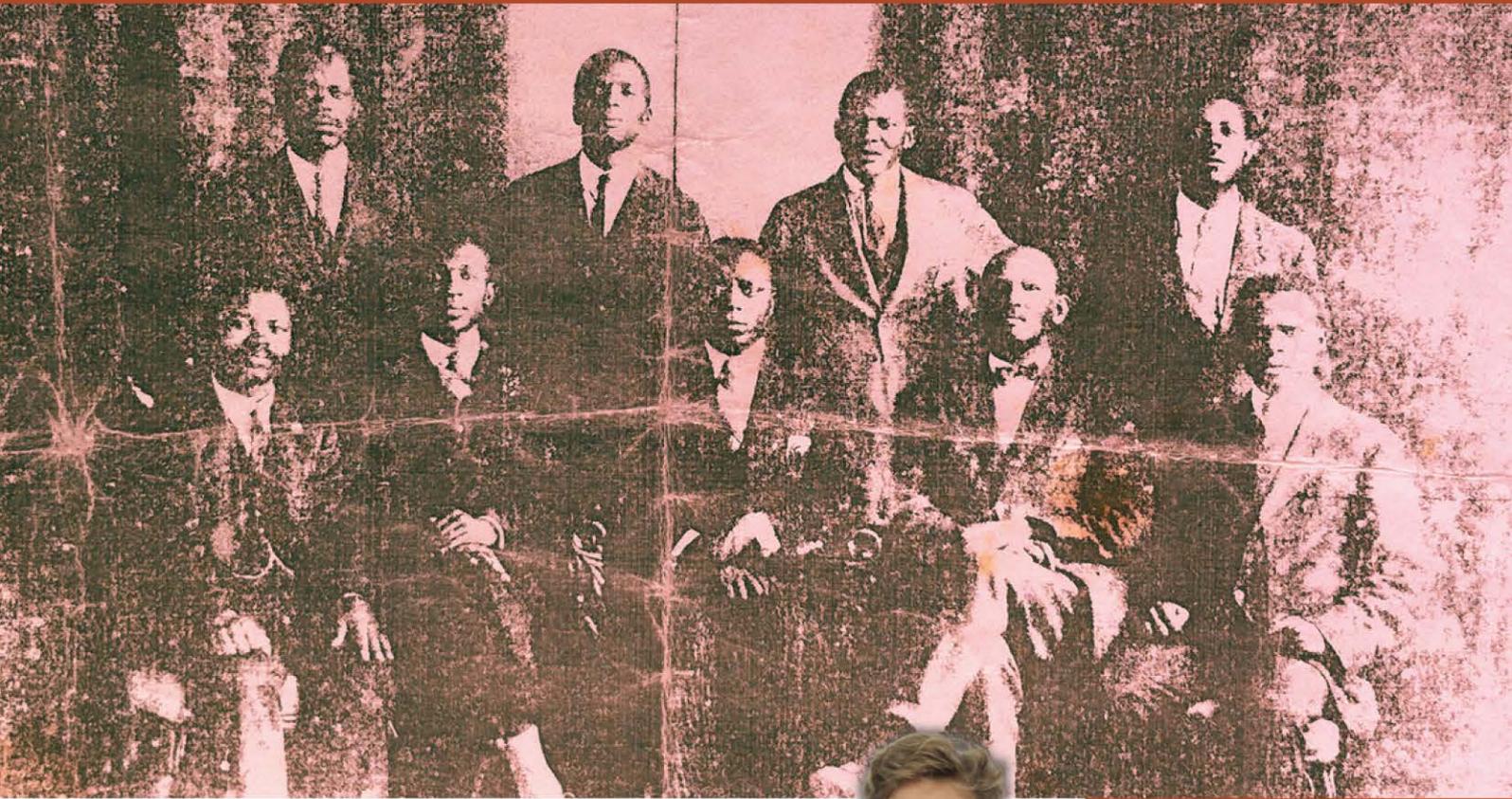


# BOOK LAUNCH NEIL AGGETT LABOUR STUDIES LECTURE

Hosted by the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) and the  
Departments of Sociology & Industrial Sociology, and Economics & Economic History.



## MILITANT MIGRANTS: CLEMENTS KADALIE, THE ICU AND THE MASS MOVEMENT OF BLACK WORKERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, 1896-1951

Presented by Henry Dee

**THE BOOK:** Malawian-born Clements Kadalie exploded on the global stage as head of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU). A massive popular movement founded in Cape Town in 1919, it also spread into Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In the 1920s, the ICU completely overshadowed the nationalist and communist parties, organising perhaps 250,000 workers and labour tenants. Kadalie, a famed orator, journalist and organiser, electrified huge meetings with his calls for economic freedom and all-in mass organisation. Praised as the most important black worker leader in the world at the time, he was championed by figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Tom Mann, and George Padmore.

Henry Dee's *Militant Migrants*, based on extensive research, is the first full biography of Kadalie. It examines his evolving ideas, African impact and global importance, unprecedented successes, inescapable failures, and complicated personal life. Kadalie won wage gains and improved conditions, through strikes, campaigns and lobbying, alarming colonial states. Yet his ICU was marked by contradictions, and imploded into autocratic leadership, corruption, factionalism, and bitterness. Kadalie's story illuminates the period in which his star rose: the Malawian diaspora and immigrant politics, class struggles and transnational organising, and battles over gender, citizenship, nation and respectability, and is also a tale of a man's fall from popular hero into alcoholism, a broken family, and ruined reputation.

