

The Influence of the IWW in Southern Africa

Lucien van der Walt

2006

Contents

Industrial Revolution	3
Anarchism and Syndicalism	4
The IWW and the SLP	5
End of the Beginning	7
The New Radicals	8
Red and Black	10
Industrial Workers of Africa	11
A General Strike	12
The ICU and Syndicalism	13
Eclipse	14
In Conclusion	16

The IWW had an important impact on South Africa and its surrounding region in the early twentieth century. The ideas and model of the IWW were deeply inspiring to many, and provided an important point of reference for local radicals opposed to the reformist – and racist – policies of the South African Labour Party, launched in January 1910. As an early study noted,¹

In common with the Labour movement elsewhere in the world, South Africa passed through a period of vigorous reaction against politics on the working class front. ... The disillusion of the workers' movement in the value of parliamentary reform was now spreading from Europe, from Britain, America, Australia and New Zealand... From America came the ringing call to action of Haywood and Eugene Debs of the IWW, while from France was spreading an enthusiasm for the doctrines of the revolutionary Syndicalists with their faith in the industrial struggle and the general strike and their mistrust of politics...

For a majority on the revolutionary left in the 1910s, the ideas of the IWW set the broad parameters of radical debate. The 1908 split in the American IWW- between the “Chicago IWW” opposed to any participation in elections, and the “Detroit IWW,” followers of Daniel De Leon of the Socialist Labour Party, who favored a limited use of parliament – was replicated in South Africa from at least 1910. IWW materials were reproduced and emulated in the local radical press, as were the writings of De Leon, which were widely read.

Local radicals influenced by the IWW advocated interracial and revolutionary unionism in place of the segregation favored by the local Labour Party and most of the local trade unions, and warmly endorsed the basic IWW principle of the solidarity of labor regardless of race or color. These ideas would also have some echoes in nearby South West Africa (now Namibia), as well as South and North Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia, respectively).

Industrial Revolution

The backdrop was the industrial revolution that took place in the South African interior after the 1860s. In the early nineteenth century, the region now known as South Africa was only marginally linked into the world economy. Following the discovery of gold in 1886, however, vast sums of (mainly European) capital flooded into the Witwatersrand region, financing vast underground mines. The early mining camps at Johannesburg were home to around 3,000 prospectors, but by the eve of the First World War Johannesburg was home to a quarter of a million people, and was the hub of a vast urban complex.

By this time, a few gigantic mining houses, further united through a Chamber of Mines, dominated the mining industry. The “Randlords” who ran the mines faced a large working class, drawn from North America, Europe and southern Africa. By 1913, according to Baruch Hirson, there were an estimated 40,000 white workers, of whom 22,000 worked on the mines, and 245,000 African workers, 195,000 being mine workers.²

¹ R.K. Cope (no date, 1943?), *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of WH. Andrews, Workers' Leader*, Stewart Printing, Cape Town, pp. 108–110.

² Baruch Hirson with Gwyn A. Williams (1995), *The Delegate for Africa: David Ivon Jones, 1883–1924*, Core Publications, pp. 106, 116.

However, the local working class was deeply divided on several levels: there was a fundamental structural divide between white workers, who were generally urban workers and lived with their families, enjoying some basic rights, and the African workers, who were typically migrants, whose families resided in the countryside. A conquered people, Africans lacked the most basic rights, were housed in the urban areas in closed compounds, segregated “townships,” or multiracial slums along with poor whites, were controlled by pass laws that restricted movement, and typically employed as indentured laborers. At the same time, traditional hostilities amongst the Africans – divisions astutely fostered by the Randlords – also provided a point of division.

Another line of division was between Afrikaners and other white workers, for the events of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902- the largest of the British colonial wars in Africa- had seen the conquest of the old Afrikaner republics, a scorched earth policy, and the establishment of concentration camps in which 28,000 Afrikaners (and up to 14,000 Africans) died from disease and malnutrition. The Anglo-Boer War was widely unpopular with labor and the left abroad, and fervently opposed by the British anarchists. An anarchist attempt on the Prince of Wales during a visit to Belgium in 1900 was in large measure retaliation for the war.

The Afrikaner republics and the conquered African kingdoms of “South Africa” were joined with the Cape and Natal colonies to form a single state in 1910- a British dominion called the Union of South Africa, based on white rule. This was a capitalist state, but it was based on colonial domination, and host to severe national and racial conflicts.

Between the white and African strata, there was also a layer of Coloured and Indian workers: free labor, like the whites, they lacked political rights and suffered routine discrimination and segregation like the Africans.

On the other hand, there were points of convergence between the different layers of workers: appalling health problems in the mines, high living costs, housing shortages, and the ferocity of the local state. Rare as they might have been, there were occasional moments of interracial labour unity- and it was interracial labour unity that local anarchists and syndicalist wanted most.

