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T.W. Thibedi and the Industrial Workers of Africa, April-July 1919

Lucien van der Walt

July 2014

T.W. Thibedi, radical school-teacher, was a leading figure in the anarchist / syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL) and the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) union. He was involved in late 1910s struggles, like the March-April 1919 anti-pass law campaign on the Witwatersrand. The campaign had been driven by more radical members of the Transvaal ANC – including members of the revolutionary ISL and IWA, like Fred Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai. But the campaign was called off by conservative leaders of the South African Native National Congress (now the African National Congress, ANC).

Thibedi always believed that workers needed their own structures, outside the ANC – like the IWA and ISL. In April 1919, he issued an IWA leaflet arguing that workers needed their own “council” (this is included below). When the anti-pass campaign was called off, Thibedi challenged the ANC leadership at a mass meet-

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Retrieved on 1st October 2021 from lucienvanderwalt.com

Published in *Tokologo* no. 3, July 2014, p. 10.

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ing in Vrededorp on 9 July 1919. Then he called a meeting for “all labourers” at St. Mary’s Hall, Johannesburg, 26 July.

Here he called for building the IWA into a mass movement against passes and for higher wages. He stated: “Congress don’t utilise money properly, they use it for themselves, and we, the working men, get nothing” so “We must separate and call ourselves the Labourers and have our own leaders. The workers must separate from Congress.”

But this did not happen – and by the end of 1919, the conservatives were firmly in control of the ANC again. Below is part of Thibedi’s April 1919 IWA leaflet.

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF AFRICA

... the time has come for you all who call yourselves Country Workers that you should join and become members of your own Council. It is not to say that we workers stop you from joining any other Councils, but you must know what you are in the Country for (rich or poor). All workers are poor therefore they should have their own Council.

... Friend are you not a worker?

... Why should all workers be pressed down by the rich when they do all the work of the Country?

... Why should you be kicked and spat at whilst working.

... How is it that you black workers asking for bread from the Government as their children, are arrested and sent to gaol?

... Workers come together and be united and join your own Native Council. Why are you afraid to become members of the Industrial Workers of Africa whilst you call yourself Workers?