The latter tend to look at participation in terms of acting through mandates by community members who sit on the sidelines and are observers without active participation. On the other hand there is a strong desire amongst community members for direct participation in these processes despite the leaderships insistence that greater participation leads to stagnation in the processes.

While many people in Wentworth are both privately and publicly critical of the presence and role of Engen in the area as well as government's lame response to environmental protection and improvement of living conditions, the challenge remains of how to translate this criticism and communal anger into tangible gains for residents.

## ***ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY***

An informative series of newspaper reports authored by Tony Carnie under the heading “Poison in our Air,” suggests that the Engen and Sapref refineries in South Durban, which were built in the fifties and sixties are suffering from crumbling infrastructure. According to these reports this dilapidation has led to some of the incidents of work place accidents as well as the spillages of effluent onto surrounding communities.

*Singh (then Environmental Minister for KwaZulu-Natal) said a legacy of poor planning had placed Durban in a position where trade-offs had to be made almost continually between economic considerations and human welfare.*

*‘I often wonder whether the haphazard planning of the past is now combining with obsolescence of plant and pipeline infrastructure to create new risks as the infrastructure starts crumbling.’*

*Singh said he believed several ‘captains of industry’ seemed to accept the need to invest in cleaner technology to reduce pollution, but he also warned that government would not hesitate to shut down industrial operations until the owners put their houses into order.*

It appears that environmental concerns in South Durban emerged as soon as the Engen refinery was built in 1954, though at that stage it appears that it was mostly the affluent residents of the white suburb Bluff that raised the issue then. Bluff residents had resisted the building of the refinery in the first place. For the most part Wentworth and neighbouring Merebank community action was centred on socio-political issues such as housing, service delivery etc. In the mid-eighties Merewent and Wentworth residents also started making their concerns over pollution heard. A handful of environmental action groups appeared including the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA).

There are three refineries in South Durban namely Engen, Sapref and Natref. These refineries have been responsible for pollution in the area but the larger Engen plant has been the bigger polluter. All environmental concerns by the surrounding community have in the past been treated as a non-issue by management at both refineries. Allegations of water contamination and spillages were dismissed as freak occurrences. While on the other they have consistently claimed that emission level were within acceptable World health Organisation (WHO) standards. Only in the nineties with greater access to information and co-operation from international environmental organisations did

management at these refineries concede that emission levels were unacceptably high. And undertook to reducing them. Cleaner fuels and technology were introduced in the mid-nineties. In addition to this the refineries had resolutely refused to discuss these issues with CBO's. A combination of political pressure on politicians particularly former Minister of Water and Forestry Kader Asmal and Environmental Minister Vali Moosa as well as President Mandela on his 1996 visit to Wentworth as well as research into pollution were adopted by the environmental lobby led top a softening of management intransigence. In the mid-nineties negotiations and stakeholder forums were established. But these forums were bogged down by lack of any agreement between Engen and the community. It has also been claimed that despite having made a commitment to work with the community, Engen was reluctant to release information regarding its emission levels, thus making it difficult for community groups to make concrete proposals.

One of the first successful environmental campaigns was over the removal of a toxic waste dump located near Umlazi township. Through community pressure the government was forced to order the closure of the site. One of the functions of these environmental groups is to document cases of pollution related illnesses such as cancer, asthma, and leukaemia, to lobby government, to monitor emissions from refineries, to rally the community over environmental issues, to seek the support of national and international environmental groups, most notably Greenpeace and Earthlife Africa.

A number of strategies have been employed to challenge the pollution issue. Research, demonstrations, media reports, lobbying for tougher legislation and enforcing legislation have been the main focus for these groups. Government on the other hand, has stated that it does not always have the human recourses to monitor violation of environmental legislation. While one may sympathise with government in this regard, one might well have more concern for the residents who have to live with this pollution. It has also been noted that there are no evacuation procedures in place in case a very bad accident were to happen.

Though Engen is not the only polluter in South Durban, the refinery is none-the-less one of the major polluters including the Sapref refinery and Mondi paper mill. In all there are an estimated 180 companies in the area that are responsible for pollution. The most common or most complained about pollutant has been identified as sulphur dioxide

which has the distinctive smell of rotten eggs. This and other pollutants have been responsible not only for long-term illnesses but more immediate symptoms have been observed especially in children of Settlers Primary School where children reported symptoms of nausea, vomiting and difficulty in breathing. Research by Ecoserv has also suggested that cases of asthma amongst children at this school were abnormally high. Over the years and in particular in the immediate post-apartheid stage the government favoured self-monitoring by the petrochemical industries. The government tended to see its role as mediator between the community or at least its leaders and the refineries. As Bobby Peek et al pointed out CBO's had a tough time securing information about emissions from the polluters in the area. Recent formulations however have shifted to a model where the government now sees itself as a stakeholder and is keen to promote the Multipoint Plan which according to literature produced by the eThekweni Municipality, is a co-operative forum where civil society, government and industry monitor and set standards on pollution. The government has also pledged more monitoring staff as well as more co-operation with international bodies. What is not clear is what role in specific terms is envisaged for the community and whether the existing power relations are in any way addressed by this new dispensation. Whether this new Multi Point plan will finally yield the reductions in emissions and stop the spillages that have periodically occurred over the years remains to be seen. The Multi Point Plan is also deafeningly silent on what measures will be put in place to censure those companies that violate environmental regulations. In the past despite the minister's reassurance that the polluter will be made to pay, there have been few penalties for offenders of the law even in instances where the culprits have been clearly identified.