Anarchism and Syndicalism

It was in this context that a local libertarian socialist tradition emerged. The pioneer was Henry Glasse, an English emigrant born in India and associated with the Freedom Group in London. Living in the coastal town of Port Elizabeth from the early 1880s, he wrote for *Freedom*, translated several of Kropotkin’s works into English, and acted as a local distributor for anarchist materials from Freedom Press. Glasse organized a Socialist Club in Port Elizabeth at the turn of the century, a mixed body that was one of the very first left-wing bodies in the country.

Similar socialist groups sprung up amongst other groups of white immigrants, with a wide range of socialist ideas, and it is clear that a fairly wide range of overseas papers and pamphlets were available. These ranged from the anarchist materials distributed by Glasse to the British *Clarion* and the De Leonist organ, *The Socialist*, from Edinburgh, Charles H. Kerr’s *International Socialist Review*, Peter Kropotkin’s *War!* and the *Communist Manifesto*.

The year 1904 saw the formation of a Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in Cape Town by Wilfred H. Harrison, who described himself as a “philosophical anarchist.”³ A former soldier in the British armed forces, he fought in the Anglo-Boer War, became strongly anti-militarist, lost his post as a military artificer for fraternizing with Afrikaner prisoners, and resigned his commission to work as a carpenter in 1903. He expounded Kropotkin to racially mixed crowds, and the SDF included Marxists, anarchists, guild socialists and moderate reformers. It was involved in several attempts to form interracial general unions and organized an unemployment campaign in 1906.

In 1904, John Sepoul, a mechanic and sailor, and Henry Larsen, a railway fireman, were deported from the Transvaal for an alleged anarchist plot to assassinate Lord Milner, the post-war British governor of the Transvaal.⁴ The idea of “propaganda by the deed” was never influential locally, but it indicates something of the diversity of ideas within the emerging socialist movement.

While the dominant ideology amongst white workers was “White Labourism” – a mixture of social democratic reform and racial segregation, heavily influenced by the example of the Labour government in Australia and championed by the local Labour Party—a revolutionary left emerged from the local socialist movement that favored both revolution and interracial unity.

A key development was the emergence of the *Voice of Labour* in Johannesburg, which acted as a forum for radicals. A fitter, Archie Crawford, a socialist from Scotland, acted as editor; the press was owned and managed by Mary Fitzgerald, from Ireland. Crawford and Fitzgerald regarded themselves as revolutionary socialists, but they were state socialists. The pair had been involved in the formation of the local Labour Party, but withdrew: Crawford ran as an independent in 1910, where he addressed hostile white crowds on the need for interracial unity and socialist revolution, receiving eight votes.

Nonetheless, the *Voice of Labour* acted as an important forum for anarchist and syndicalist ideas, and for the development of a radical critique of racial discrimination and prejudice. It was overtly hostile to White Labourism from an early date. Glasse, firmly in support of syndicalism, stressed in the paper that, “For a white worker in this South Africa to pretend he can successfully fight his battle independent of the coloured wage slaves – the vast majority- is, to my mind, simply idiocy.”⁵

Other anarchists and syndicalists – such as Philip R. Roux, a staunch DeLeonist in Johannesburg, the Cape Town correspondent known as “Proletarian,” and Harrison – supported this line of argument, as did most of the radicals who advocated State socialism. The *Voice of Labour* provided a platform for a critique of racialism and segregation that would be a mainstay of later radicals.

The IWW and the SLP

The year 1910 saw a flurry of local syndicalist activity. The British syndicalist Tom Mann visited in February: invited by unions in favour of White Labourism, he alienated his hosts by his advo-

³ Wilfred H. Harrison (no date, 1948?), *Memoirs of a Socialist in South Africa 1903–47*, Stewart Printing, Cape Town, p. 119

⁴ See, e.g., *The Voice of Labour* (26 Jan. 1912), letter from Glasse.

⁵ *Voice of Labour* (27 October 1911), “The Problem of Coloured Labour,” emphasis in original; Vincent St. John (27 October 1911), “History of the Industrial Workers of the World.”

cacy of interracial industrial unionism. Under the editorship of the unidentified IWW supporter “Proletarian” from late 1910 to early 1912- Crawford had gone on a world tour of socialist groups – the *Voice of Labour* became for a time a predominantly syndicalist paper.

In “Proletarian’s” view, the only solution for South Africa was “an organization of wage-workers, black and white, male and female, young and old” which would proclaim “a universal general strike preparatory to seizing and running the interests of South Africa, for the benefit of workers to the exclusion of parasites.” It reprinted materials from the IWW, including a lengthy serialization of the *History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, which was “specially written for *The Voice*” by the Chicago IWW General Secretary-Treasurer Vincent St. John.⁶

In June 1910, a South African IWW was formed in Johannesburg following the take-over of a newly formed “Industrial Workers Union.” It organized two spectacular strikes by white tramway workers in 1911, held meetings in Pretoria, the provincial capital, amongst white railway workers, and formed a Pretoria Local and also set up a Durban group. It was in correspondence with the Chicago IWW, and was recognized in the IWW press as the “IWW (South African Section).”⁷

The key figures were Andrew Dunbar, a giant blacksmith born in Scotland in 1879, and Tom Glynn. Glynn, an Irish-born soldier who had fought in the Anglo-Boer War, was discharged in 1907 for refusing to shoot a Zulu during a raid on African rebels, worked in New Zealand until 1910, and returned to work on the Johannesburg trams. The South African IWW followed the anti-parliamentary approach of the Chicago IWW.

