

# **A History of the IWW in South Africa**

**“Can we do any less than our forebears?”**

Lucien van der Walt

2001

# Contents

MEMORY THE WEAPON . . . . .	3
THE FIRST IWW . . . . .	3
RACE AND INDUSTRY . . . . .	3
THE VOICE OF LABOUR . . . . .	4
ON THE TRACKS . . . . .	4
THE 1913 GENERAL STRIKE . . . . .	5
THE INTERNATIONAL . . . . .	5
RED AND BLACK . . . . .	6
FOR AFRICA . . . . .	6
ON THE DOCKS . . . . .	7
FROM CAPE TOWN TO THE ZAMBEZI . . . . .	7
RACE AND ANARCHY . . . . .	8

The Industrial Workers of the World, and the ideas, goals and organisational practices for which it stood, had an important influence on the early labour movement and radical press in South Africa. It also had an impact on neighbouring Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, at least five unions were founded on the IWW model in this period. Four of these unions pioneered the organisation of workers of colour, most notably the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first union for African workers in South African history.

## **MEMORY THE WEAPON**

Much of this history has been forgotten, both in South Africa, and elsewhere, including within the contemporary IWW movement, and, unfortunately, most writings on this history have tended to be inaccurate and incomplete. Both the hostility of liberal and Marxist writers, and over-enthusiasm and simplification by anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists, have muddied the waters.

It is therefore an essential task to set the record straight. The history of the IWW's role in South Africa is important for more than simple academic reasons. It is vitally important that we understand our own history, learn from it, and yes, take pride in our accomplishments as anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists .

## **THE FIRST IWW**

Founded in the United States in 1905, the IWW spelt out its aims in unmistakable terms in the Preamble of the IWW:

“The working-class and the employing class have nothing in common . There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, and abolish the wage system.

For radical workers around the world, this sort of vision proved immensely attractive. Tired of continual betrayals by workers parties and elected politicians, and often excluded from even the semblance of political rights represented by bourgeois electoral processes, millions of working people joined revolutionary trade unions that were committed to direct action and the replacement of capitalism and the state by workers' control of production between the 1890s and the 1930s.

## **RACE AND INDUSTRY**

South Africa's industrialisation was begun by the discovery of diamonds at Kimberely in 1867, followed by gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. Hundreds of thousands of workers from Australia, America, Europe and from throughout southern Africa were drawn into vast new cities such as Johannesburg and Kimberely almost overnight.

For white workers, conditions were poor and dangerous, but they at least had basic civil and political rights.

Not so the Africans who entered the cities as a conquered people, their lands under imperial authority, their chiefs colluding in labour recruitment to the mines, and their working lives shackled by pass laws preventing free movement, indenture laws banning strikes, and residential laws condemning them to all-male hostels or grim ghettos.

Conditions for Indian workers, descended from indentured farm labourers brought out in the 1860s, and Coloureds, descended mainly from the old Cape colony slaves, were a little better, but both groups suffered national oppression under a succession of white supremacist regimes that were finally consolidated as the Union of South Africa in 1910.

## **THE VOICE OF LABOUR**

By 1910 the Voice of Labour – a radical weekly founded in 1908, and the first socialist paper in twentieth-century South Africa – had by 1910 become a leading forum for revolutionary syndicalist views. For radicals alienated by the brutalities and racism of South African capitalism, the segregationist reformism of the South African Labour Party, and the sectionalism of the craft unions, the IWW vision was attractive.

Local anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists wrote into the paper to praise “direct action” over Parliamentary politics” which acts to “chill and paralyse natural energy and initiative.” They were also the first to call for racially integrated trade unions: the “only logical thing for white slaves to do,” wrote “Proletarian,” “is to throw in their lot with the black wage slave in a common assault on the capitalist system.”

## **ON THE TRACKS**

In March 1910, a pro-IWW Socialist Labour Party (SLP) was founded in Johannesburg, and the founding of a South African section of the IWW followed in June. The vocal and militant blacksmith A.B. Dunbar was soon elected general-secretary of the union.

Despite the sectarianism that dogged the early Johannesburg left – including the relations between the SLP and the IWW- the various left groups rallied behind the IWW when it led white Johannesburg tramway workers out in a lightening strike in January 1911.

The strike against the appointment of an unpopular Inspector – was won in less than day, and led to a rapid growth in the IWW in Johannesburg and the founding of an IWW section, the Municipal Industrial Union. An IWW local was also set up on the Pretoria railways that year, and there are reports of a “Durban IWW” operating in that port city in 1912.

However, the Johannesburg municipality soon launched an enquiry into the January 1911 strike. The strike had not followed the restrictive labour laws, and the central government was worried about the example it set for the railways, where strikes were prohibited.

As a second strike broke out in response, the municipality recruited strikebreakers, sent armed police to surround the tram works and main power station, and had Glynn and Glendon arrested. Workers and their families then set up barricades, clashes with the police followed, and public meetings were banned; Dunbar and John Campbell of the SLP, among others, were arrested for addressing a rally after the ban was in place.