It has also been noted that Engen has signed numerous environmental agreements with sections of Wentworth. Each time Engen, community organisations and the media have celebrated these as breakthroughs but it has transpired that Engen has consistently reneged on those agreements. Part of the reasons that were cited for this development are that there are no effective enforcement of these agreements. And Engen can always deem illegitimate the leaders who complain about its non-compliance and using the divisions within the community to effectively silence its critics.

The story of the failed housing project for Barracks residents also has an environmental dimension to it. In that one of the reasons why the offer by government and Engen to

relocate the community was met with suspicion arises from the fact that Engen wanted to buy those properties which was interpreted as an attempt on the part of Engen to acquire more land for expansion beyond the current buffer of Tara road and in particular how this expansion would effectively seal Engen off and make it inaccessible to picketing from Tara road.

One of the major concerns over the Engen and the other chemical plants in South Durban is that according to Sven Bobby” Peek (Interview: August 2003) is the lack of an evacuation plan for the city in case a major accident happens on the refinery. According to Peek, there are a number of toxic agents stored by these industries that could, if released into the atmosphere would affect large sections of Durban’s population.

These concerns do not seem as far fetched as they may appear. There have been several accidents on both the Engen and Sapref refineries when benzene considered extremely toxic has escaped without the refinery personnel noticing until members of the Wentworth and Merebank communities started complaining about the smell. Alarmingly management has tried to reassure communities that everything is ‘OK’ when they are in fact in danger. In other instances the refineries have been responsible for polluting Badulah canal. Whenever these incidents have occurred management has tried to reassure the public that these are freak accidents and dismiss claims that they are occurring because of inadequately old infrastructure. The fact that government is aware of this crumbling infrastructure, as acknowledged by Narend Singh’s statement quoted above, makes it complicit in a kind of economically inspired environmental terrorism.

## ***ENGEN’S ROLE IN THE WENTWORTH***

Engen is a multinational corporation with investments in the DRC, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Namibia, Ghana and Botswana<sup>27</sup>. The Malaysian state-owned company Petronas owns Engen. If one reads press releases and information on the Engen website, there is no reason to suspect that there is anything unhealthy about Engen’s

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.mbendi.co.za/coen.htm>

ability to create employment. Engen is quite proud of its role in the social life of South Africa. It sponsors sporting events and supports certain NGO's.

In December 2000 in an article entitled "*Refinery lubricates local labour market*" by Des Parker, John Mackey, then Engen General Manager, is quoted as saying: "The labour agreement [with its residential neighbours] aims to ensure that people from surrounding communities have an equal and fair opportunity of being appointed for temporary refinery and construction work at a standardised hourly rate." The article does not elaborate to say who these neighbours are accept to say that they represent people from Austerville, Chesterville, Merebank, Merewent, Wentworth, Sydenham, Newlands, Lamontville and Umlazi.

This article states that 700 jobs would be created by the shutdown. There is a discrepancy between Engen's PR and reality since in most cases Engen is not creating new jobs but rehiring the same workers year after year. Especially since most shutdown workers have very little prospects for promotion. It also makes government's claims that big industry brings employment sound hollow.

Engen also claims in its website that it has since 1990 spent 100 million rands worth of social investment in:

- Education quality and delivery
- Sustainable job creation
- Peace and security
- Building national (and African) pride and identity

While it is true that Engen has initiated the two training centres one in Cape Town and the other in Durban, the Durban Engen Training Centre has been closed for about two years now, after having been moved to Isipingo (making it less accessible to Wentworth residents). In addition to this many residents claimed that the training centre is producing artisans that have no job prospects because of skills over-supply in the engineering sector. Furthermore as Alan Moolman and Mr Johnson pointed out; There is also a need for apprenticeships because since the early nineties there have been no new apprenticeships. The consequence of that being that young artisans who completed

training at the Engen Training Centre lack experience and only hold a worthless certificate.

