

Building African working-class unity

The Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures

Labour Studies: Working-Class Education Series

Revised edition



Editors:

Zarina Patel

Lucien van der Walt

Contributors

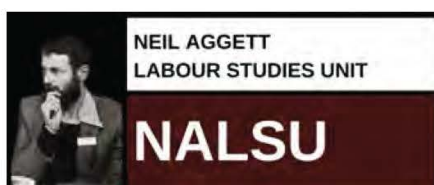
Baba Aye

Antonater Tafadzwa Choto

Zarina Patel

Pyarally Rattansi

Lucien van der Walt



**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

www.awaazmagazine.com
AWAAZ
V O I C E S

Building African working-class unity:

The Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures

Volume 2

Labour Studies: Working-Class Education Series

Revised edition: 2022

Edited by Zarina Patel and Lucien van der Walt

Contributors

Baba Aye, Antonater Tafadzwa Choto, Zarina Patel,
Pyarally Rattansi and Lucien van der Walt

ISBN: 978-0-6397-3749-2(print)
978-0-6397-3750-8(e-book)

Publishers:

Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa.
Zandgraphics Ltd, Nairobi, Kenya, with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), South Africa.
Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the publishers.

© Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University / AwaaZ Publications/ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), and the contributors.

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holders, NALSU (Rhodes University), AwaaZ Publications, the FES, and the contributors, request due acknowledgment and a copy of the publication to be sent to NALSU at v.wessels@ru.ac.za

No part of the booklet may be reproduced by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise for the purposes of profit without the prior written consent of NALSU.

The authors and publisher have made every effort to obtain permission for and acknowledge the use of copyrighted material. However, should any infringements have occurred, NALSU would like to be notified. In the event of a reprint, these will be corrected.

Contacts:

Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit, PO Box 94, Rhodes University, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa.
Phone: (+27) (0)46 603 8939, 072 183 6632
Email: v.wessels@ru.ac.za
Online: <https://www.ru.ac.za/nalsu/>

Zandgraphics Ltd, PO Box 32843-00600, Nairobi, Kenya.
Phone: (+254) (0) 72 234 4900, (+254) (0) 78 7557 454, (+254) (0) 73 374 1085
Email: info@zandgraphics.com
Online: <https://www.zandgraphics.com>

Layout and Design: Bronwyn Tweedie, Design Office, Printing Services Unit, Rhodes University.
Printing: Harry's Printers, Port Elizabeth.

Cover photo: Makhan Singh addressing a union meeting in 1962, from the collection of Zarina Patel.

We dedicate this booklet to the memories of
Makhan Singh of Kenya, and Neil Aggett
and Vuyisile Mini, trade unionists killed by
the apartheid state.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of those who have made this booklet possible. We gratefully acknowledge the support and efforts of all contributors, friends and colleagues, those who attended the Memorial Lectures, the family of Makhan Singh, and the Kenya Human Rights Commission. Thank you to David Fryer, Warren McGregor, Katie Moonie and Mattie Webb for proofreading.

We thank the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), which funded the publication of this booklet for its initial launch as part of its support for the 8-12 November 2021 Vuyisile Mini Workers School in Makhanda, South Africa by Rhodes University's Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU).

Dr. Pyarally Rattansi, who gave the first Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture, passed away in 2022. We express our condolences to his friends and family, and our gratitude to him.

Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Background and Introduction to the Collection	3
Zarina Patel and Lucien van der Walt	
<i>The First Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture</i>	6
Remembering Makhan Singh, One of the Great Heroes of Kenya	
Dr. Pyarally Rattansi	
<i>The Second Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture</i>	15
Makhan Singh, Ghadar, the IWW and Communism: Legacy and Relevance to African Trade Unions Today	
Professor Lucien van der Walt	
<i>The Third Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture</i>	30
The Living Wage: Problems and Prospects	
Baba Aye	
<i>The Fourth Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture</i>	29
Contemporary Labour Struggles in Sub-Saharan Africa: Successes and Challenges	
Antonater Tafadzwa Choto	
Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites	43
Zarina Patel	
Speaker Profiles	51
About AwaaZ Magazine: The flagship of AwaaZ Publications	53
About NALSU and the Eastern Cape Worker Education Project	54
Short Course Programme: Policy, Theory and Research for Labour Movements	55

List of images

Still in the news: Makhan Singh in the The Standard newspaper (Kenya), 2 May 2020	2
Third annual conference of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, Nairobi, July 1939.....	5
Detention centre: The tin <i>rondavels</i> at Maralal, where Makhan Singh spent much of the 1950s	29
Makhan Singh addressing the Kenya Federation of Labour, Mombasa, 8 November 1962	35
Makhan Singh with Oginga Odinga, soon after being released in 1961.....	42



"They are not interested in history, only in themselves."

- Photographer Ambu Patel - who spent years documenting Kenya's struggle - after the new Kanu fat-bellies derided him at Independence.

Nairobi Saturday May 2, 2020AD

With yesterday's Workers' Day pulverized by Covid-19, let's take a look at the sturdy unionists who hastened Kenya's Independence with their dyed-in-the-wool nationalism and robust visions for a great nation... only to be shunted aside and replaced by the self-serving, pot-bellied comedians we see today.

● Kaloleni Hall, April 23 1950 - 13 years before independence - Makhan Singh became the first Kenyan to publicly call for an end to colonialism. Many leaders were then negotiating for "equality and justice", expecting Uhuru in 30 years' time. Diehard wazungus saw Kenyan self-rule not earlier than 75 years! Agitation to reclaim African soil had, of course, begun 30 years earlier led by stalwarts like Harry Thuku.

Can you identify the characters?

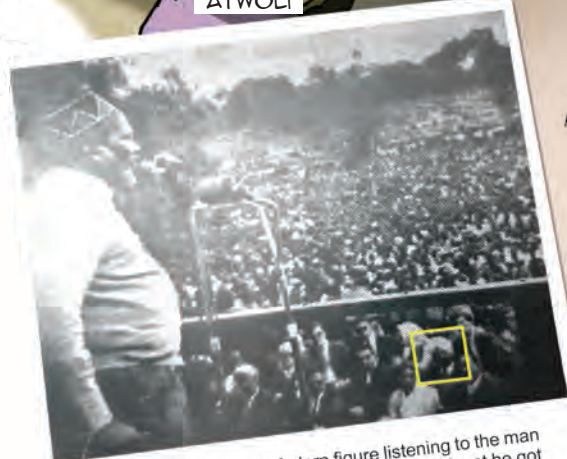


MUZUNGU NA RUDI KWAO MWAFIRIKA NA PATA UHURU!

FRANCIS! STOP REPEATING STUPID OTHERWISE I WILL NEVER TAKE YOU OUT AGAIN!

A few of the stupendous labour union officials and other shakers...

Fred Kubai
Bildad Kaggia
Kungu Karumba
Makhan Singh
Harry Thuku
Clement Lubembe (dad to a prominent present day attorney at law)
John Mungai (father to Pauline Msalame)
Chege Kiburu
Mwangi Macharia
JD Kali
S Osore
Gerald Olola
Arthur Ochwada
Muindi Mbingu
Jesse Kariuki
Joseph Kangethe
Gopal Singh
Chandan J. Beauttah
Pranlal Sheth
Aggrey Minya
JW Okaka
George Ndegwa
MAO Ndisi
Dishon Kahiato
James Karebe
Wilson Mukuna
Chege Kibachia
Dennis Pritt
Chunilal B. Madan
Eric arap Srony
JM Nazareth
Haroon Ahmed
Shanti Pandit
James Karebe
Pio Gama Pinto
Tom Mbotela
Ambrose Adongo



Makhan Singh cuts a forlorn figure listening to the man he admired, at Kamukunji in 1964... but at least he got a ringside seat!

FACT ● Kenyatta served 9 years in detention. Makhan served in those northern wastes for eleven (from 1950).
● Ronald Ngala was first African Labour Minister back in '61 (before Independence).
● Crusaders such as Harry Thuku and Dennis Pritt felt let down by Old Jomo's presidency. Bildad Kaggia was utterly shocked by the massive land grabbing. Joseph Murumbi as well - but incredulously - he hang on until 1966.

Sources: Research, history classes and Zarina Patel.

Still in the news: Makhan Singh, a deeply principled anti-colonialist, and pioneer of the union movement in East Africa, was an undogmatic man of the left. He was derided by moderates for demanding the freedoms they thought impossible: shenzi means "stupid, ignorant." The cartoonist states that men like Singh were "shunted aside and replaced by the self-serving, pot-bellied comedians we see today."

Image source: with permission from *It's a Madd MAdd World* (kelemba@gmail.com), *The Standard* newspaper (Kenya), 2 May 2020.

Background and Introduction to the Collection

Zarina Patel and Lucien van der Walt

This collection is a contribution to the process of rediscovering and reflecting on African labour history, thinking beyond national boundaries and official histories, and addressing the challenges facing labour today. It is an international and internationalist publication in the best traditions of the workers' movement.

It includes the five Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures delivered in Nairobi, Kenya in the period 2006 to 2017. The Memorial Lectures involve an international speaker giving a public address in Nairobi, followed by a workshop with Kenyan labour activists. These events provide Kenyan trade unionists and their allies the opportunity to learn from, as well as interact with, their counterparts and comrades from abroad.

The key idea, in holding these Lectures is to give Kenyan trade unionists an opportunity to move beyond a narrow focus on wages, working conditions and so on, to delve into the politics and ideology of working-class struggles as they have developed in other sub-Saharan countries. This is a key programme that should not only be continued, but indeed be expanded.

With this in mind, we are pleased to note that the Fifth Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture in conjunction with NALSU's annual Vuyisile Mini Workers School, in Makhanda, South Africa in November 2021. This will be included in the next booklet of Vuyisile Mini Workers School materials, as well as online as a video, by NALSU.

The Lectures are held in honour of Makhan Singh, a key figure in the rise of trade unionism in East Africa, both in Kenya and Tanzania. Makhan Singh's activities led to him being detained by the Kenyan colonial authorities for 11 years. He was marginalised by the post-colonial government after his release in 1961. But his inspiring role in uniting workers across racial lines, in fighting against imperialism, and his aspirations for a new society that would end exploitation, deserve to be remembered.