However, the local IWW was continually embroiled in disputes with local De Leonists, organized as the local Socialist Labour Party and aligned to the Detroit IWW. The SLP was centred on Roux, the veteran Jewish radical Israel Israelstam, and J.M. Gibson. The local SLP was formed in March 1910, and concentrated on paper sales, discussions and Sunday meetings at the Johannesburg Market Square. There were certainly elements of sectarianism and personal conflict in these disputes, but they also raised the question of electoral action. Dunbar and Glynn were firmly opposed to any participation in elections; the “SLP men” were for it, but only on the lines advocated by De Leon.

De Leon had been a champion of orthodox Marxism, but shifted decisively to syndicalism with the formation of the IWW. De Leon insisted that a parliamentary road to socialism was “gigantic Utopia,” advocated revolutionary “Industrial unionism ... against which all the resources of capital ... will be ineffective and impotent,” and insisted that “Industrial Unions will furnish the administrative machinery for directing industry in the socialist commonwealth” after the “general lock out of the capitalist class” and “razing” of the state to the ground.⁸ Nonetheless, he clearly saw elections as a good propaganda platform, and seems to have thought that the “general lockout” must be supported by a “purely destructive” electoral victory that would see

⁶ *Voice of Labour* (27 October 1911), “The Problem of Coloured Labour,” emphasis in original; Vincent St. John (27 October 1911), “History of the Industrial Workers of the World.”

⁷ *Solidarity* (1 October 1910), “Industrial Unionism in South Africa.” For more detail see Lucien van der Walt (2004), “Bakunin’s Heirs in South Africa: Race, Class and Revolutionary Syndicalism from the IWW to the International Socialist League,” *Politikon* 30(1).

⁸ See, in particular, Don McKee (1958), “The Influence of Syndicalism upon Daniel De Leon,” *The Historian* 20, pp.; (1960), “Daniel De Leon: A Reappraisal,” *Labour History* 1 ; Socialist Labour Party (no date), *The Socialist Labour Party: Its Aims and Methods*, Socialist Labour Press, Edinburgh, pp. 18, 21, 23.

the SLP abolish the state to prevent the repression of the industrial revolution.⁹ Elections were a secondary, but vital, supplement to unionism.

These debates were fairly abstract, as the local SLP did not actually participate in elections (or do union work), but speak volumes of the extent to which the local factions were influenced by, and identified with, the debates in the larger IWW movement.

Where the two factions concurred, however, was on the need for interracial unionism. Although the local IWW does not seem to have had any success in organizing across the color line, it was the only union in pre-1914 South Africa that placed absolutely no racial restrictions on membership, the first labor union in South African history open to workers of all races, and possibly the first such in Britain's African empire.

Local anarchists and syndicalists opposed the new South African state. Speaking of the imminent creation of an all-white army, "Proletarian" argued that the point of the "militarist" Bill was to suppress a "native rising," which would be a "wholly justified" response to "the cruel exploitation of South African natives by farmers, mining magnates and factory owners."¹⁰ Such a rising should receive the "sympathy and support of every white wage-slave"; "no white wage slave will be true to the cause of labour if he lifts a rifle against his black brother"; "if you must fight see that your rifles are aimed at the class which owns all property and robs all races." While condemning the "grotesque" "attitude of superiority" of the white "'aristocrats' of labour," "Proletarian" opposed "small capitalist" nationalists amongst the oppressed races: only class struggle, on interracial lines, could destroy local capitalism.¹¹

End of the Beginning

From 1912 onwards, this early wave of syndicalist activism ebbed. Glynn left South Africa in 1911, spending a period in Ireland and the United States, where he rejoined the IWW. He ended up in Australia where he became editor of the IWW's official organ, *Direct Action*, a leading propagandist against the "White Australia" policy, author of the 1915 IWW booklet *Industrial Efficiency and its Antidote*, and one of the "Sydney Twelve" arrested in 1916 for treason.¹²

In early 1912, Crawford returned from abroad, and immediately set about trying to create a united South African socialist party along the lines of the Socialist Party of America. He took control of the IWW, seeking to use it as the wing of the new party, and had Dunbar expelled. The party, which sought to unite the SDF, the SLP and other groups, soon fell apart, while the IWW, evidently a low priority for Crawford and Fitzgerald, became inactive and collapsed. The *Voice of Labour* itself ceased publication in early 1913.