**THE SPEAKER:** Henry Dee is a research fellow at Northumbria University, UK, and a historian of empire, labour and migration in the early 20th century. Widely published, he co-edited (with David Johnson), *I See You: The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa, 1919-1930* a collection of primary sources (HiPSA, His biography of African labour leader Clements Kadalie, *Militant Migrants*, was published by Liverpool University Press in November 2025. Henry's latest research compares trade unions across Southern Africa, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and their engagement with the politics of migration in the late British empire.



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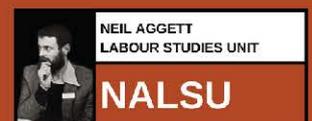
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# MILITANT MIGRANTS

*Clements Kadalie, the ICU and  
the Mass Movement of Black Workers in  
Southern Africa, 1896–1951*

HENRY DEE

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# Structure

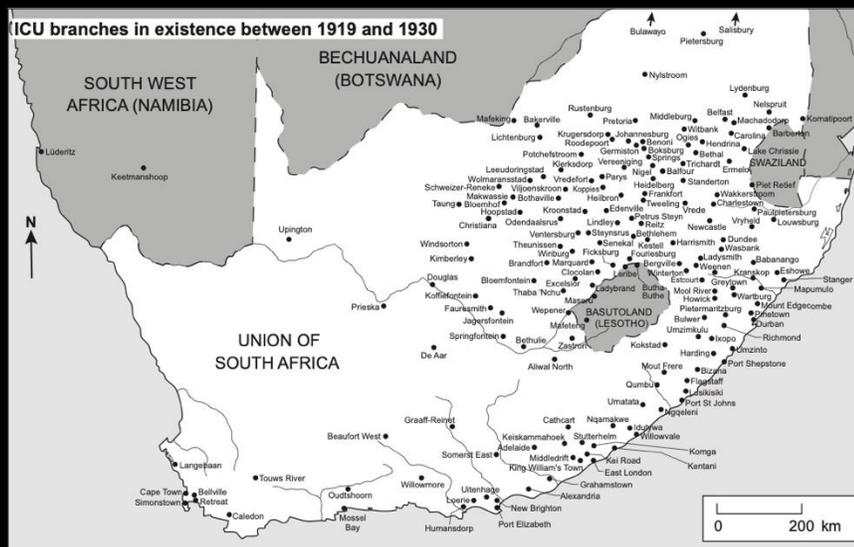
1. Who were Clements Kadalie and the ICU?
2. Kadalie and the ICU in Makhanda
3. Three main arguments of *Militant Migrants*

# 1

*“... the largest economic organization of  
black men in the world ...”*

Who were Clements Kadalie, and the  
ICU?

# Clements Kadalie & the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU)



(clockwise from top left) Kadalie in the early 1920s; ICU branches across Southern Africa; a Johannesburg mass meeting.

Membership of the ICU peaked at 100,000 to 250,000 around 1927

DEEDS! DEEDS! DEEDS!  
 WORKERS OF THE RAND  
 Do not listen to the reactionaries  
 JOIN THE

## Great Campaign for Emancipation.

All Roads should Lead to the

**INCHCAPE HALL**

Eloff Street Extension

Wednesdays 3 p.m., Fridays 5 p.m., Saturdays 3 p.m.

where **CLEMENTS KADALIE**, Gen. Sec. I.C.U.  
 the Apostle of the African Workers, expounds

**INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION**

as the effective weapon to sweep out existing disabilities amongst the African Race

**SPECIAL MASS MEETING**

in the same Hall,

**SUNDAY, 12th OCTOBER, at 3 p.m.**

ELECTION OF OFFICERS  
 Brass Band in attendance

**REMEMBER OUR BURIAL BENEFIT**

**ROLL UP! ROLL UP! ONE AND ALL**

Published by the Johannesburg Branch of the I.C.U. 17, Becker St.

An October 1924 Johannesburg ICU poster, from CULSC Rochlin Papers

# LABOR COLOR LINE TROUBLES AFRICA

Premier Hertzog's Resentment of 'Interference' Is Aimed at British Union Leaders.

## BLACKS ORGANIZING FAST

Demand Recognition and Have the Support of the International Body.

With the row over what kind of a flag should be used by the Union of South Africa settled by a compromise between the 100 per cent. South Africans and the British elements, the Government of that section of the British Commonwealth is facing a much more serious problem, judging from reports about the drawing of the color line in labor matters received in Europe.

That the ruling class in South Africa resents any interference in its affairs is evidenced by Premier Hertzog's recent statement, cabled to THE NEW YORK TIMES, in which he deplored "the constantly renewed attempts of individuals across the water to interfere in South African native affairs," and said that European Africa will observe no other

*New York Times,*  
5 February 1928



Kadalie in WEB Du Bois' Crisis, September 1927

**DAILY HERALD**  
FRIDAY, JULY 6, 1927

WATCHING THE WEATHER (One Page Four)

ICE CREAM VENDORS PRAY FOR FINE WEATHER :: DOMINION BROADCASTING

NOTED FOR THE BEST ICE CREAM IN THE CITY

OPEN your mouth and shut your eyes!

STOP PRESS

THE HERALD'S...  
DOMINION BROADCASTING...  
A BIRTH AFFAIR...  
STOP PRESS

THE TIMES, MONDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1927.