The publication of my (Zarina's) 2006 biography, entitled *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*, helped inspire a new interest in this important working-class leader and his example and legacy.¹ This builds on my work as a Kenyan artist, writer and activist. And, in this spirit, the collection also includes "Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites," a previously unpublished research paper on Makhan Singh's life and politics, which had been presented in an earlier form in South Africa in 2006.

The First Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture was held on 20 March 2006 at the Taifa Hall of the University of Nairobi, Kenya, in conjunction with the launch of *Unquiet*. The speaker for this, the inaugural Lecture, was Dr. Pyarally Rattansi, Professor Emeritus at the University of London. Dr. Rattansi knew Makhan Singh in Kenya in the late 1940s, when he was a cub reporter for the *Daily Chronicle*, a paper that was the voice of the anti-colonial movement in Kenya and provided an important mouthpiece for Makhan Singh's ideas on trade unionism, social justice, and freedom. This Lecture provides important insights into Makhan Singh's life and legacy, his emphasis on the importance of class politics, and his relevance to civil society's struggles for democracy today.

1 Patel, Z. 2006. *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi: Zand Graphics/ African Books Collective.

The Second Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture was held on 4 December 2013, and addressed by myself (Lucien), and is part of my work with trade unionism and workers' education. This Lecture focuses on the radical ideas and ethical commitments that Makhan Singh imbibed from Sikhism, the anarchist- and syndicalist-influenced Ghadar Party, and the communist movement, and the enduring relevance of his bottom-up approach to unions and politics.

The Third Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture was held on 28 November 2014, and given by Baba Aye, trade unionist and founding member of Nigeria's Labour Party. This Lecture provides a critical examination of the system of wage labour that Makhan Singh opposed; Aye looks at its roots in processes of enclosure and land expropriation in Europe and in Africa, its role in class exploitation, and the crisis of the capitalist system in which it is embedded. While reforms like the living wage are essential, they are not enough.

The Fourth Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture was held on 4 July 2017, and given by Antonater Tafadzwa Choto of the Zimbabwe Labour Centre. This Lecture explores the struggles of Africa's workers in the recent period, in the context of neo-liberal capitalism, authoritarian governments, and economic crisis. Noting ongoing weaknesses within the trade union movement, and the rise of populism, it highlights the importance of developing working-class consciousness, and of workers' rebuilding and wielding workers' power.

Finally, the paper "Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites" draws on my (Zarina's) work on Makhan Singh's life, struggles and politics. It was first presented at the "Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean" conference, held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

It argues that Makhan Singh provides a powerful role model, as an independent and undogmatic thinker, a defender of union autonomy who was nonetheless willing to engage in a wide range of alliances, and a visionary who understood that decolonisation without a pro-people, left-wing approach will always fall short of real freedom for the masses.

Equally importantly, Makhan Singh's life shows us that principle, commitment, honesty and sacrifice are not just utopian ideals but are possible, as well as essential to revolutionary leadership. He was jailed and marginalised for his resolute adherence to his principles and absolute refusal to be compromised, and lived and died in conditions of personal suffering and deprivation. But in so doing, he left a priceless legacy for generations to come.

This volume is jointly published by the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), based at Rhodes University, in Makhanda, South Africa, and AwaaZ Publications, based in Nairobi, Kenya, with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). It forms part of NALSU's *Labour Studies: Working-class Education Series*.

It was made possible by the support of many, including the Ford Foundation which provided financial support for the research and writing of *Unquiet*; Zahid Rajan of Zandgraphics Ltd, who handled that book's publication and public launch; the Labour Programme of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, which funded the Memorial Lectures series, and co-organised the events with the *AwaaZ* editors; Hindpal Singh Jabbal, son of Makhan Singh, who supported these ventures; and the FES.



Third annual conference of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, Nairobi, July 1939, just before the Mombasa general strike. Makhan Singh was re-re-elected general-secretary. The non-racial, cross-border union movement's resolutions included founding a Tenants' Association in communities.

Source: Zarina Patel's collection.

Remembering Makhan Singh, One of the Great Heroes of Kenya

Dr. Pyarally Rattansi

University of London, Britain

It's a great privilege and a great honour to be asked to speak at this first Memorial Lecture for Makhan Singh, one of the great heroes of Kenya. He was somebody who was ready to give his life for securing the freedom of Kenya, and for laying the foundations for a social justice movement that would emerge out of independence. As a cub reporter with the *Daily Chronicle* newspaper in late 1940s Kenya, I had the privilege of meeting him, almost daily, for a period of about four years from 1947 to 1950.

What I'm going to do in this talk is to give a brief synopsis of Makhan Singh's life and pay a tribute to him. Of course, for a fuller story, we can now go to Zarina Patel's amazing book, *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*, which was launched here this very day.² The book, *Unquiet*, will be a great resource concerning the life of Makhan Singh in the years ahead. Zarina and Zahid Rajan, who edit *AwaaZ* Magazine, have also launched these Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures today. This is the first Memorial Lecture, here in Taifa Hall at the University of Nairobi.

So, in what I am going to say about the life of Makhan Singh, I have drawn from Zarina's book and also include my own impressions, to add to our memory of his life and legacy. I will also reflect a little on why he has a claim to remembrance by Kenyans, as well as what sort of lessons we can draw from him. I know that professional historians discourage us from drawing easy lessons from history but, of course, this is something we must do even if we start by taking all the precautions.

Makhan Singh's life can be divided into phases. We have to think of the influences that impinged on him in his childhood, and we have to think of his gradual awakening to the objectives of trade unionism; we have to think of his early childhood in the Punjab, then a largely rural part of eastern India, but which was later partitioned between India and Pakistan;³ we have to think of his emigrating to Kenya to join his father; his school years in Kenya; we have to think of his early work helping to build up the trade union movement in Kenya from the 1930s. Then there are the years of detention he suffered: he was jailed in India for five years during the Second World War of 1939-1945, and then in Kenya from 1950 to 1961. This is just to help us to keep in our minds the various phases in the life of this remarkable man.

2 Patel, Z. 2006. *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi: Zand Graphics / African Books Collective.

3 British India was split in 1947 into India and Pakistan, and the Punjab province, from which Makhan Singh and many other Indians in East Africa originated, was partitioned by the new border. Makhan Singh's own home village of Gharjakh in the Gujranwala district became part of Pakistan. Thus, the broader terms "Asian" or "South Asian" came into increasing use in East Africa, to refer to local people of "Indian" descent. Partition was associated with massive intercommunal riots and ethnic cleansing, with minorities fleeing in their millions across the borders for safety. Around three and a half million Hindus and Sikhs fled West Punjab for India, and around five million Muslims left East Punjab for Pakistan. *Note by editors.*

A Great Drama in a Little Courthouse

Perhaps we can start by looking at an incident from that life. I'd like to ask you to envisage a great drama enacted in a little courthouse, in the then very small township of Nyeri. In May 1950. I know the courthouse well because I was born and brought up in Nyeri, and lived there until the age of about nine or ten. Thus, the courthouse was familiar to me. The chief judicial official of the colonial Kenyan government, Judge Ransley Samuel Thacker, sat fully robed with one of the chief prosecutors on one side. In the dock was a turbaned, bespectacled and bearded Sikh: Mr. Makhan Singh. I can bring this to my mind, vividly, because I had covered many court cases for the *Daily Chronicle*, and I had seen Mr. Anthony George Somerhough, the public prosecutor, try cases before.

The case was one of serving a deportation order against Makhan Singh. There's certainly an irony in this scene, because it was the Supreme Court itself which was meeting in this little courthouse in Nyeri. Usually, a Magistrate's Court was used for petty offences, and the power and majesty of British rule – which was perhaps much more evident when you sat in the law courts in Nairobi – was missing from this scene. Instead, the power and pomp of the British Empire was being forced to operate in these very basic quarters.

But why? The colonial government had originally intended to proceed with the charges in the Nairobi courts, but they had learned their lesson. When Makhan Singh and his associate Mr. Fred Kubai⁴ were charged in 1950 with running an illegal trade union, the East African Trade Union Congress, and tried in Nairobi, the case sparked a huge general strike which even drew in the so-called “house-boys,” as black African domestic servants were then called. It spread across the main towns in Kenya and lasted nine days despite hundreds of arrests being made.

And so, the government feared that there would again be mass demonstrations if either Singh and Kubai were tried in Nairobi. This is why the deportation case was moved to Nyeri, where the power of the British Crown faced just one person, sitting there in the dock: Mr. Makhan Singh.

So, if I may put it a little dramatically, what was it that gave Makhan Singh the power to make an Empire tremble in this way? To find out, we have to go back and look at his life, his ancestry, and the influences on him. We have to remember the contributions he made to the rise of trade unionism in colonial Kenya from 1935, in particular with the Indian Labour Trade Union, which he led at the age of 22. Then, after he had helped to lay the foundations of a militant multi-racial trade unionism in Kenya, he went for a visit to India in 1939, where he got sucked into unions again, as well as the Communist Party, with the result that he was detained there for most of the Second World War.

After his release in India, Makhan Singh came home to Kenya. The Kenyan colonial government had actually declared him a prohibited immigrant, but a slip-up by the immigration authorities allowed him back in. The government then tried its best to deport him to India.

I covered quite a few of the court cases attendant on the ongoing efforts at deportation. Makhan Singh always fought back. Sometimes he would lose in the lower courts but win in the Supreme Court. He waged other legal battles as well – for example, he tried to get his certificate of permanent Kenyan residence – and these cases also went on for years.