By 1913, when a general strike broke out amongst white workers across the Witwatersrand, there was no clear syndicalist nucleus that could try and engage the movement. The strike was highly militant, being largely organized through unofficial strike committees, and it soon escalated into gun battles and riots that left the strikers in control of central Johannesburg. J.T. Bain

⁹ Daniel De Leon, *The Preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World, address delivered at Union Temple, Minneapolis, Minnesota, July 10, 1905*, Socialist Labour Press, Edinburgh, p. 23

¹⁰ "Our Special Representative" (1 December 1911), "Sundry Jottings from the Cape: A Rebel's Review," *Voice of Labour*.

¹¹ "Proletarian" (27 October 1911), "The Problem of Coloured Labour," *Voice of Labour*.

¹² Verity Burgmann (1995), *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: the IWW in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 36, 77, 88, 207.

– a radical who combined romantic socialism with White Labourism -played a leading role in the strike, as did Crawford and Fitzgerald, with Crawford editing the *Strike Herald*. There is little sign of the latter two promoting syndicalist ideas in the 1913 strike: their keynote was simple *militancy*, and lagged behind the syndicalist sentiments that *did* develop during the strike amongst a section of the strikers.

These syndicalist sentiments did not develop, however, into a coherent tendency, and there is no support for the subsequent government claim that the strike was a “Syndicalist Conspiracy.”¹³ However, this claim provided the state with a justification for crushing a follow-up strike in early 1914 with martial law. During this repression, Crawford and a number of others were deported to Britain, where they became celebrities amongst the union movement and left, before returning to South Africa. Mann also briefly revisited the country at this time, but there was no organized left for him to meet. Both Crawford and Fitzgerald subsequently became moderates and withdrew from radical activity

The New Radicals

Nonetheless, the 1913 strike had radicalized a whole layer within the local Labour Party, with David Ivon Jones, a key example in this layer, distributing the syndicalist “Don’t Shoot” leaflet during the 1914 strike. This group initially managed to push the Labour Party- which had just applied for affiliation to the Labour and Socialist International- to oppose participation in the First World War, but was later defeated.

South Africa, meanwhile, participated in the First World War in Africa and Europe. Reorganized as a “War on War League” –which also drew in most of the veterans of the old IWW and SLP, even those who were not part of the Party – the radicals walked out of the Labour Party in September 1915 to form the International Socialist League, which published the weekly *International*. In addition to radicals from the Labour Party, like Jones, S.P. Bunting and WH. “Bill” Andrews, the ISL drew in many IWW and SLP veterans, including Dunbar, Gibson and Roux.

Despite the usual presentation of the ISL in the literature as a Marxist party – a “communist nucleus” of “true socialists” influenced by Lenin –¹⁴ the anti-militarist ISL adopted a syndicalist platform, leaning in the direction of De Leonism. This was clear from the first congress in January 1916, which resolved, as the *International* reported at the time: “That we encourage the organization of the workers on industrial or class lines, irrespective of race, colour or creed, as the most effective means of providing the necessary force for the emancipation of the workers.”¹⁵ Racially exclusive craft unions had to be replaced by integrated industrial unions open to workers of races; the Labour Party focus on parliament had to be replaced by a focus on mass action and the revolutionary general strike; the focus on white labor had to be replaced with a drive to organise across the color line:

¹³ Jan Smuts (1914), *The Syndicalist Conspiracy in South Africa: A Scathing Indictment*, Government Printers, Pretoria.

¹⁴ Yusuf M. Dadoo (1981), “Introduction by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, National Chairman of the South African Communist Party,” in Brian Bunting, ed., *South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party, 1915–1980*, Inkululeko.

¹⁵ *The International* (7 January 1916), “League Conference”; (14 January 1916), “The First Conference of the League”

Industrial Unionism is the only solution to the problem, organized on the broad lines of no colour bar ... the interests of the working class, irrespective of colour, are identical and irreconcilably opposed to the capitalist class ... The worker must organise to unite *all wage earners* to combat capital... To you the worker, no matter what your race or colour, belongs the future. You are the only class to take control of the disruption of society as presently formed. Yours is the historic mission to inaugurate the Co-operative Commonwealth, abolishing all class distinction, all class rule.¹⁶

The core arguments of the ISL were that revolutionary change in South Africa required unity amongst workers of all races, with white and African workers combined in One Big Union, a struggle against racial prejudices, and a syndicalist policy of using unions to both prepare for the revolution *and* oppose racially discriminatory labor controls and laws. These ideas were promoted by the *International*, a number of pamphlets and leaflets, weekly public meetings, the distribution of a range of De Leonist and other syndicalist booklets, and the establishment of a book shop at the ISL offices in Fox street, Johannesburg.

“Socialism,” commented the *International*, “can only be brought about by all the workers coming together on the industrial field to take the machinery of production into their own hands and working it for the good of all.” White workers had to choose between becoming a “closed guild of favoured white workers to police it over the bottom dog, the great mass of the unskilled,” or “giving up ... craft and colour vanity” to join their fellow workers in the struggle for the “control and administration of industry.”¹⁷ Calling for the abolition of the pass laws, the *International* argued:

Once organized, these workers can bust-up any tyrannical law. Unorganized, these laws are iron bands. Organise industrially, they become worth no more than the paper rags they are written on.¹⁸

The ISL established sections across the Witwatersrand, and also had supporters in Pretoria, Pietermaritzburg in Natal and in Durban. It was later strengthened by Jewish immigration from east Europe, with a Yiddish-speaking branch set up in 1917, based in the multi-racial slums of downtown Johannesburg. The Yiddish-Speaking Branch was strongly opposed to the ISL’s occasional forays into elections, and had a strong anarchist current.