<p><b>GERMAN LOANS.</b> <b>EXPENDITURE AND REPARATIONS.</b> (FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.) BERLIN, Oct. 9. Friday's meeting of the Cabinet, reinforced by the President of the Reichsbank and the director of the railway company, was designed to tranquillize the discussions of foreign loan policy by an authoritative pronouncement, and to strengthen foreign confidence in the efficiency of the Foreign Loans Control Committee. The <i>communiqué</i>, revealing behind the outlined compromise the clash of opinions at the meeting, has not given full satisfaction; it is obscure in parts and shows that</p>	<p><b>SOUTH AFRICAN NATIVES' TRADE UNION.</b> <b>USES AND ABUSES.</b> (FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT IN ZULULAND.) One of the most interesting and significant developments of late years in the life of the Zulu people is the recent appearance and rapid spread among them of the teachings of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union. Under the designation of the I.C.U. this trade union of black people has caused much stir throughout South Africa during the past two or three years. This body has been organized</p>	<p><b>FRENCH BUDGET ESTIMATES.</b> <b>TAXATION AND POLITICS.</b> (FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.) PARIS, Oct. 9. The Finance Committee of the Chamber has concluded its examination of the Budget estimates for 1928. Paying dutiful attention to M. Poincaré's exhortations it showed no inclination to alter his provisions, but—unfortunately, from the Government's point of view—it accepted at the last moment for discussion by the Chamber a series of amendments to the existing taxation which tend to upset the balance of the Budget. They represent slight alleviations of a number of different</p>
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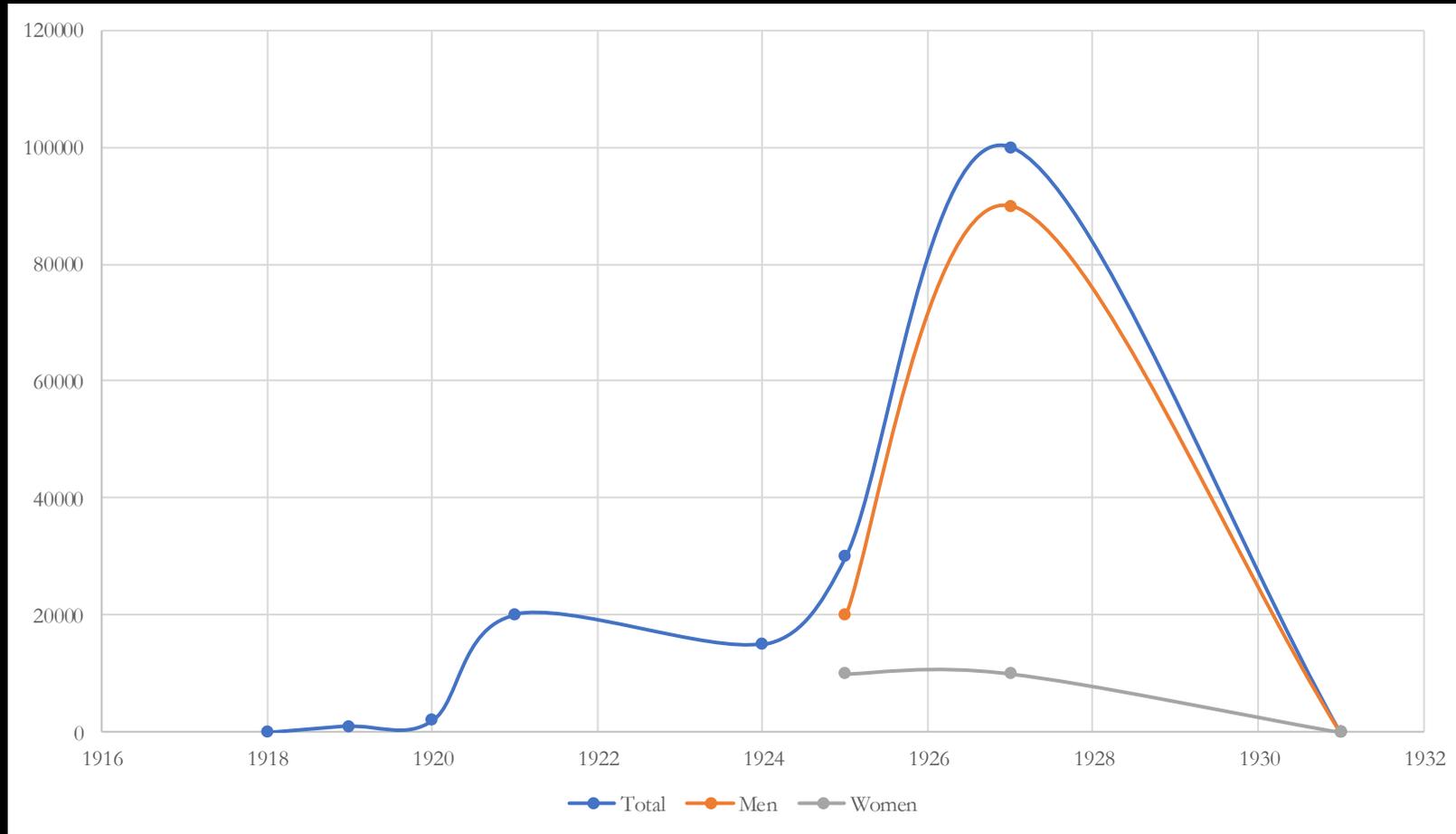
**LANSBURY'S Labour Weekly**  
Vol. III—No. 105 SATURDAY, MARCH 12, 1927 TROPENICE.  
Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper.