⁴ Born in Nairobi in 1917, Fred Kubai attended high school in Mombasa and worked as a telegraph operator for the East African Post and Telecommunications from 1931, including a stint in the British Army in the same capacity. In 1946, he quit, joining the African Workers Federation and founding the Kenya African Road Transport and Mechanics Union. In 1950, he worked with Makhan Singh to establish the East African Trade Union Congress: he served as its president, with Singh as its general-secretary. In 1952, along with Jomo Kenyatta, Bildad Kaggia, Kung'u Karumba, Paul Ngei, and Achieng Oneko, Kubai was charged with organising the Mau Mau Uprising. The “Kapenguria Six” were members of the Kenya African Union: found guilty, they received ten years in prison. Kubai passed away in 1996. *Note by editors.*

Under the Sword of Damocles

You have to keep in mind that everything Makhan Singh achieved in the years 1947-1950, in building up the trade unions and the movement for independence, was achieved in these difficult conditions. Much of what he had built up before the Second World War had been destroyed by the colonial government, using the excuse of “military necessities”. The unions had been partly dismantled, but revived after the war. There was a big general strike in 1947, and many of Makhan Singh’s union associates were imprisoned.

There was a Sword of Damocles hanging over him, waiting to fall, but this did not deter him in his renewed trade union work. This is where we see his tremendous organisational skills, his ability to influence people, his fearlessness and his selflessness.

This was roughly the time that we in the *Daily Chronicle* came into contact with Makhan Singh, and in which the *Daily Chronicle* increasingly became a mouthpiece for his ideas on trade unionism, the foundations of social justice, and freedom. What was remarkable about him in those days was that, although he was deeply concerned about the fight for freedom from British colonial rule, he was equally concerned about what would happen *after* this freedom was won. What kind of a society would there be in Kenya after independence?

And here, let us go back to that dramatic court scene in Nyeri in 1950, where the colonial government’s latest attempt to deport Makhan Singh was taking place.

If you read the charge sheet today, it is a rag-bag of all sorts of allegations which lacked substance. What comes across is just how little the Crown had against him. A lot of the charges were related to the fact that he was a self-proclaimed communist, and that he had been detained in India during the war because of his political activities. But, of course, as the judge had to admit, being a communist was not illegal in Kenya.

The other reason given as to why he should be deported was that he had advocated the use of unconstitutional or illegal means to secure changes. According to the charge sheet, he devoted his energy to building a mass movement. But the same charge sheet admitted that he took great care to stay within the law, even applying to the police for permission to carry out demonstrations. Of course, he had threatened the use of strikes, but then only as a last resort and even then, sought to make use of reforms allowing legal strike action.

So, what emerged from these two points was that he was to be deported because one, he was a communist, which was not illegal, and two, because he planned to use the strike weapon as a last resort, which was a very flimsy argument. Still, the government tried to make the allegations stick.

The final judgement admitted that being a communist was not an offence, but settled on the claim that Makhan Singh was an unscrupulous person, self-seeking, who was seducing half-educated Africans into ideas which were against good order and good governance. But the court was still not able to deport him: Judge Thacker ordered that Makhan Singh be relocated to, and isolated in, a remote area within the colony. And so, the Kenyan colonial government of the mighty British Empire had failed to deport this one quiet man; in the end it had to be content with exiling him within the country he wished to live, to the inhospitable north.

Today, many are unfamiliar with the name of Makhan Singh, and the reasons why he must be accounted one of the great heroes of Kenya and the anti-colonial struggle.

But the colonial government had absolutely no doubts on this score. Makhan Singh was put away for 11 years, far longer than the Kapenguria Six accused of organising the Mau Mau armed rebellion of the 1950s; the Six included Jomo Kenyatta, the middle-class nationalist, Fred Kubai, the militant trade unionist, and Bildad Kaggia. Tried two years later than Makhan Singh but by the same judge, they got seven years in jail. Kenyatta was, of course, the leader of the Kenyan African Union, formed in 1944; Kubai was also a leading member. It was banned in the 1950s and re-established as the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in 1960. While the British were willing to negotiate a settlement with Kenyatta, they wanted Makhan Singh out of public life for good.

The Law, the Races and the Empire

Let me make another point here. I have so far been telling you about how the Kenyan government officials wished to deport Makhan Singh, but could not simply seize him and send him out on the first aeroplane to India. This was before the State of Emergency and they had to proceed through the courts, opening themselves to a series of legal battles and defeats.

Now, this might seem to suggest – I don't know quite how to say this – that Makhan Singh, and other dissidents including the journalists at the *Daily Chronicle*, were rather lucky if you consider those particular times. Suppose they had been before the bench in the Belgian Congo at that time, or in the Portuguese territories like Mozambique, or in French-ruled Algeria: would the authorities have persevered with trying to make solid cases against them, and take them through proper court processes? Doesn't this show something about British rule, something of the dignity of the rule of law in the Empire, and that the people we play cricket with can't be all bad? I mean, this was the "fair play" the British Empire claimed to stand for, a liberal Empire.

Now that many of the relevant official documents are in the public domain, we can see there is some truth to this explanation – but there were other forces at work as well. What exactly did the Governor of British Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell, and the colonial administration broadly, think about having to carry out these legal processes? There is a dispatch from Sir Mitchell to the Colonial Secretary, in which he talked in very angry terms about his frustration at not being able to deal with Makhan Singh and the writers at the *Daily Chronicle* by simply sending them to the Tower Hill jail. He claimed that having to handle these things through the courts and so on was frustrating. The replies from the Colonial Office, which you can also see now, are very revealing. They did mention the importance of due legal processes but also show that other considerations were at work as well – especially the need to manage race relations in a particular way.

Officials thought of Kenya as divided between three groups. There were the European settlers, the whites, who dominated commercial farming through estates in the Highlands. The colonial government had to be careful about their feelings and power. Then there were the Indians – who we began to call "Asians" after the partition of India – on which the colony relied very heavily for administrative and professional services; they also ran the retail sector. Both groups had some legal rights, and direct representation in the government, and so had some constitutional means to raise issues.⁵

The Colonial Office was also wary of repercussions in India arising from any perceived maltreatment of Indians anywhere in the Empire. This was a consideration both before and after India's independence and partition in 1947. The new Commonwealth Office kept reminding the Colonial Office of this issue, and this was duly communicated to the Kenyan colonial government. So, the Empire was most concerned about how they dealt with the whites, and was also very sensitive to how it handled the Asians, in Kenya.

You can't attribute the actions of the men in the Kenyan colonial government and in the Colonial Office merely to the goodness of their hearts, or to timeless notions of "fair play." There were constraints of duty, of practical politics, which help explain why the government relied on adopting legal means to secure its rule where possible.

The black African majority was seen by the colonial government as a passive group. What was striking about the 1940s was the government's blindness towards black African aspirations and frustrations. It was felt that there wasn't any need to make concessions, as their struggle was believed to be at the stage of

5 Indians had some access to "constitutional means" through the complicated Kenyan colonial government system. By 1948, the Kenyan colonial government was headed by the Governor, advised by an Executive Council and an elected Legislative Council. The Executive included appointed Europeans, one appointed Indian, and one appointed European representing black Africans. From the 1920s, there were also communal i.e. racially segregated elections to the Legislative Council. Not all seats were elected, and whites had the majority of elected and non-elected seats, but Indians had a number of both elected and unelected seats from the 1920s. Black Africans were first given two seats in the 1940s, but these were unelected. Representation was to be provided primarily through African chiefs, in the system of indirect rule. *Note by editors.*

simple single issues, and divided on what officials called “tribal lines”.

Serious conflicts like the rise of militant labour struggles were believed to be the result of people being inflamed by “outside” agitators – like Makhan Singh. And so, it was thought that the black African population could be managed easily by removing the agitators.

When you read these colonial records now, it becomes clear that the colonial government gravely misunderstood things. There seems a certain blindness at work when you read the Colonial Office dispatches, and see Kenyan government reactions to developments among the black African population. They seem to have completely underestimated the kind of anger and tensions generated by the eviction of African labour tenants off white farms in the Highlands, and around overcrowding within the African reserves.

The Colonial Office relied on reports which continued to misread what was going on in the rural areas, and the conflicts around land that especially affected one particular group, the Kikuyu. These led to the Mau Mau revolt in the early 1950s, including attacks on black African loyalists and white European farmers, and the State of Emergency. Although Mau Mau was defeated, the turmoil would contribute to rapid political reforms, and, ultimately, Kenyan independence in 1963 with Jomo Kenyatta as first head of the newly independent state.

To put this into a wider context, remember that during the period of 1947-51 which I am talking about, there was a new Labour Government in power in Britain with Arthur Creech Jones as the Colonial Secretary. Arthur Creech Jones was well-known to us at the *Daily Chronicle*. In the late 1940s, when I came to the *Daily Chronicle*, we all had a great admiration for him. We read his essays in which he set up a blueprint for what ought to be done in Kenya and other colonies when Labour came to power.

Creech Jones was a former British trade unionist, on the left; he was jailed in the First World War as a conscientious objector; he was in the Independent Labour Party and was a Labour Party MP from 1935. He had a deep interest in colonial affairs, especially East Africa, and helped found Britain’s Trades Union Congress’s Colonial Affairs Committee, and then the Fabian Colonial Bureau. He proposed what were then major reforms: the East African territories should be federated, black Africans would, for the first time, get a right to vote, and there would be future colonial self-government by the inhabitants. Under the Labour government, as Colonial Secretary, he undertook some important reforms. These included legal amendments in Ghana (then the Gold Coast colony) in 1946 that made it the first colony in Africa to have a majority of elected black African members, and independence for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in Asia in 1948.

While Labour’s Britain was able to make moves towards self-government and even independence in south Asia and west Africa and so on, things were very different in the settler-dominated colonies where black African-based political movements were not very active and in which local British settlers wielded power over the colonial government. When Creech Jones visited Kenya in 1946, he faced a fierce reaction from local whites. If the Labour government forced through the liberal legislation that Creech Jones was proposing, many threatened that they would break away, with a unilateral declaration of independence. They would join up with Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and with apartheid South Africa.

It is quite clear that Creech Jones feared provoking such a situation, and moderated his positions for Kenya. So, while Ghana got sweeping electoral reforms in 1946, Kenya saw little change in the 1940s: two black African representatives were added to the Legislative Council, both unelected.

This was the context in which the trials of Makhan Singh unfolded. And one result was that Makhan Singh was exiled to a remote village, where he would be detained for more than a decade on the flimsiest grounds.

So, why was Makhan Singh such a threat at this time? Why did he get such a severe sentence? It was because he was threatening the capacity of the colonial government to manage the African side of the racial system, and seen as an “outside” agitator unduly stirring up what were believed to be passive, contented people.