The ISL was never larger than several hundred members at any one time, although it was a very visible and controversial group in South Africa at the time. The ISL also maintained fraternal links with the SDF, which distributed the *International*. Harrison, meanwhile, had been arrested for an inflammatory speech during the attempted general strike in 1914 and again that year for an anti-war leaflet. In the leaflet, “WAR!” Harrison wrote:

Picture the “hero” glorified and awarded the Victoria or Iron Cross in the melee that brought him his fame. The reports of the pistol, the clash of the sword, the dying moans of those whom he has slain, and over whom he stands a maddened and excited victor bespattered in human blood. The heads of mothers’ sons and children’s fathers

¹⁶ J.M. Gibson (23 February 1916), “Race Prejudice,” *The International*, emphasis in original

¹⁷ *The International* (16 June 1916), “Inviting Jim Sixpence to Tea”; (16 February 1917), “The Poor Whites’ and a Page from History”; (2 March 1917), “The Mineworkers to be Made a Scab Union.”

¹⁸ *The International* (19 October 1917), “The Pass Laws: Organise for their Abolition.”

lie at his feet and their blood and brains besmear the ground, while in a dark garret to-day these mothers and children with bitter tears mourn their loss that has been his fame.

These and other gruesome deeds are demanded of you who respond to the ironical call of “your country needs you!” Truly it does! In your country there is always unemployment, high rents, and dear goods, there is always bad housing and disease, there is squalor and filth in home and factory, there is poverty and starvation. So YOUR country needs you! ... Yes! YOUR country needs YOU. Are you prepared to fight for your country and help to bring wealth, happiness and peace with ALL people?¹⁹

He was sentenced to six months imprisonment with the option of a £50 fine, but after public protests, the fine was reduced to 50 shillings and Harrison was released after two days in Roeland Street Gaol.

Red and Black

The ISL, initially based amongst White radicals, made ongoing attempts to organise a bloc within the white craft unions, and some ISL activists became quite prominent in these unions, most notably Andrews. Following a visit to Britain, Andrews was deeply impressed by the shop stewards’ movement –characterized in the August 2, 1918, *International* as the means by which “Industrial Unionism will most rapidly be brought about in England” –and appointed as a full-time ISL organizer in 1918 and 1919 in order to foster a similar movement in South African unions.

The ISL also placed increasing emphasis on forming syndicalist unions amongst workers of colour and recruiting African, Coloured and Indian members. In March 1917, Gordon Lee of the ISL helped launch an Indian Workers’ Industrial Union in Durban, and Indian ISL members like Bernard L.E. Sigamoney and R.K Moodley played a central role in the union, which organized in catering, on the docks, in laundry, printing and tobacco. Sigamoney was a schoolteacher and a great cricketer; he later became a Christian minister. One of the first unions amongst local Indians, it was involved in several strikes, and the Indian Workers Choir provided entertainment, singing the *Red Flag*, the *International* and a selection of IWW songs.

The ISL organizer Sam Barlin set up a Clothing Workers Industrial Union in Kimberley, which recruited several hundred, mainly Coloured, clothing workers, from which at least fifteen were recruited to the ISL, which also maintained a small office in the town. The most important was Johnny Gomas, later a prominent trade unionist and Communist. The son of domestic worker, Gomas left school young to apprentice as a tailor. By 1919, the new union had won recognition from the employers and secured substantial wage increases for its members. Sections of the Clothing Workers Industrial Union were also established in Johannesburg and Durban. Barlin also organized a horse drivers’ union in Kimberley, which struck in late 1919.

In the meantime, the SDF underwent a split in 1918, leading to the formation of a syndicalist Industrial Socialist League (IndSL) in Cape Town. This adopted the program of the Chicago IWW, and published the monthly *Bolshevik*. Its aims stated:

¹⁹ Wilfred H. Harrison (1914), “WAR!,” Simons Papers, Manuscript fragile papers section, University of Cape Town

The interests of the Working Class and of the Employing Class are diametrically opposed. There can be no peace as long as hunger and want are found among millions of 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 all the toilers come together on the industrial field, and take and hold what they produce by their labour, through an economic organization of the working class, without affiliation to any political party.²⁰

It was mainly primarily based amongst immigrant Jews, like A.Z. Berman and Solomon Buirski; other immigrants, like Manuel Lopes and his brother, F. Lopes; and Frank Glass, an English emigrant. Among its members was S.H. Davidoff, of Russian origin, previously an advocate of “propaganda by the deed.” The IndSL’s racial composition began to shift as able to obtain “the services of a few coloured and Malay comrades in our propaganda... amongst the coloured and native workers, ... work ... which directly undermines capitalism in South Africa.”²¹

Initially, the IndSL was based at a large, 600-seat hall in the multi-racial, but predominantly Coloured, District Six area of Cape Town, where it organized large meetings. The IndSL also organized a syndicalist Sweets and Jam Workers’ Industrial Union amongst Coloured factory workers.