**NATIVE WORKERS OF S. AFRICA**  
**Biggest Trade Union on Continent**  
**MR. KADALIE'S VISIT**  
CLEMENTS KADALIE

Mr. Clements Kadalie, secretary of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa, arrived in London yesterday from Geneva, where he has been attending the International Labour Office Conference as an unofficial delegate. Mr. Kadalie's organisation, which has a membership of about 80,000, is composed of native, coloured and Indian workers, and claims to be stronger than any white trade union in Africa. "As a result of my visit to Geneva," said Mr. Kadalie to a DAILY HERALD representative yesterday, "I am hoping that the position of the native workers in South Africa will have become a matter of international importance. In the past that has been far from the case, but next year it is quite likely we shall be officially represented at the International Labour Conference."

*Daily Herald,*  
18 June 1927

# ICU membership numbers



# 2

*“... it is now a long time that you have worked for the white man ...”*

Kadalie and the ICU in Makhanda

# ICU discussed in Makhanda at SANNC meeting, June 1922



Hamilton Kraai

Kraai: “the natives who recently struck on the Cape Town Docks were placed in trucks and sent to Milnerton where the public complained of their presence, they were subsequently interviewed by Mr Solomon of the Harbour and some Clergy; that he (Kraai) was asked to persuade the strikers to return to work on the condition that the grievances would be dealt with in a Christian-like spirit, and that there would be no victimization. He stated that he persuaded the boys to return to work twenty (20) were arrested and were told that they were ringleaders. He (Kraai) then moved that a minimum wage of 10/- per day be demanded and that if not granted a general strike throughout the Union would be declared on 31st July next.

“This was seconded by one Mabaso a Swazi who stated that he was Chairman of the Native Labour Party in Johannesburg. He described the recent strike in Johannesburg and spoke at considerable length and informed the gathering that they should not be cowards, that he was not afraid of the white man and that the Gaol was the best place under the sun[.]”

# 1924 ICWU annual conference in Makhanda

- ICWU a moderate rival to the ICU led by IB Nyombolo
- Pledges loyalty to the King and denounces “Bolshevism”
- Demands better working conditions for railway workers, and pledges to send a deputation to the new Pact government

*Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 August 1924

## I.C.W.U.

The fourth annual Conference of the Industrial and Commercial (Amalgamated) Workers' Union was held in Grahamstown last week. This is the I.C.W.U., and not to be confused with the other body bearing the same name and known as the I.C.U.

The conference as representing non-European organised labour in South Africa passed a resolution expressing loyalty to the King.

The following further resolutions were passed:

That this conference of I.C.W.U. views with great alarm and consternation the preaching of Bolshevik texts to the Native and coloured workers of the Union as being detrimental to the cause of the subject races of this country; further, the conference appeals to all intelligent Natives, the Royal authorities, the Government, and those interested in the non Europeans for co-operation in combating the evil in the best interests of the country so dear to us all.

Whereas the Government of the Union provides top-boots for railway employes who work in washouts, and whereas the Government gives dirt money for European labourers who work as fitters, and whereas white employes employed by the Railway Administration are well protected by being placed on a different scale of pay when they are either on night-out or Sunday time or holiday duty, and whereas the Government does not provide healthy accommodation for its non-European labourers on the railways in which to live, and whereas there is no differentiation between coal men and leading men in the coal shed as well as between labourers and non-European pumpers: therefore this conference of I.C.W.U., which represents railwaymen as well as industrial and commercial workers, prays the Government immediately to take steps to better these conditions among its non-European employes. Further, the conference resolves to send a deputation to the Minister of Railways with a view to laying before him these grievances.

# Independent ICU and 1930 East London general strike



Independent ICU protest in East London, February 1930; East London strike committee P.C. Fetsha, D.D.T. Mqayi, P.D. Mkwambi and Robert Kadalie (back, left to right); Joel Magade, Alexander Maduna, Clements Kadalie, Henry Tyamzashe and Alfred Mnika (front, left to right)

Kadalie interviewed railway authorities on 19 September 1929, demanding a minimum wage of 6s. 6d. per day for all Black workers in East London

Independent ICU conference at the St Philips Hall 6-11 January; on 12 January, again petitioned the railway management, this time threatening to call a strike.

Strike called 16 January 1930; by the second week, 4,000 men and 600 women – 70 per cent of port's workforce – were out in a sympathetic general strike

Strike lasts into May 1930

# Joel Magade and Alexander Fifana lead Makhanda Independent ICU

99 members in February 1931, 500  
members in April; Kadalie visits March,  
April and June 1931

June 1932 Independent ICU  
concentrated in the Eastern Cape, with  
branches in Port Alfred, Grahamstown,  
Toise River, Cathcart, Keiskamahoe,  
King William's Town and East London.



Joel Magade, *New Africa*, 29 June 1929

# Magade's enduring Garveyism

Unlike other ICU leaders, Magade continues to advocate Garveyite ideas into the 1930s and writes for *Negro World*

“Let the officials of the ICU stand on their feet to organize our native people everywhere ... We shall never rest, until this cause is carried right through South Africa, and if possible the whole extensive continent of BLACK AFRICA. Hence we shall be confirming and establishing Hon. Mr. Marcus Garvey's policy – AFRICA for the AFRICANS, Europe for the Europeans, Asia for the Asiatics and all other intruders according to their natural countries” (JJ Magade, *Workers' Herald*, 15 August 1925)

His Garveyism also influences his support for Kadalie in face of anti-immigrant politics

“Once more I am appealing to all native workers of East London to come forward and join the Independent ICU we must become united, Kadalie has shown us the way to unite, there are some fools who are still saying Kadalie belongs to Nyasaland what is he doing here. Let me tell you once more that Kadalie has been sent organise the native workers of S. Africa, he is striving to gain freedom for you...” (16 December 1929 Meeting of Independent ICU in East London led by Magade)

# Magade's break with Kadalie

Independent ICU executive expel Kadalie in June 1932 for misuse of funds. Kadalie “under the influence of liquor” complains that rivals have:

“decided that you did not want to be led by a foreigner anymore. I am the only foreigner in the Union. You are nothing but heathens, liars and hypocrites. I do not hold private meetings, I abuse that.”