“Constitutional Methods” and the Threat of a United Working-Class

The Kenyan colonial government firmly believed it could manage things, so long as black African politics was kept to single issues, not sweeping claims, so long as the black Africans were divided according to ethnic or tribal lines, so long as the Africans and Asians could be played against one another, and so long as “outside” agitators could be removed.

But Makhan Singh was a threat to this entire system. Once he started organising the masses into common, non-racial trade unions, concerned with a range of working-class issues and linking immediate problems like wages to a sweeping criticism of colonialism, things became very serious.

Makhan Singh, of course, always stressed the importance of transcending ethnic and racial divisions, whether between the Africans and Asians, or within each group. He was deeply opposed to the communal, or racially segregated, election system. Like us at the *Daily Chronicle*, he considered this to be totally unacceptable. He even went on a fast until death to try and stop such measures in Kenya. Likewise, his Labour Trade Union aimed at organising all workers, both black Africans and Indian, and even expanded into the Labour Trade Union of East Africa because it spread into Tanganyika (now Tanzania) by 1937. Makhan Singh worked with Fred Kubai, and in 1950 they further united the unions and the workers across racial lines, forming the East African Trade Union Congress, with Kubai as president and Singh as general-secretary.

Makhan Singh also wanted the name “Indian” removed from the titles of the various local Indian political associations, starting with the Indian Labour Trade Union, the East African Indian National Congress and the Indian National Association. But he also wanted to do the same for the African and European organisations. He was very, very insistent that we Kenyans must start breaking away from a thinking based on primordial and communalist identities like race, tribe, and religion. He believed in a united country, and he recognised that encouraging racial and ethnic identification was a policy adopted by colonialism in order to divide-and-rule.

We can now read the official secret reports, and it is quite evident that he was right: senior colonial officials had a clear policy of managing the Kenyan population this way. They would praise things that were done on a narrow, communal basis but whenever something became intercommunal, it was seen as a threat, and the government took action.

We see this with the ongoing repression of unions, leading into the exile and detention of Makhan Singh in the remote north. Why there? This was far away from the towns and the urban working-class, the hub of the developing unity across the barriers of race and tribe.

That said, Makhan Singh did not deny that there were contingent historical circumstances that could give ethnic consciousness a particular edge, and make it a basis for politics. I am talking of the fact that one particular tribe, the Kikuyu had suffered disproportionately from colonial land seizures, because the British decided that Kenya would be developed with large-scale European settlement, with the Highlands climatically suitable for this project. One particular tribe was dispossessed of its lands, and driven across malarial and ecological borders. Makhan Singh recognised that where one group was subject to the greatest land hunger, its members might unite on communal lines. Even if their revolt was crushed, the sacrifices and suffering could make them feel even more disadvantaged and unified.

But even so, his ideal was a unified country, with all of its inhabitants as equals and self-governing. And non-racial working-class unity was essential to this project.

What I would like to reiterate here is that Makhan Singh was a self-confessed communist: he never hid his convictions about the need for working-class struggle, and for a profound change in society.

But what did “communism” mean to Makhan Singh? He was not interested in building an underground communist movement or conspiracy, or armed struggle. As the charge sheet at Nyeri admitted, *he devoted his energy to building* a mass movement, a mass of unarmed workers to change East Africa through peaceful means like strikes.

I think this is one thing to remember: that he was a “constitutionalist” in the sense that he tactically

used what was available in the constitution and the laws then prevailing in Kenya. He defended the use and expansion of human rights.

Does this mean that we must then sharply distinguish Makhan Singh from, let's say, somebody who used unconstitutional means, like armed struggle, to win change? Makhan Singh did not think of himself as a pacifist; he was not somebody who believed in non-violence as a principle.

Instead, Makhan Singh believed that one must make an analysis of the concrete situation in any particular society, and choose the tactics accordingly. Whenever you took any kind of political problem to him, he would immediately sit down, put his head in his hands and say "Give me five minutes," and then come out with his own analysis and proposals. These were always informed by the systemic constraints as well as spaces existing in the wider society that we lived in.

In the concrete situation of Kenya in the 1930s and 1940s, he believed that there was enough room – enough space one might say – within the rules and constitution of the system to organise, politicise and mobilise against it. And he decided to push this as far as possible. Unions were a critical part of this struggle.

In this situation, Makhan Singh believed that resorting to violence would merely result in becoming trapped in a battle with the repressive colonial apparatus. He wanted to keep the colonial government from stifling the newly rising, slowly gathering power of the trade unions and other popular organisations. It was not a matter of ruling out violence in principle, but rather of the political assessment that violence was not a weapon that would secure results at this particular time.

Beyond Independence: More than Changing the Guard

In his struggle for an independent Kenya, free of the Empire, Makhan Singh also favoured the broadest possible anti-colonial front. While he wanted working-class unity, across ethnic and racial lines – and even across countries and colonies, as we have seen – he also believed that the priority in Kenya was to win independence. To do this, he believed, it was vital to bring together a broad coalition of different kinds of people. It did not matter whether they were Marxists or nationalist or liberals, or proletarian, petit bourgeois or bourgeois or African or Asian, or even European. They could and should unite to secure the first goal: the independence of Kenya from colonial rule.

This idea, this approach, was what the communists called a Popular Front to secure democratic and national goals.

But at the same time, Makhan Singh also believed that we had to pay continuous attention to the kind of society that we were going to build in Kenya after independence. He did not think that popular unity across classes for an immediate goal, should mean losing sight of what happened after that goal was achieved. While he was aware that such a discussion had to be handled carefully, so as not to threaten the Popular Front, he insisted that we should always direct our thoughts to what would happen after achieving independence.

Makhan Singh foresaw that independence would come quite a bit sooner than, I think, any of us in the anti-colonial movement had imagined at the time, or certainly sooner than anybody thought so on the official side. Creech Jones was deemed quite optimistic, thinking colonial rule could end in about 20 or 25 years. Sir Mitchell famously said it would not be in his lifetime, but maybe in his grandchildren's.

But Makhan Singh believed it would come much, much sooner, and therefore said that we must turn our thoughts right now, to what kind of society we wanted in a new Kenya.

When Makhan Singh was finally released from detention in 1961, he returned to Nairobi. When independence came in 1963, he assumed there would be a honeymoon period among the anti-colonial forces, which would provide the space for such discussions and the steps that would follow. He had been close to the African leadership in the Kenyan African Union, many of whom were also exiled and detained, and assumed that friendly relations would continue with KANU.

But this did not happen. Makhan Singh was marginalised even before independence in 1963. He

naturally thought that he would be given some sort of role, maybe as a candidate in the elections, or a role in the trade unions. But this was not to be. You can read Zarina's biography for the details, but he was pushed out of unions, and kept out of the political arena – mainly by the African nationalists around Kenyatta. After independence, he worked in inconsequential jobs, ignored by the nationalists and by many in the unions.

But Makhan Singh continued to imagine possibilities for an independent Kenya. He believed there were different options for the way in which Kenya should develop, and that these visions should be allowed to peacefully compete with each other.

I want to make the final point that it is tempting to see Makhan Singh's thinking as involving a vision of a what we would now call a strong civil society. When people remember the failure of post-independence democracies – not only in Africa but in many other post-colonial situations, and including Kenya under KANU – many believe that it was partly due to a weak civil society. They argue, rightly, that democracy has to be underpinned by a large variety of organisations, including unions independent of the state, kinship groups, and patronage.

If you look at the projects that Makhan Singh devised and encouraged in the pre-independence days, you can clearly see that he wanted all sorts of organisations to flourish and compete with each other. He wanted these to be separate from communal associations, which is why he did not want organisations titled "Asian," or "African," or "Kikuyu" or "European" or any other communal name. There would be employers' associations, trade unions, student unions, women's associations and so on, co-operatives, newspapers, etc. Even the broad anti-colonial front should bring together a range of formations, in respectful and open dialogue.

Makhan Singh did not ignore the class factor. He knew that class and money were very real, even in civil society, and so he always insisted that unless you deal with these aspects of power, they would basically lead to enormous inequalities. In a class society, there can be a great many civil organisations between the state and the individual, but they will tend to replicate and reproduce inequality unless we tackle the class fundamentals.

As Makhan Singh insisted, the real battle is between the haves and have-nots, and one of the most pernicious kinds of thinking, or false consciousness in post-colonial situations, is the kind of ethnic consciousness that misleads the people. It gives those at the bottom of the heap, no matter their civil society associations, the delusion that they can improve their positions by aligning with their ethnic group – which is of course dominated by the rich and powerful. It cripples their capacity to unite with their workmates and organise for real change.

There is no substitute for class consciousness. Conducting our politics on the basis of ethnic or racial consciousness will cripple the mass of the people's capacity to raise their demands and to secure their rights, and organise as a working-class.

The message which comes out again and again in Makhan Singh's work and life is fundamentally that a common culture and class unity has to overcome ethnic and racial consciousness and communalism, and that there must be associations that organise across these kinds of divisions. For Makhan Singh, trade unions were a crucial part of this process.

And so, we can understand then why he spent so much of his last years writing up the history of the Kenyan unions, as an example and as a record for future generations of what was possible – and what should be done.

In Closing

Just to finish: when we look back on the life of Makhan Singh, we will be tempted to think of his last years as tragic, with him being side-lined, and forgotten, and denied any opportunities to use his great skills and experiences for advancement in the lives of all Kenyans; perhaps we might see in his personal tragedy part of the larger tragedy of independent Kenya.

But I don't think Makhan Singh would have seen it in quite that way. Rather, he would have seen it as a temporary setback for himself, and in the governance of a new Kenya. He was absolutely convinced that the fight for equal rights and the betterment of all, the fight for achieving social and economic justice, was something that lived within the hearts of all human beings – and which could never be expunged.

And I think this is the kind of message he would give to us here, in our session.