It is also quite true that Engen is not the only polluter in the area. The Mondi plant and Sapref refinery also contribute to the pollution. Exhaust fumes from the nearby freeway and other smaller industries are to blame but again there is a disparity between the Engen's PR and reality. In a letter to The Natal Mercury Engen's General manager, Wayne Hartmann says: "how many of your readers know that the sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) level in South Durban, as detected by the network of SO<sub>2</sub> monitors, is now close to the guidelines of the World Health Organisation? South Africa's ambient air quality standards are still to be enacted into law but when they are, our SO<sub>2</sub> standards will be stricter than most of the developed world." But environmental organisations have had a tough time trying to secure relevant data from Engen regarding its emissions. Also worth mentioning is that incidents of environmental pollution continue to be reported by residents, the media and research organisations. Nevertheless, two recent Ecoserv reports state that sulphur dioxide pollution in Merebank exceeded World Health Organisation guidelines on 124 occasions between November 1, 2000, and October 31, 2001.

## ***CONCLUSION***

One question that is pertinent with regard to the strike might be: what is the lasting legacy of the 2001 strike for Wentworth? In answering this question will turn to Piven and Cloward who argue that occasions when protest is possible amongst the poor, the forms that it must take and the impact it can have are all determined by social structure in ways which usually diminish its extent and diminish its force (1979). In the case of Wentworth it seems that the fact that the strike was unprotected left the workers in a vulnerable situation, making it difficult to sustain the struggle over a longer period of time; the strike only lasted three weeks. On the other hand the Wentworth community as a whole was dependent on the salaries earned by its citizens at Engen. It is perhaps the strong element of co-dependency that in the end determined the outcome of the strike rather than the resolve of the workers to improve conditions. But as the subsequent strike in

2003 suggests, this chapter was by no means closed. If anything, the subsequent strike proves that as long as there is dissatisfaction amongst the workers, industrial action will be a constant reality for the refinery.

The strike ushered in an era of renewed commitment to the union CEIWU and a new strategic sensibility as demonstrated by the CEIWU strike of 2003, but as Piven and Cloward point out working class struggles are fragmented and contingent rather than revolutionary and united in purpose. So much of what happened in Wentworth in 2001 and since reflects this reality.

“Protest is not a matter of choice. Violence is often not the preferred course of demonstrations. Anger at changing material circumstances but also changes in conditions, relationships of daily lives i.e. of regular patterns of reward and punishment, cause protest action” (Piven and Cloward: 1979). There are many positive aspects that emanate from the strike. One is that it has boosted the confidence of workers and sections of the community to confront Engen and realise that this giant is vulnerable. Another positive spin-off has been that it raised awareness about the plight of the workers and of the poor sections of Wentworth, how this awareness could be translated into meaningful change remains a challenge. But there were significant losses also and the social movements have not addressed these losses. For instance the change in the frequency and duration of shutdowns, the continuing harsh conditions that workers are subjected to and the fate of the 200 workers who were allowed to work at Engen until the end of the shut but were subsequently black-listed by Engen, which meant that they would be near impossible for to find employment with any contractor employed by Engen.

There is a David versus Goliath appeal to the strike of 2001. However, preserving the myth of the great strike has meant that the world has tended to focus on the progressive aspects of the struggles and downplayed the undercurrents of dissatisfaction at the leaders and at the shallowness of participation. Similarly, disagreements within and amongst various social structures have been downplayed.

This is significant because, as one informant pointed out: it becomes very easy for “outsiders to be drawn into personal and ideological differences between personalities

and groups in the community to the extent that they become obstacles rather than conduits of popular participation” (Interview 16/01/04).

The Wentworth strike is of interest to social movements because of what it represents; i.e. the emergence of a new revolutionary consciousness and the possibility of sweeping social changes. However, if social activists are to be effective in advancing the political interests of Wentworth residents, they need to answer some crucial questions. Is their definition of the community premised on the support for a few prominent leaders or actual residents? Are they able to speak on behalf of residents or only of their own subjectivity? How does one sustain relationships beyond high-profile events like strike and marches? Perhaps it is more useful for social movements to support the day-to-day reformist and short-term struggles of the Engen workforce and community than to read anti-corporatism or revolutionary intent in the strike. Additionally, there is a need to sustain such contacts and synergies and focus on building more inclusive and stronger social organisations.

Though it could never be said that the strike was a total failure and though it could never be said that it should not have happened having started as spontaneously as it did, but one could say that those who participate in social movements must become more aware of their influence on the style of leaders and complexities of the communities they support.

## **Notes**

1. Engen has had several name changes over the years. In its earliest days it was referred to as The standard Vacuum Company of South Africa (Stanvac), when it was sold to Gencor it became Genref, then later, Engen. It is now owned by the Malaysian State-owned company Petronas

2. Labour brokers are sometimes referred to simply as brokers  
The name Wentworth encompasses many areas including areas such as the barracks, Austerville Woodville road etc.
3. The terms shutdown workers and contract workers are used interchangeably. They refer to workers who are employed at Engen for the shutdown and are thus on limited short-term contracts.
4. Durban Corporation, the Durban Municipality, Durban Metro and eThekweni Municipality are different terms referring to the body governing the city of Durban over the years.

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