Members of the IndSL also became quite prominent in the Cape Federation of Trade Unions. Based largely amongst white workers, with many affiliates organized on craft lines, the Federation was, nonetheless, somewhat more open to left-wing views and the idea of interracial trade unionism than were unions on the Witwatersrand. Berman became secretary of the Federation, while F. Lopes became president of the Tramway Workers’ Union in Cape Town.

At the second annual conference of the Federation, held in 1920, the IndSL members managed to get resolutions passed calling for the emancipation of the working class, and the socialization of the means of production, distribution and exchange, although were not able to get a clear commitment to specifically syndicalist approaches. They also managed to get the Federation to agree to restructure itself into industrial unions. At the third conference of the Cape Federation of Trade Unions, Berman was, however, able to have resolution passed that the Federation join the Communist International and abstain from parliamentary action. However, few of these resolutions were actually carried out.

Industrial Workers of Africa

Three months after the launching of the Workers’ Industrial Union in Durban, the ISL advertised a meeting for African workers in Johannesburg. Held on the 19 July 1917, it drew in a layer of African workers, who were subsequently recruited to a radical weekly night school taught by ISL members like Dunbar and Bunting. On 27 September 1917, the weekly study groups were transformed into a syndicalist union called the Industrial Workers of Africa, with an all-African organizing committee. It was modelled on the IWW.

A leaflet was issued in two African languages in 10,000 copies, urging all African workers to join the union, and distributed widely in the Transvaal. “Workers of the Bantu race,” it asked,

²⁰ *The Bolshevik* (February 1920), “What WE Stand For.”

²¹ Manuel Lopes (7 August 1920), letter, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*.

“why do you live in slavery? ... Because the masters want you to labour for their profit.” So, “There is only one way of deliverance for you Bantu workers. Unite as workers... deliver yourself from the bonds and chains of the capitalist.” The slogan was the “*Sifuna Zonke!*” (“We Want Everything!”).

The key figures in the Industrial Workers of Africa were Reuben (Alfred) Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai. Born in and educated at Qumbu in the Eastern Cape, Cetiwe moved to Johannesburg, where he worked as a picture framer’s assistant. He urged: “we should go to Compounds and preach our gospel”:

We are here for Organization, so that as soon as all of your fellow workers are organized, 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.²²

Kraai, a close friend of Cetiwe, came from Peddie in the Cape, worked in Johannesburg, as a foreman and a parcel delivery man in 1918. Both Cetiwe and Kraai joined the ISL. The third key African figure in the ISL and the Industrial Workers of Africa was T.W Thibedi, a brilliant schoolteacher who joined the ISL after hearing a talk by Bunting in Johannesburg.

While the Industrial Workers of Africa was probably never much over two hundred members, its significance cannot be judged in purely numerical terms: it was South Africa’s first trade union for Africans – perhaps the first union for Africans in Britain’s African empire – and it was syndicalist besides.

The Industrial Workers of Africa had a short-lived influence on the [black] nationalist movements of the time, as well as on the early African labour movement.

In late 1917 the Industrial Workers of Africa met with both the African Political Organization and the Transvaal Native Congress- the latter was the provincial section of the South African Native National Congress, a nationalist body founded in 1912, dominated by the African elite, and based on a conservative and mild programme. The union also had a great impact on the Transvaal section of the APO, whose leading member, Talbot Williams, subsequently advocated non-racial, industrial unionism. Relations with the TNC were initially more strained, with open hostilities breaking out at one point. However, men like Cetiwe, Kraai and Thibedi were also members of the TNC and helped foster the emergence of a leftwing bloc from 1918 to 1919 that – against the backdrop of rising labor struggles – briefly pushed the Congress to the left and a focus on labor issues and direct action. This broke the traditional domination of conservative nationalists in the TNC.

A General Strike

The post-war period saw a massive wave of strikes and trade unionism across South Africa from 1918 onwards. The 1st May 1918 saw the ISL organise the first May Day rally directed at workers of color in South Africa. In June 1918, 152 African workers, employed by the municipality of Johannesburg, went on strike for a wage increase, but were jailed and sentenced to carry out their old jobs under armed guard.

²² Unlabeled report (May 1918, full date illegible), in Department of Justice, “The ISL and Coloured Workers,” JD 3/527/17, National Archives, Pretoria, South Africa.

This heavy-handed action was strongly attacked by the *International*, and on the 10th June 1918, the Transvaal Native Congress called a mass rally of African workers in Johannesburg to protest. When old-guard Congress leaders suggested a letter of protest to the government, the audience disagreed loudly, and took its lead from the Industrial Workers of Africa members present, who suggested a general strike to demand the release of the workers. An organizing committee made up of members of the ISL, the Industrial Workers of Africa, and the Transvaal Native Congress was then set up to plan for the proposed strike.