Makhan Singh, Ghadar, the IWW and Communism: Legacy and Relevance to African Trade Unions Today

Professor Lucien van der Walt

Rhodes University, South Africa

This year is the centenary of the birth of a remarkable working-class figure, Mr. Makhan Singh, a pioneer of Kenyan and East African trade unionism, a champion of non-racialism, anti-imperialism and social justice. I thank you for having me here. In this lecture I will outline some of the life and achievements of Makhan Singh, examine his political views and his approach to trade unionism, and draw some lessons from this for trade unionism in Africa today: its organisation and its challenges.

This discussion will take us around the world, with stops in India, in the United States of America, and in Kenya's neighbours. I will look at a number of organisations and influences on Makhan Singh's political milieu and his politics, some direct and some less so, among them unions like the Industrial Workers of the World (or IWW) and the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, and at political groups like the revolutionary Ghadar Party, the Communist Party of India, the East African Indian National Congress, and the Kenyan African Union. Next, I will move from events a hundred years ago, and the story of the rise of Africa's trade unionism, to a consideration of today's challenges for workers and the poor.

Such a discussion requires attention to issues ranging from why unions are important, and specifically why union democracy and inclusivity are important, to strategies for change and the need for a vision and project of shifting economy and society to operate for the benefit of the popular classes.

The first part of the talk then, is to say something about Makhan Singh, to recover his life, role and the forces that shaped his beliefs.

Makhan Singh and the Indian Working-Class

There is a substantial literature on Asians in East Africa but this has tended to ignore class issues, casting all in the roles of a middleman minority, of traders, merchants and professionals.

But, as in South Africa, East Africa had a substantial Indian working-class. Indian workers came seeking jobs, bringing traditions of workplace struggle and playing a pioneering role in local unionism. Indian immigrants and workers could be found worldwide: besides East Africa, there were large communities in the United States and Canada, parts of the Caribbean, in South Africa and in East Asia.

Some, but by no means all, were locked into fixed long-term contracts. Millions of Indians (and to a lesser extent Europeans, Chinese and Japanese) were recruited for work worldwide from the 1830s under a harsh long-term contract system based on debt, called "indenture". Indentured labour was sometimes used to replace slaves, as in Jamaica, Trinidad and, Mauritius.⁶ In South and East Africa, it was used when other cheap labour was scarce. Others were sailors, who formed a very large part of the British merchant

⁶ Britain having abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in 1833, indentured labour became an attractive alternative for employers and officials. The Indian colonial government ended the South Asian wing of the system in 1917.

marine, especially in the Indian Ocean, known as the so-called *lascars*.⁷ A third group were those who migrated abroad in search of work, trade opportunities, or to study, sometimes to stay.

Around 37,000 indentured Indians worked on the Uganda railroad from 1896-1902.⁸ Many were from the Punjab, in what was then British-ruled India; today, this area is now partitioned between India and Pakistan. Sikh artisans were very important to the railway project, and had a reputation for frugality, hard work and skill. Although many of these workers returned to India, some settled, and by 1921 there were around 22 000 Indians in Kenya.

In 1900, there were a series of strikes, including one in the railways that was started by white workers, and joined by some black and Indian workers.⁹ Others followed, often centred on Mombasa, and usually based in the key nodes of the emerging colonial economy: the docks, public works and railways. The central role in these early strikes was played by “skilled and semi-skilled workers,” who were “predominantly Indian.”¹⁰

Just as immigrant European workers helped launch trade unionism in southern Africa, immigrant Indian workers formed the first union in eastern Africa, called the Indian Trade Union, in 1914.¹¹ This preceded unions amongst white workers in Kenya (starting with the 1919 Workers Federation of British East Africa) and black Africans (dating to the 1930s, despite some earlier efforts).

The 1914 union was short-lived, but it was not the last. In the early 1920s, Sudh Singh, a Sikh from the Punjab, helped organise the Railway Artisans Union, partly in protest against racially discriminatory wages paid to the Indians. By this stage, there had also been the rise of political protest associations in Kenya, amongst Asians (the East African Indian National Congress, which held its first conference in 1914), and black Africans (the East Africa Association, established in 1921).

We miss this story when we assume the Indians were a homogenous group, or all members of a privileged class or alien minority. As part of the emerging nation, and its working-class, Indian workers would make an important contribution to politics and resistance.

Unions and Workers under Colonial Rule

In colonial Kenya, wage levels varied by race, which correlated with skill, as well as by urban status. Racial disparities in pay, conditions, and rights were common in the same jobs, even amongst skilled workers. Workers and unions operated in the context of highly authoritarian – indeed despotic – labour relations, marked by racial discrimination and low wages. Low wages and authoritarian workplaces, as well as class divisions, were an essential part of colonial capitalism and state-building.¹² Of course, they did not end with the attainment of independent statehood in Kenya in 1963, or elsewhere, as we shall see.

Unions were outside the law in Kenya before 1937, faced vociferous employer opposition, and battled in a divided, stratified working-class. There was no formal job colour bar, but there was racist discrimination in wages for the same job, and whites and Indians predominated in administrative, supervisory, and skilled jobs.¹³ As in southern Africa, the lowest wages were for the migrant black Africans who retained homes in the countryside. Racist laws like the *kipande* registration system played a crucial role in the cheap black African labour system.

Despite the migrant labour system, there was the steady growth of a permanent urban black African

7 Hyslop, J. 2009. Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c.1880-1945. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, volume 44, number 1, pp. 49-67.

8 Northrup, D. 1995. *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*. University of Cambridge Press: Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, p. 146.

9 Zeleza, T. 1993. The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya: The Era of the General Strikes. *Transafrican Journal of History*, volume 22, p. 5.

10 Zeleza, 1993. The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya, pp. 5-6.

11 Patel, Z. 2006. Unquiet: *The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi: Zand Graphics/ African Books Collective, p. 57.

12 See for example, Zeleza, 1993, The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya, pp. 9-10.

13 Mboya, T. 1956. Kenyan Trade Unions Fight for Freedom. *Africa Today*, volume 3, number 2, p. 2.

working-class, increasingly based in the bigger cities, like Nairobi, usually in grim, depressing slums. Although strike action and then trade unionism became a central part of urban black African life, repression was a common response by the state: in 1922, during a mass strike, over 100 protestors were shot and killed.¹⁴

So, it was not smooth sailing. It is not surprising that Sudh Singh's union was not successful, closing down in 1923. But where does Makhan Singh fit into this picture? Sudh Singh, having migrated to Kenya in 1920, and settled in Nairobi, brought over his young family, including his son, in 1927.

This was Makhan Singh. Born in 1913 in the Punjab, he came to Kenya at the age of 14, scion of a Sikh family. They formed part of a local Indian population that would rise to over 130 000 by the mid-1950s, compared to just 40 000 Europeans and six million black Africans.¹⁵

Makhan Singh was "an unusually socially conscious young man," influenced by several key sets of ideas.¹⁶ For one, he was influenced by Sikhism's stress on universalism, justice and charity. But another was the trade unionism and anti-colonialism of his father and the working-class of India. His father told him of key events in the Indian national struggle, including the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre of Indians at the Sikh holy city of Amritsar.¹⁷ And a third was the radical current in Indian politics, both in India, but also across the larger Indian diaspora.

Beyond Gandhi: Insurrectionists, Class Struggle and the Ghadar Party

Today, Indian resistance politics is often seen in terms of a simple story of the rise of Mohandas Gandhi and his politics of non-violence, starting with his activities in South Africa, and then moving onto his subsequent activities in India from 1915. This usually feeds into a nationalist narrative, in which the story of Indian politics in India gets reduced to the story of the Indian National Congress, with which Gandhi associated himself, and its leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the first Prime Minister of independent India in 1947.

Left out of this story was a more radical left-wing of the independence and working-class movement, distinguished – I would argue – by its focus on the struggles of the working-class and peasantry, its scepticism towards the Congress nationalists and their elite leaders, and its aspirations towards a profound change in society. They aspired towards far more than replacing a British Governor with an Indian Prime Minister; they sought a meaningful redistribution of wealth and power to the popular classes.

Although some of these radicals were willing to use violent methods, this was not a matter of principle: most of their activities were peaceful. Violent methods of struggle were also not enough to define a current as left-wing. Armed struggle, after all, was also used by right-wing forces in the independence movement. These included Vinayak Savarkar's exclusivist *Hindutva* current, associated with the 1948 assassination of Gandhi for being too generous to Muslims, and the ancestor of today's ruling right-populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

But Gandhi, a relative latecomer into Indian independence politics, also had many critics on the left. He opposed those who had long sought the violent overthrow of the British power.¹⁸ They were target of

14 Stichter, S. 1974. Trade Unionism in Kenya, 1947-52: The Militant Phase. In Gutkind, P., Cohen, R. and Copans, J. (eds.) *African Labour History*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, pp. 156-157

15 Mboya, 1956, Kenyan Trade Unions, p. 4.

16 Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, p. 31.

17 Hindpal S. Jabbal, 4 December 2013, talk on his father, Makhan Singh, at the second Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture, Louis Leakey Memorial Hall, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya.

18 See, for example, Hees, P. 1992. The Maniktala Secret Society: An Early Bengali Revolutionary Group. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, volume 29, number 3, pp. 349-370; Silvestri, M. 2000. 'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal. *The Journal of British Studies*, volume 39, number 4, pp. 454-486; Puri, H.K. 2008. The Influence of Ghadar Movement on Bhagat Singh's Thought and Action. *Pakistan Vision*, volume 9, number 2, pp. 70-84.

his famous book 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, precisely because they always had a “huge impact politically.”¹⁹

One of the most important radical formations – one with which Makhan Singh had direct links²⁰ – was the Ghadar Party formed in 1913. It was not formed in India, but in the United States of America, where substantial Indian migration started in the early 1900s. Most migrants were Punjabi Sikhs; there were a mere 10 000 South Asians in North America by 1914,²¹ far less than in Kenya or South Africa. The word Ghadar means “mutiny” or uprising, and you can get a sense of the Party’s temper from an early issue of its newspaper which in 1914 asked for:²²

... brave and self-sacrificing warriors who can raise revolt ...
Salary: death;
Reward: martyrdom;
Pension: freedom;
Field of battle: Hindustan [i.e. India]

The Ghadar Party was also a global party; most members were Sikhs, but it included atheists, Hindus and Muslims. The party operated across the larger Indian world, with notable Ghadar groups in the United States, Afghanistan, China and Japan, and networks in Africa and elsewhere.²³ In colonial India itself, it was centred in the Punjab area, which was also the location of the imperial capital, Delhi.