Nonetheless, the strike was broken. Seventy workers were fired, and Glynn sentenced to three months hard labour. He subsequently left for Australia that year, where he became editor of the IWW's Direct Action and was one of the "Sydney twelve" tried for treason in 1917.

A second crippling blow against the local IWW came from within: in early 1912, the union was hijacked by members of a local socialist sect Intent on setting a "workers' party," and Dunbar was expelled. The IWW seems to have withered by the middle of that year.

## **THE 1913 GENERAL STRIKE**

Thus, when the great July 1913 strike by white workers broke out across the Witwatersrand, neither the IWW nor the SLP had any visible presence. The government nonetheless blamed the militant strike — in which imperial troops killed more than 25 protestors, and strikers and their supporters rioted in Johannesburg and on a "syndicalist conspiracy," "Anarchy masquerading as Labour," and the the "ravings of the syndicalists" which were "appealing both to the poorer Dutch and to the Natives".

Some IWW-type ideas were in evidence amongst sections of the strikers, with the SA Labour Party finding it necessary to campaign against a wave of "syndicalist talk." One example was R. Waterston, who not only reportedly called for a "a general strike" and "a revolution," but tried to bring African mine workers out on strike as well.

Nonetheless, such perspectives do not seem to have been dominant. By the time of the January 1914 white miners strike (suppressed under martial law) the South African IWW was clearly defunct.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL**

Nonetheless, IWW ideas got a second lease of life in South Africa with the founding of the International Socialist League (ISL) in September 1915.

The ISL was founded by anti-war dissidents from the SA Labour Party, who left over that party's support for World War One . Many of these had been radicalised by the brutal repression of the 1913 and 1914 general strikes, and had broken also with the Party's "White South Africa" policies. They included militants such as G. Mason, W.H . Andrews and S.P. Bunting.

Veteran IWW and Socialist Labour Party militants — notably Dunbar and Campbell- also joined the ISL, where they soon wielded a decisive political influence. By 1916, the ISL's weekly, The International, described the organisation's aim as the establishment of a "new movement," One Big Union that would overcome the "bounds of Craft and race and sex," "recognise no bounds of craft, no exclusions of colour," and destroy capitalism through a "lockout of the capitalist class."

The ISL consistently condemned racism, and insisted that "an internationalism which does not concede the fullest rights which the native working-class is capable of claiming will be a sham."

The ISL set out to promote these sorts of ideas through The International, through innumerable leaflets and public meetings, and even through the standing candidates in elections on a platform of equal rights for white and black, and the abolition of capitalism and the state through the One Big Union.

## RED AND BLACK

Initially rooted, like the South African IWW, amongst militant white workers, and focused on the white trade unions, the ISL increasingly turned its attention towards workers of colour, the African, Coloured and Indian wage slaves who formed the bedrock of South African capitalism.

Unlike the South African IWW, which was open to all workers, but based, in practice, amongst whites, the ISL was able to unionise workers of colour into syndicalist unions on the IWW model.

Not only were links made with nationalist organisations such as the African Peoples Organisation and the African National Congress (ANC), but African workers were also drawn into ISL study groups set up in Johannesburg in July 1917. Dunbar was the main speaker at these study groups, which focused on the need for revolutionary trade unionism, for mass civil disobedience against racist laws, and for the abolition of the capitalist system.

In the port city of Durban, ISL militants like Gordon Lee founded an Indian Workers Industrial Union in March 1917 “on the lines of the IWW.” Whilst “the Indian Workers Choir entertained the crowds by singing the Red Flag, the International and many IWW songs,” plans were put in place to translate ISL materials into In Tamil, Hindi and Telegu.

The key organisers of the Union were R.K. Moodiey and Bernard Sigamoney, who seem to have been very effective: according to the local Indian Opinion, the “fame of the Indian Workers Union, and Comrade Sigamoney’s activities therein reached Lahore in India” where a local paper was quoted as asking: “Is there no lesson for this to the working classes in India”?

In 1918, noting a “great awakening of industrial solidarity” amongst Coloured workers in the diamond mining town of Kimberely, the ISL dispatched Sam Barlin to unionise workers.

An ISL office was set up, and Barlin organised a Clothing Workers Industrial Union, which set up a branch in Johannesburg in June 1919. Twenty-seven Coloured workers subsequently joined the ISL, including Fred Pienaar (the union’s secretary), and Johnny Gomas, later a prominent communist. Barlin also set up a Horse Drivers’ Union in the town, again amongst Coloured workers. Both unions struck in 1919.

Meanwhile, in Cape Town, the Industrial Socialist League (IndSL), a second revolutionary syndicalist group founded in March 1918 on the basis of the IWW Preamble, organised mainly Coloured factory workers into a Sweet and Jam Workers Industrial Union, and promoted IWW ideas in its monthly *The Bolshevik*.

