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Dunbar, Thibedi, Sigamoney

Three figures in the IWW in South Africa

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The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, the Wobblies) was the main influence on the radical left in South Africa in the early twentieth century. But who were the South African Wobblies? This article looks at three key figures.

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and dedication it evoked, and its staunch and unwavering opposition to the country's barbaric racial capitalism.

Andrew Dunbar (1879–1964)

Andrew Dunbar was general-secretary of the IWW in Johannesburg, established in June 1910. A hefty Scots immigrant who arrived in 1906, he worked in the Natal railways as a blacksmith, leading a mass strike in 1909. This cost him his job, and he went to work on the Johannesburg tramways. These were the IWW's stronghold, with a powerful presence amongst the white workers, and led big strikes in 1911. In 1912, Dunbar was ousted from the IWW, which faded away soon afterwards.

From 1914, he was in the War on War League, which set up the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL) in September the next year. The ISL campaigned for One Big Union, and fought against the oppressive laws applied to African workers, the majority of the working class: indenture, pass controls, housing in closed barracks etc. It also opposed the discrimination being applied against the Coloured and Indian minorities.

From June 1917, Dunbar was part of an ISL team running study groups in downtown Johannesburg amongst African workers, advocating civil disobedience and One Big Union against African oppression and capitalism. This led to the Industrial Workers of Africa, an African union modeled on the IWW. As interest in the Russian Revolution rose, Dunbar and others formed Africa's first Communist Party in October 1920 –on a basically syndicalist platform; he was general-secretary. In 1921, this merged into the official Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), but Dunbar headed a syndicalist faction. Later expelled from the CPSA, he faded from union and socialist work.

T.W. Thibedi (1888–1960)

The son of a Wesleyan minister, Thibedi William Thibedi was one of the most important African syndicalists in 1910s South Africa. Hailing from the small town of Vereeniging, he trained as a school teacher and worked at a church school in Johannesburg. Around 1916, he joined the ISL, its first major African leader.

In September 1917, Thibedi was involved in organizing an ISL-sponsored conference that led to the formation of a “Solidarity Committee,” intended to reform the orthodox trade unions. These generally excluded people of colour (except in Cape Town), tended craft unionism, and were prone to binding no-strike agreements. Thibedi served on the Committee –which was not however a success.

From 1918, Thibedi was involved in the Industrial Workers of Africa in Johannesburg, arguing for One Big Union, united on class lines across the races, and mass action. Along with other figures in the union, he also promoted these views in the leftwing of the African nationalist South African Native National Congress (SANNC). When a failed general strike in July 1918 led to a crackdown on the ISL, Industrial Workers of Africa and SANNC leftwing, it fell to Thibedi to revive the union in Johannesburg. The union drew its members from across the African working class, and was more a General Membership Branch than an industrial body.

The key African in the early CPSA, Thibedi put his syndicalist background to work when he ran the party night school in Johannesburg, and became a full-time organizer and unionist. When the CPSA expelled him in 1929, the communist-led Federation of Non-European Trade Unions forced his reinstatement; he was expelled again in 1931. Later Thibedi flirted with Trotskyism, before drifting away into anonymity.

Bernard L.E. Sigamoney (1888–1963)

Bernard Lazarus Emanuel Sigamoney was the grandson of indentured Indian farm labourers, Pariah Christians who arrived in South Africa in 1877. His family managed to secure him an education, and he worked as a teacher at Estcourt Indian High School and then St. Aidans’ Boys’ School.

During the First World War, Sigamoney became increasingly involved in politics, addressing public meetings on the growing food shortages in Durban. He soon encountered the local ISL, which founded an Indian Workers’ Industrial Union on IWW lines in March 1917. Sigamoney joined the ISL, and was the union’s first secretary. The union claimed members among Durban’s large Indian population, notably on the docks, in garment work and laundries, painting, hotels, catering and tobacco workers. There were efforts to unite it with the Industrial Workers of Africa. Meanwhile, Sigamoney and other ISL figures supported the independent Tobacco Workers’ Union, and its big strike in October 1920, and the 1921 strike of Indian furniture workers.

Sigamoney did not join the CPSA. Instead, he left radical politics, going to Britain in December 1922 to study as an Anglican pastor, and returning to work for St. Anthony’s Indian Mission in Johannesburg in 1927. He was viewed as a troublemaker by the authorities, partly because he associated with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, a union influenced by both the IWW and Marcus Garvey, and the SANNC. Sigamoney’s remaining years were focused on work in the church, in promoting Indian sport, and in promoting the civil rights of people of colour.

Conclusion

The multiracial IWW tradition in South Africa threw up some remarkable militants, These there men – one white, one African, one Indian – exemplified the high moral character