By 1915, Ghadar Party publications were being distributed in Egypt, Madagascar, Morocco, Reunion, South Africa, the Sudan and East Africa.²⁴ Notably, Kenya was a Ghadarite hub.²⁵

What were the politics of the Ghadar Party? It was influenced by a range of ideas, and what it stood for could sometimes depend on who you asked. The party also shifted over time, and even then, does not easily fit into any pre-existing model; it was something new and distinctive.²⁶

However, it is still possible to identify some consistent themes, among them a commitment to decolonisation in the interests of the popular classes. That is, while the Ghadar Party was deeply opposed to the British Empire, it believed that the anti-colonial struggle should be waged by the mass of the people, i.e. the working-class, the peasants and the poor. Secondly, this struggle should lead to a new society, both independent of Britain *and* based on economic and social equality, direct democracy and solidarity.

In short, the Ghadar Party’s aim was not replacing colonial masters with local masters, but creating a society without masters.²⁷ Initially – despite its occasionally violent language – the party anticipated slowly building up its forces, focusing on propaganda and organisation.

However, the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 between Germany and Britain, and

19 Hyslop, J. 2011. An ‘Eventful’ History of *Hind Swaraj*: Gandhi between the Battle of Tsushima and the Union of South Africa. *Public Culture*, volume 23, number 2, pp. 300, 305.

20 See especially Patel, Z. 2008. “Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites.” Paper presented at “Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean” conference, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, 20-23 August, p. 3. This paper is published in revised form in this volume.

21 Ramnath, M. 2011, *From Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*. Berkeley, New York, London: University of California Press, p. 17.

22 Ramnath, 2011, *From Haj to Utopia*, p. 1.

23 British intelligence compiled a fascinating list of Ghadar adherents, or suspected supporters worldwide: Director’s Intelligence Bureau, 1934, *The Ghadr Directory: Containing the Names of Persons who have Taken Part in the Ghadr Movement in America, Europe, Africa and Afghanistan as well as India*, New Delhi: Government of India Press. Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, p. 44 gives an idea of the rapid spread of Ghadar publications in Africa by 1915: copies were reported in Egypt, Madagascar, Morocco, Reunion, South Africa, Sudan and Kenya.

24 Ramnath, 2011, *Haj to Utopia*, p. 44.

25 The activities of the Ghadar Party in East Africa have never been specifically studied, and is almost completely absent in the substantial literature on the Ghadar movement; its secretive nature makes its activities difficult to piece together; Makhan Singh was approached to write its history, but never did so: see Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 377-378.

26 The evolution of Ghadar politics is the focus of Ramnath, 2011, *Haj to Utopia*.

27 Ramnath, 2011, *From Haj to Utopia*, pp. 41, 52-53, 60, 62-69, 120, 134-135, 155-156, 162-165; also see Singh, B. 2011. The Anti-British Movements from Gadar Lehar to Kirti Kisan Lehar: 1913-1939. PhD thesis, Punjabi University, chapter 6.

their allies and empires, seemed to provide a perfect opportunity to break British power. The Ghadar Party now organised an armed revolt in India itself, focused on the Punjab, preceded by a steady return of Ghadarites from across the globe. Efforts were made to subvert Indian troops in the colonial forces, and there were armed attacks on British officials.

This was one of several anti-colonial rebellions that sought to take advantage of the British Empire's war, and which were emboldened by promises of German guns and other aid.²⁸ The best known is probably the Easter Rising in 1916 in Ireland, led by the revolutionary syndicalist James Connolly, other trade unionists, and Irish Republicans, forces with which Ghadar Party had close ties.

These revolts failed, and the Ghadar Party was repressed across the British Empire, as well as in the United States. In Kenya, where the *Ghadar* paper circulated, 15 Indians were charged with being members of the Ghadar Party, and, following a court martial, three were shot, two hanged, eight jailed, one fined and 20 deported.²⁹

The Kenyan Ghadarites then, understandably, became highly secretive, which allowed its members to work without hindrance and travel abroad without restriction.³⁰ Internationally, the Ghadar movement survived as well, despite repression and a split in the United States by early 1917.³¹ Despite these challenges, the movement's press was revived, and it again grew rapidly in influence in India from the late 1920s.

Makhan Singh never publicly declared an affiliation to the Ghadar Party, nor did he mention it in his personal papers, but he was very close to Kenyan Ghadarites Gopal Singh, Vasudev Singh and Kavi Prem Singh.³² He was also active in the East African Indian National Congress, which included Ghadarites – among them two founder members. He was an avid reader of left-wing and trade union newspapers from Britain, India and South Africa. These included *Kirti* ("Worker"), which was published in the Punjab by a Ghadar-linked group which went on to found the *Kirti Kisan Lehar* (Workers and Peasants Party) in 1928.³³

Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)

Ghadar ideology was a complicated and shifting ideological mixture including Indian nationalism and egalitarian ideas from religion.³⁴ But one of the most important influences on the early Ghadar Party was the IWW, a revolutionary trade union founded in the United States in 1904.

Like the Ghadar Party, the IWW was a global movement, with active IWW unions in Australia, Canada, the United States and South Africa.³⁵ It was not just based in English-speaking countries, as powerful IWW unions emerged in Chile and Mexico. The IWW also had networks and supporters elsewhere, including Britain, Ireland, New Zealand and China. Connolly, who was executed in 1916, was in the IWW in the United States and helped to carry its ideas into the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. The IWW also influenced other unions, notably the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (the ICU), which was founded in South Africa in 1919 and spread into Basutoland (now

28 German colonial rule, as seen in eastern Europe and parts of Africa, was brutal, but the German state was willing to aid anti-colonial movements that disrupted Britain and her allies: *realpolitik* suggested a common enemy. The failed Afrikaner rebellion in South Africa in 1914, also supported by Germany, was another of these struggles.

29 Patel, 2008, "Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites." Also see Patel, Z. 1997. *Challenge to Colonialism: The Struggle of Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee for Equal Rights in Kenya*. Nairobi: Publishers Distribution Services, p. 80.

30 British intelligence named five Ghadarites who had lived in, or were living in, East Africa including one in Uganda and one in Tanganyika: Director's Intelligence Bureau, 1934, *The Ghadr Directory*.

31 amnath, 2011, *From Haj to Utopia*, p. 62.

32 See Patel, 2008, "Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites" for a key analysis.

33 A recent paper puts it thus: the party was "a both a successor and an allied organisation of the Ghadar movement," and the link between two continued into the 1940s. See Raza, A. 2020, Provincializing the International: Communist Print Worlds in Colonial India. *History Workshop Journal*, number 89, p. 145. *Note by the editors*.

34 On the influence of Sikhism, see Grewal, J.S., Puri, H.K. and Banga, I. (eds.). 2013. *The Ghadar Movement: Background, Ideology, Action and Legacies*. Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University.

35 Some of this story is covered in Cole, P., Struthers, D. and Zimmer, K. (eds.). 2017. *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW*. Pluto Press: London/ University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Lesotho), Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe, respectively), and South West Africa (now Namibia).³⁶

The IWW was a revolutionary syndicalist union: its ideas traced back not to Karl Marx, but his rival, the anarchist or syndicalist Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin argued for a bottom-up trade unionism that would help win rights and better wages and conditions – but which would also prepare the workers to take over – and run – the farms, factories, mines, railways, offices and so on, through the *unions*.

Bakunin rejected political parties and he rejected the idea that freedom could come from the government. But he also rejected capitalism. What he proposed was, to put it in today's language, that a strong civil society based amongst the mass of the people should defend the people, and extend their power over society, the economy and key decisions, through autonomous organs of popular power. He advocated politics *at a distance* from the state, with the ultimate aim of a revolutionary change in society. Rather than simply replace one set of bosses and politicians with another, the aim was to replace bosses and politicians with a decentralised, bottom-up society based on common ownership and control.

In terms of unions, Bakunin's core idea was that the union structures themselves could themselves form the nucleus of a new society. And since that new society was to be democratic, egalitarian, inclusive and fair, the unions built today had to be democratic, egalitarian and fair. Unions could be “the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world ... creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself.”³⁷ A bottom-up and participatory style of trade unionism was not just, for Bakunin, the most effective form of unionism, but also the type of unionism that *prefigured* a new, better society.

This approach, which was later called “anarcho-syndicalism” or “revolutionary syndicalism,” was what the IWW was all about. The IWW argued that unions should be built on the basis of independence from outside funders, political parties and governments.

What the IWW (and Bakunin) wanted was a union movement based on an informed and active membership, relying on their own efforts to win changes through direct actions like protests, rather than relying on the courts, funders, politicians and laws. The union should be as “flat” as possible, rely on active member participation through democratic and participatory structures and processes, and limit the power and number of full-time leaders. This was the context in which IWW activists – when asked to point out their leaders, so that they could be arrested – would say: “We are all leaders, arrest us all.”

The aim was to build “One Big Union” that would promote maximum working-class solidarity across the divisions of race, country, culture, language, creed (religion), sex, skill and age. It would even include the unemployed, and it would straddle the whole globe. This was partly to maximise working-class counter-power, but also makes sense when we recall that the IWW wanted, like Bakunin, to create a new society from below. This co-operative commonwealth would allow self-management at work, and a democratically planned, post-capitalist, economy. This was very different from the state ownership, central planning and repressive, paranoid one-party system later seen in so-called “Communist” countries. And it would not be possible without the active participation of the majority, organised in One Big Union.

The IWW had a direct and long-lasting influence on anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements in a range of countries, including Ireland, Mexico, Kenya and South Africa, the latter two especially through its influence on movements like the ICU and the Ghadar Party. Lala Har Dayal, an anarcho-syndicalist who ran the Bakunin Institute in California, and who was a leading figure in the IWW, was co-founder of the Ghadar Party and one of its first leaders.