Women at the meeting shout: “where is Magade going to live[?] We will not allow him, ‘the dog’, we will kill him.”

Police: “The men showed no sympathy towards Kadalie.”

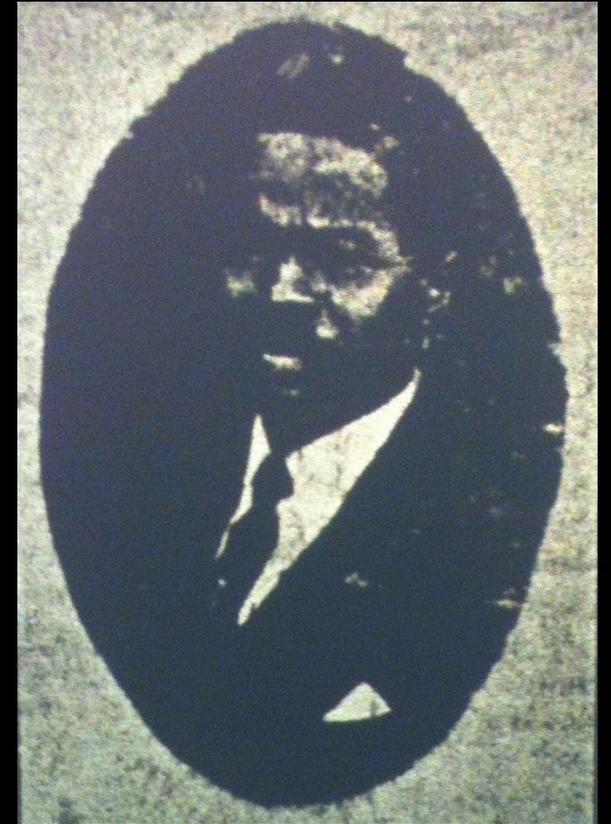
# Magade and the Makhanda Independent ICU into the late 1930s

Independent ICU annual conference in Grahamstown in January 1933

Independent ICU continues in Makhanda up to 1935; Magade based at 40 Wood Street and 42 Albert Road

Magade then re-appears in London, Britain, where he is vice-president of the Pan-African Federation for the Defence of Africans and the People of African Descent, with George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and Nancy Cunard

He passes away in November 1928



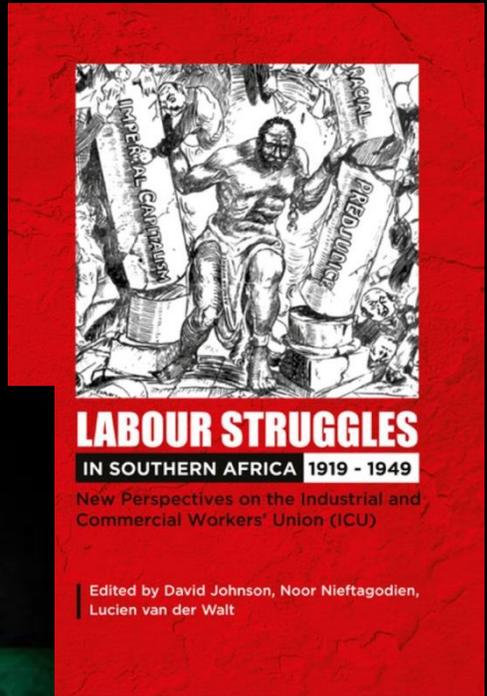
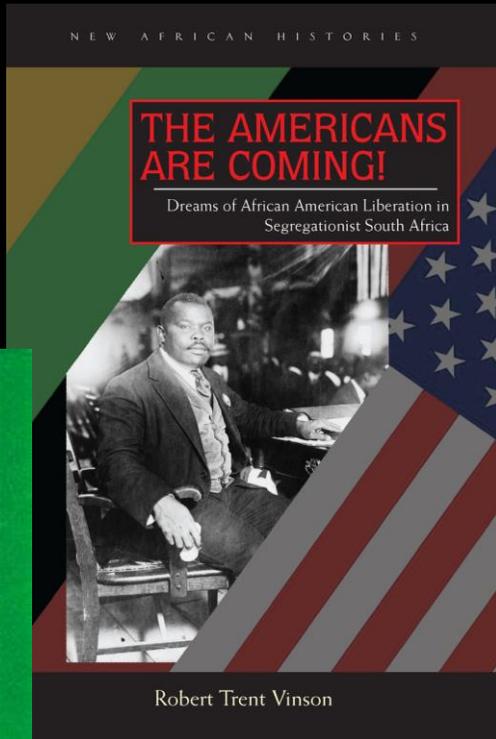
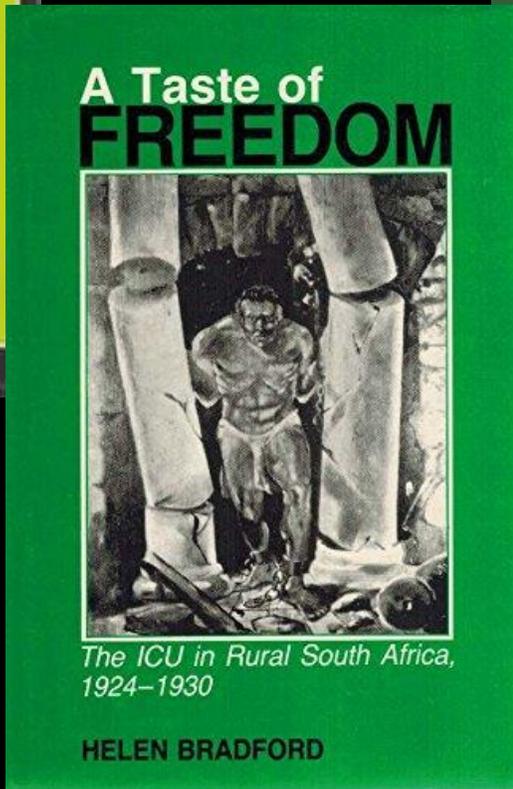
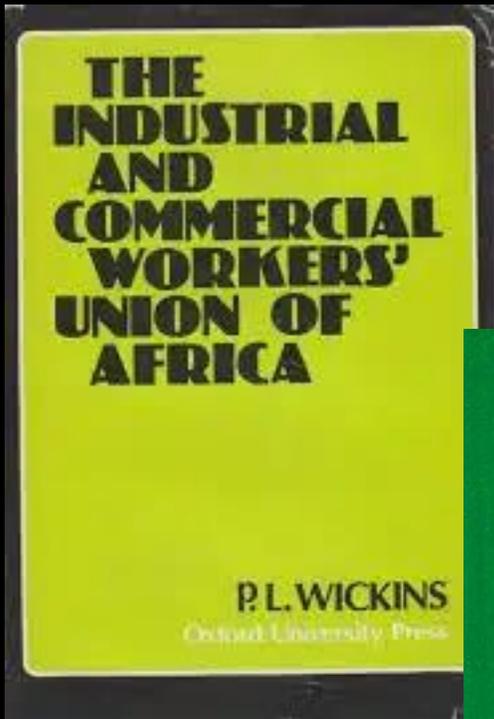
Joel Magade, *New Africa*, 29 June 1929

