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The relevance of the ICU of Africa for modern day unions and liberation movements

**Presentation at the launch of the Industrial and
Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU)
Centennial Exhibition, William Cullen Library,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.**

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*The following is based on a 15 minute spoken presentation
delivered by the author at the event. It was not meant and
should not be read as an exhaustive historical or critical account
of the ICU.*

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CONCLUSION

I will conclude by saying that a re-examination of the ICU reveals a broader imagination of what a union can be, and its potential role in transforming society. It had a somewhat prefigurative politics, aiming to build tomorrow today; this was developed in relation to an Africa that was being transformed by colonial domination and racist capitalist development.

It was not simply the product of external ideological influences and socio-economic pressures, but also made by its rank-and-file, and by its internal organizational imperatives and pressures. It was able to use its organisation and its struggles to develop its own repertoire of ideas, politics and action, prefiguring a new social order by developing independent working class organisation bent on transforming society.

I would propose that as you consider the ICU you shift your analytical eye from the more usual national and nationalist lens and personality narratives that I mentioned earlier – with their focus on individuals and contestations for individual power, their triumphalist story of the rise of the ANC and CPSA, and their narrow views on what unions can or should be.

I would advise a focus on the modes of ideological, political and organisational development as dialectical processes informed by the cries, demands and actions of the working class and peasant rank-and-file and their communities. Thus considered, it is not that difficult to see the ICU not just as a union, as we know them now, but a creative rebellion. Its experiences offer rich lessons, to be visited through honest analytical re-appraisal, which are relevant to modern day unions and liberation movements – if they choose to learn these. The ICU fought for the possibility of a better world...we can redevelop this imagination by learning from it and our collective pasts.

Thank you.

that were claiming leadership of African, black and workers struggles, including parties and other unions. But it never saw parties and state power as the primary loci of transformation.

RELEVANCE FOR UNIONS AND MOVEMENTS TODAY

There are many lessons trade unions and oppressed people's movements can learn via a critical reappraisal of the ICU, not only what pitfalls to avoid, but also by understanding that many circumstances confronting organizations today were faced by the ICU in the first half of the 20th century.

The ICU organised in what organisers and activists have always considered difficult terrains. Its rural base, particularly by the later 1920s in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s, was substantial, and at times militant in thought and deed. This allowed the ICU to articulate and develop a profound response to the land question, which included union ownership schemes, through which it espoused the aim of eventual collective, de-colonised and de-commodified working class and black ownership.

It had many ideological influences, including Garveyism, social democracy and Christian millenarianism. However, its ideas for organisation and social transformation, and its stress on the centrality of unions, not parties, also signify its revolutionary syndicalist roots and influences. It imagined, and saw itself as a One Big Union, and this union seen as the most strategic tool for anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle. The syndicalist impulse cannot be ignored because it saw in the union the instrument of working class and black liberation in southern Africa.

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REVOLUTIONARY UNIONISM OF A SPECIAL TYPE

Now, how was it actually perceived? According to one-time ICU activist, Jason Jingoos (quoted in Helen Bradford's fantastic book on the rural ICU, *A Taste of Freedom*),

"...although its initials stood for a fancy title, to us Bantu, it meant basically that when you ill-treat the African people, I See You. If you kick them off the pavements I See You. When an African woman with a child on her back is knocked down by the cars in the street, I See You. I See You when you kick my brother. I See You."

Thus the ICU exhibited many aspects of a highly politicised unionism – not the political unionism we see today, where the union outsources politics to a party and chases state power. It aimed at fundamentally transforming relationships of ownership and control for oppressed black and working class people. It saw itself as a transformative organization; an organisation that would be at the forefront of challenging domination, oppression and exploitation.

Despite some members and leaders having "dual" membership, including in the ANC and CPSA, the ICU had tenuous, mostly informal links with political party, and nationalist formations. I would argue that it did not see political parties, nationalist formations or state power as the vehicles for social transformation. I think this is vital to any present and future reading of the ICU.

It engaged the state, to be sure, for example, attempting to leverage its position by utilizing Native Advisory Boards in the townships, or even running court cases and appearing at government commissions. It engaged with other organisations

regards; there was and no real, developed sense of how to sustain and continue to build a large movement over a long period of time. At particular points in its history there was little democratic rank-and-file involvement in organisational affairs, beyond electing certain local representatives. Many officials were also appointed by leaders and hired from outside the organization. Later, parts of the ICU developed quite an unfortunate penchant for ethnic tribalism, which was mobilised in contestations for control by certain leaders.