The next meeting saw the committee suggest a general strike, which would also demand a one-shilling-a-day wage increase for all African workers. While the strike fell through, seven people were subsequently arrested for incitement to public violence: Bunting, T.P. Tinker and H.C. Hanscombe of the ISL, Cetiwe, Kraai from the Industrial Workers of Africa, J.D. Ngojo, and Thomas Levi Mvabaza and Daniel Letanka of the TNC. Letanka, Mvabaza and Ngojo were TNC moderates who moved left towards the syndicalists in 1918; six of the eight defendants were members of syndicalist organizations. Also striking:

A matter of exceptional interest in this case is the fact that for the first time in South Africa, members of the European and Native races, in common cause united, were arrested and charged together for their political activities.²³

The case fell through, but struggles continued, and the TNC radicals, centered on the syndicalists, the “black Bolsheviks [sic] of Johannesburg,” the result of the lamentable “spread among our people of the Johannesburg Socialists’ propaganda,” tried to take over the August 1918 conference of the SANNC: their “concord and determination” was “perfectly astounding,” and they “spoke almost in unison, in short sentences, nearly every one of which began and ended with the word ‘strike.’”²⁴

On the 30 March 1919, the TNC launched a campaign against the pass laws on the Witwatersrand. Again, Cetiwe and Kraai were in the forefront, and were part of the delegation that met the Chief Pass Officer in Johannesburg to demand the abolition of the pass laws. The campaign continued for three months, with an estimated 700 Africans arrested and charged by May, despite the best efforts of the ISL to provide legal aid.

At this point the conservatives in the TNC regrouped, and managed to shut down the campaign and reassert the traditional politics of the SANNC. Kraai’s attempt to pass a resolution at the 1920 SANNC conference for a minimum wage of 10 shillings a day for all African workers, to be enforced by a general strike if necessary, was roundly defeated.

The ICU and Syndicalism

Following the end of the pass law campaign, Cetiwe and Kraai left for Cape Town in July 1919 to establish an Industrial Workers of Africa branch in Ndabeni township, the segregated location home to many African dockworkers. They also became involved in the local Cape Native

²³ T.D. Mweliso Skota, editor and compiler (n.d., 1930?), *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated Biographical Dictionary (Who’s Who) of Black Folks in Africa*, R.I. Esson, p. 171.

²⁴ Sol Plaatje [3 August 1918] (1996), “Letter to the General Secretary, De Beers,” in Brian Willan, ed., *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, Witwatersrand University Press, p. 237.

Congress, the provincial section of the SANNC. On 17 December 1919, the local Industrial Workers of Africa allied with another independent union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), headed by the charismatic Clements Kadalie, to organize a strike by over 2000 dockworkers. Kadalie was an immigrant from Nyasaland (now Malawi).

The strike was not a success, but was part of a rapid upsurge of unionism amongst workers of color. Despite early tensions between the Industrial Workers of Africa in the Cape and the ICU, the two unions eventually merged. In July 1920, both unions attended a labor conference in the small administrative capital, Bloemfontein, intended to unite the small unions of African and Coloured workers emerging around the country at the time. The conference showed some syndicalist influences, resolving to create “one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambezi.”²⁵

This was a difficult process, but the ICU began to grow rapidly. Syndicalist influences became more pronounced, with the 1925 ICU constitution incorporating a version of the IWW *Preamble* of the IWW:

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 human labour, until the workers through their industrial organizations 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 organized workers throughout the world.²⁶

From 1924 onwards, the ICU exploded in size, reaching over 100,000 members- perhaps twice as many- in South Africa in 1927. This made it the largest protest organization or union amongst Africans until the 1950s. It also spread to neighboring countries: South West Africa (now Namibia) in 1920, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1927, and into Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1931.

The ICU had a great many limitations that make it clear it was not a genuinely syndicalist union. It lacked the clear program and strategy of the Industrial Workers of Africa, and its members and leaders espoused a range of ideologies, ranging from mission Christianity to Africanist separatism to Marxism and liberalism, as can be seen from its speeches and its paper, *The Workers' Herald*. It was increasingly organized around mass meetings and charismatic leaders, rather than shop-floor assemblies and committees, with power often centered in the hands of unscrupulous, autocratic, and often corrupt, middle class leaders. Nonetheless the ICU cannot be properly understood unless the influence of a syndicalist vision of One Big Union delivering liberation with a one great revolutionary strike is understood.

Eclipse

The anarchist and syndicalist tradition in South Africa and the important impact of the IWW, declined in the 1920s. Initially the ISL regarded the October Russian Revolution as a confirmation

²⁵ Quoted in Peter L Wickens (1973), “The Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, pp. 145–146.