# 3

*“...Our destination was [to become]  
‘the ICU of Africa’...”*

*Main arguments of Militant Migrants*

# ICU historiography



# Intervention 1 of *Militant Migrants*: Kadalie and the remaking of class in 1920s Southern Africa

Instrumentalising proletarianization in Southern Africa, Kadalie and the ICU insisted that their members were the 'real workers' – bringing together locals and immigrants, women and men



Kadalie addressing a Cape Town meeting in January 1923

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31, NINTH STREET, VREDEDOEP, JOHANNESBURG.

**The Workers Herald**

Official Organ of the I.C.U. (Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa).

JOHANNESBURG, JULY 29, 1926. Price 5d.

## THE STRUGGLE HAS BEGUN

In these columns we have continuously drawn the attention of our members to the fact that the modern Pharaohs will not easily acquiesce as a result of our resolute determination to cast off the fetters of both economic and political slavery. Since the Bloemfontein slogan of 1925: "We must be free men and women in the land of our forefathers," has been echoed with added vigour by the African proletariat throughout the length and breadth of the Union, our tax-masters have devised ways and means to thwart our proletarian march towards economic and political freedom. The I.C.U., which came on the scene as the torch-bearer of this new revolutionary fervour, has made remarkable advance in its efforts to liberate African labour since the East London Conference in 1924. Never in the history of South Africa has a non-European organisation been able to marshal within its ranks all non-European labour. Here you have in an army of workers, Native Africans, Coloureds and Indians, who know each other as "Comrades in arms." No more do the members of the regiment call themselves Zulus, Ama Xosa, Basuto, Coloureds or Indians. They have been taught to know themselves as the working class of South Africa. There is no grudge because a certain particular tribe holds no higher post in the Organisation. It is efficiency alone that counts when the question of officers comes under discussion. Perhaps the country does not know the fact that in the National Council of the I.C.U. here are to be seen the representatives of the governing body of the Organisation of Coloureds, Native Africans and Indians.

Now this composition of a non-European Organisation would not do for South African capitalism. The middle-class politicians, as represented by the Pact Government found in the new awakening a determined threat to their infamous and unchristianlike policy of a "White South Africa." Desperate as they were, these middle-class politicians gave the Prime Minister a mandate to unfurl his Segregation Policy at Smithfield in November of last year. The white hero of the Free State was hereafter acclaimed as the Saviour of "White South Africa." But as Napoleon, he had to meet a navy and army superior to his own, thus at Bloemfontein at the beginning of this year the African masses rejected in toto the Prime Minister's Segregation proposals. It is now the beginning of a fearless political and economic struggle.

The African National Convention decided to wage an extensive propaganda throughout the land with a view to mobilise all forces into the war atmosphere. The I.C.U. decided to exploit this opportunity, and its National Secretary was there and then on the war-path. He began to stamp the country with extraordinary vigour, and the workers responded to the call. Capitalism was astonished at this new propaganda



which knew no tribalism. The services of the Native Affairs Department, which in reality has been called the Native Prosecution Department, were requisitioned and a ban was placed upon the movements of the National Secretary of the I.C.U. But propaganda work has never slackened at all in all parts of the country. Natal has made equally wonderful progress where the I.C.U. can now boast of over 6,000 followers who are entrusted to proselytise the whole Province under the leadership of Comrade A. W. G. Champion. In Natal the Pass Law system was challenged and has met a decided setback.