Har Dayal advocated, much as Bakunin had, the “establishment of communism, and the abolition of private property in land and capital through industrial organisation and the General Strike” (that is, through syndicalism), the “establishment of free fraternal cooperation, and the ultimate abolition of the

36 For a synthesis and comparative analysis: van der Walt, L. 2014. ‘One Great Union of Skilled and Unskilled Workers, South of the Zambezi’: Garveyism, Liberalism and Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, 1919-1949. Paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Vienna, Austria, 23-26 April.

37 Bakunin, M. 1980. *Bakunin on Anarchism*. 2nd edn. Black Rose Books: Montréal, p. 255.

coercive organisation of Government,” “the abolition of patriotism and race feeling,” and the “complete” freedom of women through the removal of “institutions based on the enslavement of women.”³⁸

It was, above all, through the Ghadar Party that anarchism and syndicalism influenced Indian (and East African) politics, both through its own activities and through its impact on later groups, like the *Kirti Kisan Lehar* (Workers and Peasants Party), and later figures, like Bhagat Singh, hanged by the Indian colonial government in 1931.³⁹

Makhan Singh's Union Work

From 1935, Makhan Singh threw himself into active union work in Kenya: that is, at the age of 22. Nairobi became increasingly important as a centre of strike and union activity. The role of the cities, workers and the unions in the East African struggle for independence has often been forgotten by official histories that stress rural struggles, political parties and greater leaders. But unions were as important as movements like the 1950s Mau Mau in winning change.

In fact, Kenya was relatively urbanised and the most of the big struggles before the 1950s were urban. It “was the city, not the rural hinterlands, that was the crucible of the mass strikes that were so feared and detested by government officials and businessmen,” driven by the doubling of the urban working-class from the late 1930s, and spreading into the armed forces.⁴⁰ Mau Mau itself would later draw on trade union networks and the urban working-class (see below).

Makhan Singh served as the secretary of the militant Labour Trade Union, which aimed at organising both black Africans and Indians. From 1937 it was described as the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, as it had spread into Tanganyika (now Tanzania).⁴¹ The first durable union in East Africa,⁴² it was overtly aligned with black African workers, with mass strikes, and with liberation organisations, and took great care to issue its media in a range of languages, among them Swahili. That same year, it organised a two-month long strike for the eight-hour day and higher wages. It published a short-lived paper called, significantly, the *East African Kirti*.

Kenya legalised unions in the late 1930s, partly as an attempt to bring them under greater state control. Registered unions were obliged to open their books to the government; they could call legally protected strikes in certain conditions, but faced very hostile employers.⁴³

Government efforts to distance unions from politics had very limited success. The Labour Trade Union of East Africa registered but refused to moderate its approach, and grew to over 10 000 members in 16 unions by 1948. This was part of a larger, rapid growth in number of strikes and worker organisations before and during the Second World War. The union movement increasingly overlapped with nationalist groups like the Kenyan African Union, which was formed in 1944 and led by Jomo Kenyatta from 1947. For example, the African Workers Federation led by Chege Kibachia – who was also active in the Kenya African Union – organised a massive strike in Mombasa in 1947. Kibachia and others were arrested, and the colonial government refused to register the union.

Trade unions were increasingly forced to choose between registering with the Kenyan colonial government, securing some legal rights by avoiding political issues, or remaining unregistered but independent. The authorities and white employers always viewed Makhan Singh and the Labour Trade Union of East Africa with great suspicion, due to the open support for strikes and for taking political

38 Ramnath, M. 2012. *Decolonising Anarchism: An Anti-Authoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle*, San Francisco: AK Press, pp. 94-95.

39 E.g. Puri. 2008, “The Influence of Ghadar Movement,” pp. 70-84.

40 Zeleza, 1993, *The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya*, pp. 6-10.

41 The regional dimension of the union, and its successors, work is discussed in Gona, G. 2008. Towards a Concrete East African Trade Union Federation: History, Prospects and Constraints. *African Studies*, volume 66, numbers 2-3.

42 Zeleza, 1993, *The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya*, p. 7.

43 Mboya, 1956, *Kenyan Trade Unions*, pp. 2-3.

positions, such as opposing the arrest of Kibachia and others.

Makhan Singh's work with a wide range of unions and unionists helped lay the basis for the 1949 launch of the East African Trade Union Congress, which united black African and Asian workers and unions, and brought together many of the workers involved in the strike wave of the 1940s. It included the Labour Trade Union, which had affiliates in Kenya and Tanganyika and contacts in Uganda, and it was launched on May Day. Fred Kubai, Kenyan African Union nationalist, was president; Singh, radical socialist and internationalist, was secretary.

By this time, Makhan Singh had moved to a much more clearly Marxist position. This was by no means a foreordained shift. Anarchism and syndicalism had been rather more influential than Marxism in much of the world before 1917, including in parts of Africa, but the Bolsheviks' supposed success in the Russian Revolution fundamentally changed the picture. A number of anarchists, syndicalists, and IWWs moved to Communism, which also exercised growing influence on the Ghadar Party. Several leaders of the *Kirti Kisan Lehar* went for training in Moscow. The party also developed links with the Indian Communist Party (CPI), although it retained some anarchist and syndicalist imprints, like an interest in workplace self-management and decentralisation.⁴⁴ Indeed, despite growing links with the CPI, the Ghadar Party remained a "stubbornly autonomous alternate left formation."⁴⁵

Makhan Singh read widely, including the papers of the various Communist Parties. He also became close to Indian Communists from South Africa like Yusuf Dadoo and G.M. Naicker. In 1939, Makhan Singh visited India, partly for family reasons. He was repeatedly detained and jailed there by the British colonial government for his labour and other political activities; as a result, he only returned to Kenya in 1947. At some stage during his Indian trip he joined the Communist Party of India, and he publicly referred to himself as a "communist" on several occasions after his return to Kenya.

The Kenyan government did its best to expel him from the colony after his return, but he remained very active despite this relentless pressure. Besides the unions, Makhan Singh threw himself into letters to the press, a political struggle in the East African Indian National Congress, efforts to form tenants' unions in poor neighbourhoods, the founding of a Kenya Youth Congress, in giving talks and running study circles, and efforts towards a co-operative chicken and fruit farm.⁴⁶

The colonial authorities were alarmed when the East African Trade Union Congress became the first organisation to call for complete independence. In 1950, Makhan Singh spoke at a joint rally of the federation, the East African Indian National Congress, and the Kenyan African Union which attracted 20 000 people, and resolved on the need for the "complete independence" of Britain's East African territories.⁴⁷ By this stage, the East African Trade Union Congress had around 12 000 members.⁴⁸ The resolution was inspired by Singh, who emphasised the need to create a new, non-racial nation and for united action against colonialism.

Kubai and Singh were arrested, triggering an unprecedented 10-day protest general strike, and which also demanded economic and political reforms. This started strongly on 16 May 1950, and drew in all the main towns and perhaps 100,000 workers.⁴⁹ The Crown, unable to deport Makhan Singh, sentenced him to internal exile in the far north of the colony where he languished until 1961.

The colony went into a State of Emergency from 1952; the East African Trade Union Congress was suppressed. Radicals like Bildad Kaggia, Kubai and Pio Gama Pinto were involved in efforts to relaunch the congress as the Kenya Federation of Registered Trade Unions in 1952.⁵⁰ The State of Emergency followed the rise of the Mau Mau, which was based in the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, but

⁴⁴ Ramnath, 2011, *From Haj to Utopia*, pp. 163-165.

⁴⁵ Ramnath, 2011, *From Haj to Utopia*, p. 140; also, Singh, 2011, "The Anti-British Movements," chapter 7

⁴⁶ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 134-139, 143-144, 200-204, 213, 139-142.

⁴⁷ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 222-227.

⁴⁸ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, p. 224.

⁴⁹ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 232-236.

⁵⁰ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 333-340.

also had a presence in cities like Nairobi, in KAU and in some unions.⁵¹ Kaggia, Kubai and Kenyatta were among the Kapenguria Six jailed in 1952 in the crackdown on the Mau Mau.

The Marginalisation of Workers, Unions and Makhan Singh in the Independence Settlement

Unions survived the repression of the 1950s. Kenyans like Tom Mboya (who led the Kenya Federation of Registered Trade Unions, subsequently renamed the Kenya Federation of Labour) even helped spread unions into Uganda. Nonetheless, organised labour was significantly weakened by the end of the decade. It was also fractured, starting with the 1958 split in the Kenya Federation of Labour.

The nationalists were the main beneficiaries of the political reform process that started in 1957. The Kenyan African Union, driven underground in 1952, was re-established as the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in 1960 and soon became the dominant party. Mboya, a moderate pro-Western figure, became a leading politician: Minister of Labour in 1962, he was promoted to Minister for Economic Planning and Development when Kenya became independent in 1963.

Under the KANU government, and Kenyatta, the country moved steadily towards a one-party state. Despite new laws banning racial discrimination and Africanising the state bureaucracy, as well as guaranteeing minimum wages and other rights, the material conditions of the great majority of the people barely changed.

A new black African elite replaced the colonial masters. Its leading figures had little interest in democracy. KANU viewed independent trade unions as a threat, forcing all unions into a single government-run Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) in 1965, with the assistance of Mboya.

This step also closed down the unions' cross-border activities and structures, and gravely compromised their role as defenders of workers. And so, the independent, bottom-up and worker-organised and -controlled unionism that Makhan Singh had insisted upon came to an end.

Cheap labour, authoritarian workplace relations and class inequality persisted long after colonialism ended. The new elite actively exploited divisions of ethnicity and region to split the popular classes, and indulged in fiercely anti-Asian rhetoric; it played up its patriotic credentials while working closely with British and United States interests in the region.

Those in the new government who favoured a more radical approach were dealt with harshly: Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was pushed out of office, and later jailed; Pinto, who had founded the KANU newspaper *Sauti Ya KANU* in 1960, was assassinated in 1965. As battles over the power and the spoils of office intensified, Mboya himself came under attack, culminating in his murder in 1969.

Other left-wing dissidents like Makhan Singh were silenced in the new order. Even their role in the liberation struggle was written out of the regime's new patriotic history: according to this narrative, the liberation struggle began and ended with black African nationalists -- and above all, with Kenyatta, who became life-time President.