²⁶ The 1925 ICU constitution is in Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn Carter (1972), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1964*, volume 1, pp. 325–326.

of its syndicalist views, with the *International* describing the soviets as “the Russian form of the Industrial Union.”²⁷ The IndSL held the same view. The first Communist Party in Africa was formed in 1920 by the IndSL with dissidents from the ISL, headed by Dunbar, on an anti-parliamentary platform.

Together with the ISL, SDF and several smaller organizations, this party formed an official Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in July 1921. However, the party initially broke with the older syndicalist focus on all workers, narrowing its activities to white workers for several years. One consequence was that most of African, Coloured and Indian militants recruited in earlier years were lost.

Even so, the official history of the party admits, “syndicalist concepts remained within the Communist Party for many years after its foundation; echoes of their approach and phraseology appear in many documents and journals.”²⁸ Within the CPSA, a faction centered on Dunbar and former members of the IndSL continued to oppose Bolshevik approaches, advocating One Big Union and anti-parliamentary views. The group maintained contact with the *Workers’ Dreadnought* group in Britain, whose Council Communist views were close to syndicalism.

Outside the CPSA, syndicalist influences continued as well. Besides the ICU which came to include men from the older syndicalist movement like Gomas, Kraai and Thibedi in key roles, syndicalism also played a role among a section of militant white workers. Percy Fisher and Harry Spendiff of the militant Council of Action— a radical group formed in the white miners’ union in 1921— for example, were “fiery opponents of capitalism,” prepared to die for their class: their “general aim ... was that the workers should somehow gain control of the mines and run them themselves.” To “achieve control over the resources of life,” the Council declared, “the working class must organize along class lines to bring about the overthrow of capitalism, and its class function is the act of industrial control.”²⁹ These men, like the CPSA, played a complicated role in the 1922 Rand Revolt — a general strike by white miners that developed into an armed insurrection across the Witwatersrand, but which also included many racist aspects.

In the late 1920s, the echoes of syndicalism faded away. The white syndicalists outside the CPSA were repressed in the Rand Revolt, with both Fisher and Spendiff dying in the final days of the fighting — reportedly by their own hands. The ICU in South Africa entered into a serious crisis from 1927 onwards, and largely collapsed over the next few years. It declined in neighboring countries in the early 1930s.

In 1928, the Communist International forced the CPSA to adopt the “Native Republic” thesis, which stated that capitalist democracy must be attained before socialism could be considered. The period from 1928 to 1935 was also the “New Line” or “Class against Class” period of the Communist International, in which member parties were expected to break all ties with moderate organizations, and purge their ranks of non-Bolshevik elements. CPSA membership fell from a claimed 3,000 members in 1929 to 150 in 1933, and most of the old guard— including An-

²⁷ *The International* (18 May 1917), “Russian Workmen Vindicate Marx.”

²⁸ Michael Harmel [“A. Lerumo”](1987 [1971]), *Fifty Fighting Years: The Communist Party of South Africa 1921–71*, Inkululeko, p. 40.

²⁹ Cope (n.d., 1943?), *Comrade Bill*, p. 251; *The Workers’ Dreadnought* (18 February 1922), “Council of Action: The Impossibility of ‘Boring from Within.’”

drews, Bunting, Glass, Harrison and Thibedi were expelled.³⁰ While some, later rejoined the party, others moved to Trotskyism and some left politics entirely.

The red-and-black thread had been broken.

In Conclusion

The IWW, as is well known, was an international movement. The role of the ideas of the IWW, including De Leon's variety, in southern Africa has, however, largely been overlooked. The example, the ideas and the goals of the IWW had an important influence upon radicals in South Africa, on early trade unionism amongst workers of all races- including the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first African trade union – and IWW ideas also spread, in an adulterated form.

The “glorious period”³¹ of syndicalism from the 1890s to the 1920s swept across southern Africa too, and played an important part in fostering an internationalist, anti-nationalist, and socialist tradition opposed to all racial discrimination and prejudice.

The IWW, as is well known, was an international movement. The role of the ideas of the IWW, including De Leon's variety, in southern Africa has, however, largely been overlooked. The example, the ideas and the goals of the IWW had an important influence upon radicals in South Africa, on early trade unionism amongst workers of all races- including the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first African trade union – and IWW ideas also spread, in an adulterated form.

The “glorious period” of syndicalism from the 1890s to the 1920s swept across southern Africa too, and played an important part in fostering an internationalist, anti-nationalist, and socialist tradition opposed to all racial discrimination and prejudice.

³⁰ Allison Drew, ed. (1996), *South Africa's Radical Tradition: A Documentary History, volume one, 1907–1950*, University of Cape Town Press, Buchu Books, Mayibuye Books, editorial note, p. 23.

³¹ A phrase coined by the late Harald Beyer-Arnesen (1997–98), “Anarcho-Syndicalism: A Historical Closed Door ... or Not?” *Libertarian Labor Review* 22, p. 20.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt
The Influence of the IWW in Southern Africa
2006

Retrieved on 10th November 2021 from lucienvanderwalt.com
Published in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review (ASR)*, numbers 42/3, pp. 31–38.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net