The battle is raging fearlessly. Shortly after our recent Conference Comrade Alex. P. Maduna, Provincial Secretary for the Free State, and Comrade Moses Itholog, Secretary for Kimberley Branch, were arrested at Windsorton, Cape, where they were charged with entering a location without a permit, and were fined 10s. each. Only a few days ago, Comrade Thomas Mbeki, Secretary for Pretoria Branch, was also arrested at Middelburg, Northern Transvaal, charged on similar lines as the other two Comrades. But this later arrest manifested an unprecedented spirit of solidarity in the coalfields district. The workers of Middelburg, under the leadership of Comrade Mbeki, shortly after the arrest, and when Comrade Mbeki was out on bail, made a gigantic procession in the streets of the town. It was another threat to capitalism. An eye-witness of this procession told us that he thought it was an exodus of the Hebrews from the house of bondage for the promised land. Of course it is the initial step towards a bigger effort to march to the promised land.

What lesson should the workers obtain from these arrests and prosecutions? Are we to be downhearted? NO! We must continuously maintain our vigorous propaganda in the country. Every member of the I.C.U. must now become a missionary. The work should not only be left in the hands of officials. Each and every one must do his or her share. Those who are in arrears with their weekly dues, levies, etc. must make efforts to square these at their Branch Offices. Our goal must be a militant Workers' Organisation in South Africa, and this Organisation must be efficiently equipped to combat the Prime Minister's Segregation Policy when it is brought to Parliament in 1927. We must double our membership also. Special efforts must be made to recruit an overwhelming number of mineworkers. The Struggle Has Begun. Capitalism would like to see us unshackled in these chains of slavery for ever. Let us not conceal our views and aims. We shall have none of these chains as designated in the so-called Native Policy, should be our slogan all over South Africa. It is up to us who live to-day to break these chains asunder that bind us to both economic and political slavery. Now then, as we were, TO YOUR TENTS, YE THE WORKERS OF AFRICA!

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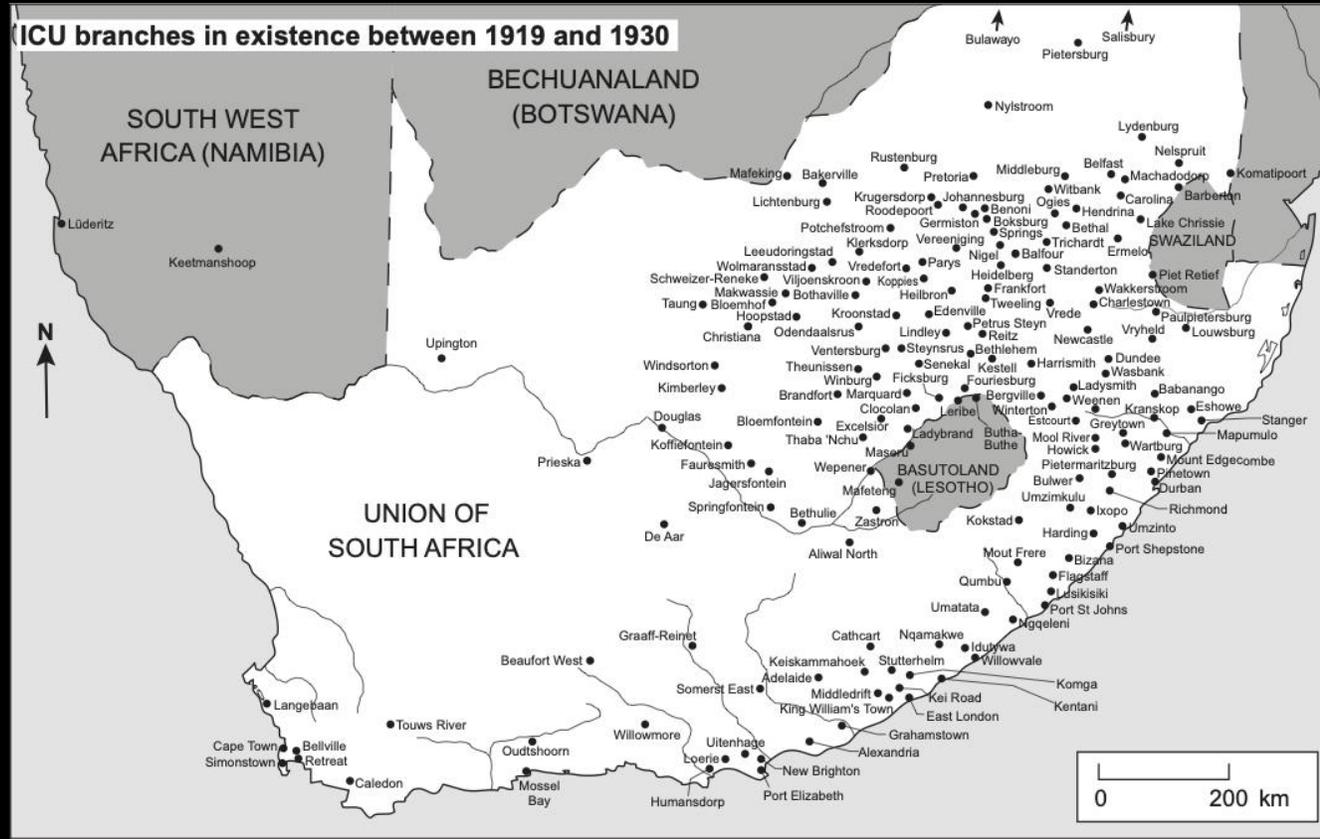
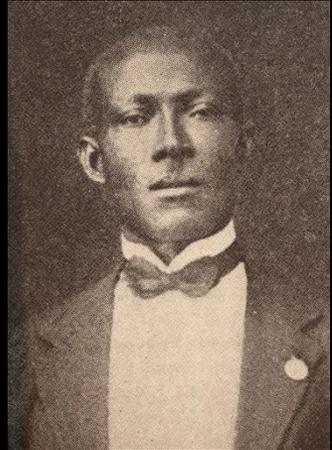
## National

Hairdressing Saloon and Tobacconist, 2, HIGH ROAD, GERMISTON. (Opposite Station).