However, its key strength, and what made it so attractive to many, was its ability to develop its own repertoire of ideas and actions. The ICU, importantly, developed a new consciousness and militancy amongst oppressed black people, and the Union acted as a consciously political movement. It was a union but it was not a union with a narrow focus. It was the primary political movement for oppressed black people at the time, a filter for expression and a body for action by the downtrodden. It spoke to, and for a black majority. Importantly, it not only organised in urban workplaces, but in small communities and rural towns, not just amongst workers, but among sharecroppers and other peasantry battling against capitalist land dispossession and racist accumulation and proletarianisation.

Its tactics were conditioned by local experiences, and from its outset, by both racial liberation, and class-based struggles. It did not distinguish race and class as separate terrains of struggle, but saw these conjoined forces of domination in the southern African economic, political and social condition. It saw the black working class and poor as one big body of the oppressed, it actively organised across colonial borders, and it located the struggle in southern Africa in the global struggle of the working class.

The history of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), formed in South Africa in 1919, is replete with lessons for today's movements. The ICU, which also spread into neighbouring colonies like Basutoland (now Lesotho), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Southwest Africa (now Namibia) was by far the largest protest movement and organisation of black African and Coloured people of its time. Influenced by a range of ideas, including revolutionary syndicalism, the ICU had both amazing strengths and spectacular failings. This piece explains.

INTRODUCTION

Amandla!

Audience: *Awethu!*

So, the audience is good. I suppose there is no need to talk about myself. Noor Nieftagodien, of Wits History Workshop, has mentioned I'm involved in workers' and union education, and an activist. Importantly, I am an anarchist, which means I am a syndicalist. But, despite my ideological affiliations, I am also quite non-sectarian.

I am excited to be part of a larger project on revisiting the history of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), along with Professor Noor, and with my comrade Professor Lucien van der Walt, down at the university still-called Rhodes. My experience in Industrial Sociology over the last few years, and my interest in labour history and left theory have indicated to me that there has been a dramatic drop in interest in labour studies, and in particular labour history.

This project, that I am fortunate to be involved in, will help change this. It aims at revisiting the history of the ICU, to recover or uncover and publish primary and secondary material, and to redevelop an interest in relatively neglected histories

of popular and working class resistance and movements. The labour scholars involved in the project are also quite interested in questioning many earlier narratives established about the ICU. These narratives include a “rise-and-fall” thesis, which ignores that much ICU organizing in colonial southern Africa well beyond its “heyday” of the 1920s. Some are also questioning understanding the ICU through the prism of the personalities and actions of leaders and, thus, the narratives around contestations of power within the ICU.

I think what the project is proposing is a deeper look at its history – a much richer history that is to be uncovered. This panel is part of that initial discussion. This project, this exhibition and this discussion today goes beyond these narratives, and also aims at examining the ICU’s particular relevance for working class and poor people’s organisations and movement building today. This is what I want to focus on in the minutes that I have remaining.

WHAT WAS THE ICU?

Firstly, the ICU, as most of us will know having gone through all of the material at this was formed in 1919, amongst black – meaning coloured and black African – workers at the docks in Cape Town. That’s a 100 years ago, and that’s what we are commemorating.

In a few years, it quickly developed into a large-scale black protest movement. Although not the first trade union of black African workers – that being the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of Africa formed in 1917 in Johannesburg – the ICU rapidly developed into the most important black organisation and movement of working class and poor people in protest against colonialism, racism and capitalism in the early 20th century. It organised in urban, rural and small town communities and work places not only in South Africa, but

across the southern African region including branches located in what was then Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, Southwest Africa and Basutoland.

It was by far the largest protest movement and organisation of black African people in its time, dwarfing and eclipsing the early South African National Native Congress (the early ANC) and the Communist Party of South Africa (the CPSA). To explain: by the 1940s, some 30 years after its formation, the ANC still only had around 4000 members; by the late 1920s, the CPSA had close to 2000 members. The ICU, however, at its height claimed close to 150 000 members in just South Africa. It drew its rank-and-file from communities experiencing the twin processes of a dramatically changing economic order that was violent, racist and exploitative, conditioned by colonial oppression, and the changing nature of African and black society with the breakdown of pre-existing social, political and economic orders under capitalism and the modern state.

The ICU’s influence must not only been seen in terms of numbers of rank-and-file members, but also in light of the impact and influence working class organizations have on the consciousness of the communities where workers and rank-and-file union members reside. These communities also benefit in real terms from the progressive gains won by movements in which workers are involved. The ICU was a pivot of protest, was involved in community-based movements, and was a power in the land.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE ICU

The ICU’s weaknesses have been written about in depth. Some of these include the “big man” politics it suffered, and which split it; there was little follow-through on promises, and weak articulation between its means and ends in key