## FOR AFRICA

In September 1917, the Johannesburg ISL study group for African workers was transformed into the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first African trade union in South African history – possibly in Southern Africa as a whole. Rueben Cetiwe, a key African militant in the new union, and part of its all-African executive, set out the union’s aims in unambiguous terms:

“We are here for Organisation, so that as soon as all of your fellow workers are organised, then we can see what we can do to abolish the Capitalist-System. We are here for the salvation of the workers. We are here to organise and to fight for our rights and benefits.”

Wi thin the ANC on the Witwatersrand, key Industrial Workers of Africa militants – such as Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai – were central to the formation of a formed part of a left, pro-labour,

bloc that helped shift the sleepy and middle class ANC to the left for in 1918 and early 1919, as an unprecedented wave of strikes by black and white workers broke out.

When the hard-line Judge McFie — “a bear on the bench,” in the words of the International-jailed 152 striking African municipal workers in June 1918, the ANC called a mass protest rally of African workers in Johannesburg on the 10 June. At the rally, members of the Industrial Workers of Africa moved for a general strike by African workers across the Witwatersrand to protest the repression.

An organising committee composed of ANC, ISL and Industrial Workers of Africa militants was set up to investigate the issue and report back. “The capitalists and workers are at war everywhere in every country,” the committee told a mass rally a week later, and so it was only right that workers should “strike and get what they should.” A general strike by all African workers against the arrests, for a 1-shilling-a-day basic wage, and “for Africa which they deserved.”

## **ON THE DOCKS**

Weak organisation- and maybe nerves and inexperience- led the committee to call off the strike. Nonetheless, the government soon arrested seven activists — three ISL militants, three activists from the Industrial Workers of Africa, and two from the ANC — for “incitement” to public violence in what became South Africa’s first-ever multiracial political trial.

After the case fell through, protest continued, with Cetiwe and Kraai playing a leading role in the ANC’s March 1919 protest against the pass laws, and African ISL militant T.W. Thibedi reviving the Industrial Workers of Africa with a “gratifyingly large attendance” of several hundred supporters and members.

Once the ANC right-wing regained the upper hand, it closed down all such mass protests, returning to its traditional tactic of petitioning the British Crown and liberal white opinion.

Cetiwe and Kraai then moved to Cape Town to set up a branch of the Industrial Workers of Africa. Organising amongst African and Coloured dockworkers, the two syndicalist militants helped organise a joint strike by the Industrial Workers of Africa with two other unions — the Industrial and Commercial Union and the (white) National Union of Railways and Harbour Servants- in December 1919. Supported by the IndSL, more than 2000 workers struck for better wages and against food exports (which worker:. blamed for massive post-war inflation).

## **FROM CAPE TOWN TO THE ZAMBEZI**

Although the strike was not won, it did lay a basis for cooperation on the docks, and by 1921 the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Union and several other African trade unions had merged to form the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (or ICU).

Not a true revolutionary syndicalist union — the ICU was influenced more by nationalist and traditionalist ideologies than anti-capitalism, and was run from above by a parasitic, weak, and sometimes crooked, layer of middle class officials — the ICU remained influenced by the IWW. It called for One Big Union, and its constitution included a version of the IWW Preamble:

“Whereas the interest of the workers and those of the employers are opposed to each other a struggle must always obtain about the division of the products of hu-

man labour, until the workers through their industrial organisations take from the capitalist class the means of production, to be owned and controlled by the workers for the benefit of all, instead of for the profit of a few . This is the goal for which the ICU strives along with all other organised workers throughout the world.

The ICU peaked in 1927 with 100, 000 members. By the 1930s it had also established loosely linked sections in Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Internal splits, strategic confusion, a lack of internal democracy and state and vigilante repression all led to a rapid decline of the organisation to a shadow of its former self by the early 1930s. Still, the ICU was the largest mass African movement in South Africa until the ANC's "Congress Alliance" campaigns of the 1950s.

## **RACE AND ANARCHY**

The IWW had had an important impact on the radical left, militant white workers, and workers of colour in South Africa in the 1910s, an influence that persisted into the 1920s in a diluted form in the ICU, and even spread into neighbouring colonies.

Can we say, then, as our detractors do, that classical anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism "ignored" race? Not at all!

Within a white dominion, within the British Empire, within colonial Africa, the IWW and the revolutionary syndicalism it exemplified and promoted had played a pioneering role in organising workers of colour, in defending the rights of African labour, in organising civil rights activities, a militancy that spilled into the African working classes of neighbouring countries.

In its "glorious period," between the 1880s and 1930s, anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism were not just a "European" phenomenon . The anti-authoritarian left was an international movement. It was also internationalist and anti-racist.

These principles remain burned into our hearts as we enter the twenty-first century at the centre of the new anti -capitalist movement. Can we do any less than our forebears?



The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt  
A History of the IWW in South Africa  
“Can we do any less than our forebears?”  
2001

Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021 from [lucienvanderwalt.com](http://lucienvanderwalt.com)  
Published in *Bread and Roses*, number 7, (Britain), pp. 11–14.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)