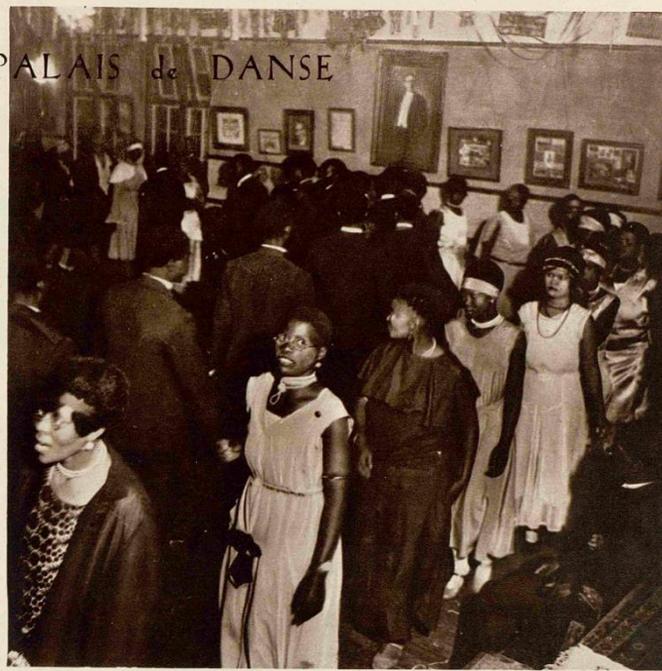
Tobacco, Cigarettes, Pipes and all Smokers' Requisites.

Prices the Cheapest in Germiston.

# Intervention 2 of *Migrant Workers and Migrants*: Migrant workers and leaders in the ICU



(Clockwise from top left) Clements Kadali (ICU general secretary from colonial Malawi); Thabo Wilfred Keable 'Mote (executive ICU member from colonial Lesotho); James Gulam Gumbs (ICU president from St Vincent in the Caribbean); James Saul Mokete Thaele (executive ICU member from colonial Lesotho); Peter Nyambo (ICU assistant secretary from colonial Malawi); Emmanuel Johnson (ICU junior vice-president from West Africa)



THE PAUL JONES is the climax of the evening. The girl in the black frock is placing with practiced coquetry over her shoulder. The variety of costume rivals that at a fashionable hotel. The prevalence of spectacles is a phenomenon among the negro women. So strong is racial feeling that the rule in dance halls has been made: "One tribe—one dance; another tribe—another dance—on another night."



NIGHT LIFE IN THE NEGRO QUARTER: A scene on an unglorious occasion in the Inchcape Hall, Johannesburg. White taverns seem *en vogue*. THE ADVERTISEMENTS of the various dance halls have a naive appeal all their own as may be seen above. Questions are cited in the article. THE PALAIS DE DANSE OF THE BLACKS in Johannesburg is the Inchcape Hall, although there are other similar organizations.



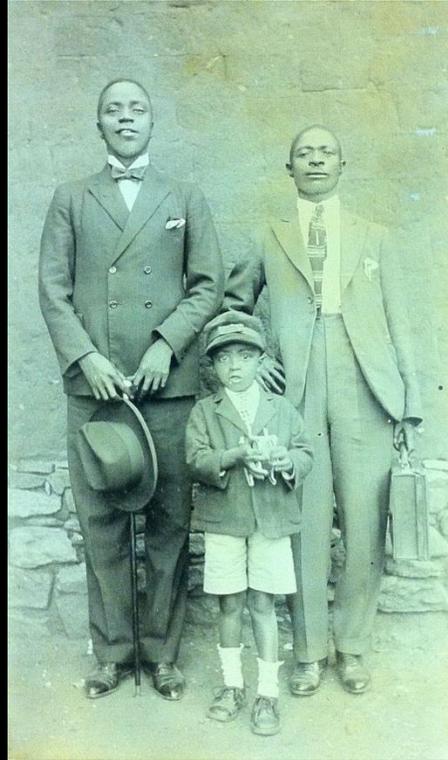
SABLE WALLFLOWERS arrayed in their best await the request to dance. Dinner jackets are far from unknown, while kit less formal is not barred. PAS SEUL is to be seen while a young mother deems her baby in arms an adequate partner? The gaiety of the blacks is a screaming contrast to the solemnity of a 'white' dance.

# Intervention 3 of *Militant Migrants*: Kadalie within the broader history of Malawians in South Africa



(left to right) Revellers at the Inchcape Hall in Johannesburg; JRA Ankhoma, Kadalie's uncle, early Pentecostal minister and Malawian nationalist leader in Johannesburg; saxophonist JG Banda; Anderson Blackway, Malawian ballroom dancer and leader of the Independent Chefs' and Waiters' Association in 1920s Johannesburg

## Intervention 3 of *Militant Migrants*: Kadalie within the broader history of Malawians in South Africa



Kadalie's family: His first wife, Molly; Kadalie with his eldest son, Alexander, and ICU leader Simon Elias; Kadalie with his second wife Eva and their son, Victor



# MILITANT MIGRANTS

*Clements Kadalie, the ICU and  
the Mass Movement of Black Workers in  
Southern Africa, 1896–1951*

HENRY DEE

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