And so, Makhan Singh, almost forgotten, died in obscurity in 1973.

Against Forgetting a Useable Past

In this final section, I want to draw out two main sets of issues: first, what were the core elements of Makhan Singh's highly successful model of unionism? And second, what explains why unions and workers have generally been marginalised after independence? And what can we learn from these experiences?

⁵¹ Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, pp. 333-334, 337. On the union/ Mau Mau link, see also Stichter, S. 1975. Workers, Trade Unions, and the Mau Mau Rebellion. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, volume 9, number 2, pp. 259-275.

A Few Lessons from African Labour History: Building Effective Unions

Makhan Singh's unionism had several key elements.

First, like the Ghadar Party and the IWW, he opposed sectionalism and divisions, understanding that effective unions required unity across the boundaries of skills, sex, race, religion, ethnicity, country and political views. At the same time, such unity had to be based on a serious understanding of the IWW slogan that "An injury to one is an injury to all." No worker benefits in a fundamental sense from the suffering of another.

For example, neither immigrant nor local worker benefits from the immigrant getting lower wages. The one is underpaid, while the other's wages and rights are pushed downwards in a race-to-the-bottom that sees overall conditions decline. The local worker has more rights, but does not enjoy "privilege" at the expense of the immigrant. Both sections lose when divided into two hostile camps.

The solution is to organise *both* together, for equal wages and rights, removing the competition and benefitting both. This does *not* mean ignoring the specific, extra burdens one section faces – for example, the immigrant is probably forced into low wages by a lack of rights, official discrimination and threats – but fighting, *specifically*, against those burdens. It's a matter of finding what workers have in common, and what they do not, and tackling both – not ignoring specific additional oppressions in the name of a supposed "unity," or treating either section as an enemy.

It is true that all workers share much in common, such as low wages and poor conditions and a lack of a real say in their society, and this is precisely one of the facts that provides the basis for workers; unity across divisions like race, ethnicity and gender. But, equally, it is important to identify the specific problems faced by different sections, and to unite all workers in fighting those problems, and bringing union power to bear in doing so.

Research on flower cutters in today's Kenya shows that women tend to work 4 hours longer than men, and do not get paid for this overtime.⁵² This benefits employers, harms working-class families and effectively precludes most women workers from any active role in union life. Fighting against this discriminatory, sexist treatment through union campaigns and activities is good for women, workers, and the union. Unions can provide a very powerful force to address the specific problems that each of these layers of the larger working-class faces.

Makhan Singh understood that, in the Kenyan case, colonial power and capitalism relied heavily on racial and tribal or ethnic divisions in the popular classes. He stressed what African and Asian shared: low wages, racial oppression, and colonial domination; he opposed tribal or ethnic divisions amongst black Africans, and caste and religious divisions amongst Asians.⁵³ At the same time, he highlighted the specific problems faced by black Africans, demanding equal pay for equal work, the removal of racist laws, equal rights as opposed to segregated, racist government, the end of colonial land grabs and full independence.

Makhan Singh understood that the power of the working-class was crippled by internal divides and inequalities, something we saw tragically in Kenya in 2005, for example, when politicians fostered election violence to win seats.⁵⁴ As Mukoma Wa Ngugi has noted, in such a situation, "questions of what true justice means and about the growing divide between haves and have-nots become lost to ethnicity."⁵⁵ The 2007 clashes barely affected wealthy areas, besides disrupting the availability of domestic workers, but they certainly affected the ability of the poor, including those same workers, to form unions and better

52 Gema, J. et al, 2012. *Wilting in Bloom: The Irony of Women Labour Rights in the Cut-Flower Sector in Kenya*. Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission, p. x.

53 Patel, *Unquiet*, pp. 50-52, 59, 72-73, 178.

54 Alsop, Z. and Wadhams, N. 14 September 2010. "In Kenya, Land Reform Worries Both Rich and Poor." *Time*, online at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2017820,00.html>.

55 Wa Ngugi, M. 19 January 2008. "Kenya's Nightmare." *Sendika*, online at <http://www.sendika.org/2008/01/kenyas-nightmare-mukoma-wa-ngugi/>

their conditions.⁵⁶

Second, Makhan Singh stressed the need for unions to be politically-involved, but as independent actors. He was certainly in favour of broad alliances around specific issues, as seen in joint rallies between political groups and unions, and in leveraging union power for struggles beyond the workplace, but he did not want unions to become subordinated to parties. While he was perfectly willing to use legal channels when useful – his union registered with the colonial state in the 1930s, and he spent much of the 1940s in courtroom battles against efforts at deportation – he was opposed to unions becoming excessively entangled in the system. Where necessary, he defied the law, as we have seen.

This, thirdly, was partly because he understood that unions were an essential weapon for ordinary people, partly because he wanted to end the status quo not join it, and partly because he understood that the real power of unions did not depend on a few leaders, on lawyers or on lobbying. Power rested on an active, involved, and empowered grassroots base, and on self-activity, which was the best protection against union degeneration, against undue reliance on a few leaders who could be killed or co-opted, or who could themselves capture the unions for their own selfish interests. The key to offsetting union bureaucratisation and to building strong, innovative unions that could weather rough times was to systematically develop the capacities and maximise the involvement of the majority of union members.

And without this bottom-up approach, the ability of unions to really change society was very limited. This requires, as the IWW stressed, unions operating through regular assemblies, with elected representatives like shop-stewards given clear mandates, required to make regular report-backs, and subject to recall. This requires the removal of measures restricting union democracy, such as requiring those standing for union office to pay hefty deposits.⁵⁷ It requires rejecting the style of trade unionism that favours centralisation and a top-down approach, and leaders' involvement in the state machinery and in political parties.⁵⁸

Worker education is also essential, and ideally targeted at the widest possible activist layers in the union. It should provide, on the one hand, a general, open-ended and critical political and historical education, based on debate and tolerance; on the other hand, a systematic training in basic administrative and activist skills. An ethic of sacrifice and solidarity in the face of hardship and danger, rather than careerism, sectarianism and manipulation is crucial.

Fourth, like the Ghadar Party, the IWW, and the *Kirti Kisan Lehar* (Workers and Peasants Party), Makhan Singh recognised the need for an independent, popular and lively workers' media. This could take many forms, including publications, theatre, music and broadcasts; what matters is that it exists. The Ghadar Party and the *Kirti Kisan Lehar* used their press to win adherents; local groups of readers would then distribute or produce media to grow numbers and influence. Around a million issues of the *Ghadar* newspaper were circulated every week by the mid-1910s. Likewise, the IWW published a wide range of newspapers and pamphlets, as well as making use of songs, poetry and symbols.⁵⁹

One of Makhan Singh's first acts in the Labour Trade Union in 1935 was to buy a cyclostyle machine for cheap printing and mass communication. The union disseminated materials in a range of languages and forms, from newsletters to posters to handbills. This allowed the union to speak in its own voice, avoiding reliance on press statements, limiting misrepresentations by the commercial and state media, provided a means of organising people and fostered a popular print culture. It enabled the development of a network of contacts, and the dissemination of ideas, proposals and symbols.

And this brings me to the fifth point: in modern society, power and wealth are centralised in the hands of a few, a small economic and political elite i.e. the ruling class. This includes not just capitalists but the people – the politicians as well as top officials – who run the state.

56 Rasna, W. 14 January 2008. "Not Ethnic Cleansing, but Class War." *Mail and Guardian*, online at http://web.archive.org/web/20080317161046/http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=329586&area=/insight/insight_africa/

57 Gema et al, 2012, *Wilting in Bloom*, p. 32.

58 Rocker, R. [1938] 1989. *Anarcho-syndicalism*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 85, 90-93.

59 Rosemont, F. 2003. *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working-Class Counterculture*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.

The very existence of unions is a reflection of this situation, as ordinary people join together to resist. But so long as the class system remains stubbornly in place, the problems ordinary people face will keep reappearing. Consider the United States, the wealthiest country in human history, where poverty and inequality are entrenched— and in some key respects, have been sharply increasing.

Makhan Singh, the Ghadar Party, Bakunin, the IWW, and also the Communists understood that deeper change was needed if this cycle was to end. It was essential to reshape the larger society in the interest of the workers, poor and peasantry, and unions could play a key role in this process.

It was essential to challenge divisions within the masses, which were fostered by the ruling class through a policy of divide-and-rule. It was crucial, too, that the struggle around immediate issues, whether tied to the workplace, like wages, or raising larger issues of civil and political rights, such as colonial domination, needed to be linked to the battle to change society in the longer-term.

It was important to win reforms within the existing system, such as better wages and more rights; it was important to challenge the effects of the existing system, such as poverty and landlessness. But it was essential to move union struggles towards the greater goal of *permanently* shifting the balance of power and wealth, so that the economy and society would operate for the benefit of the popular classes.

Union struggles, as the IWW pointed out, begin to shift the frontier of control, and can prefigure a new society. Pushing up wages challenges the prerogatives of management, and redistributes income; winning welfare helps redistribute wealth; struggles around political and civil rights issues both within and beyond the workplace helps unify workers, secure more equal rights and leverages unions' immense structural power as organisations based in production, the very heart of society. This requires, let me stress, inroads being made into the rights of the rich and powerful, that is, the employers and politicians and the government, who were the main beneficiaries of low wages, exploitation and oppression.

This was precisely why Makhan Singh fought for decolonisation to mean more than simply replacing white masters, landlords and capitalists with black masters, landlords and capitalists. He fought for promoted national and democratic rights, but also insisted that these were not enough; a new society required moving beyond capitalism, and beyond class.

In this struggle, unions were not enough. They did not and could not represent all of the poor and the oppressed. But when built well, unions can provide powerful allies for other movements: they have national reach, durable structures, and solid resources and democratic experience – all characteristics often lacking in other movements. Workers and their unions therefore have an interest in larger struggles around improvements in residential areas, and in larger political and civil rights struggles, and the workplace muscle to fight for change in a wide number of areas.⁶⁰

And, in place of the race-to-the-bottom fostered by neo-liberal globalisation, we can learn from the IWW the importance of internationalism. The IWW fought for a *global* minimum wage and standardised working conditions, backed up by cross-border organising by industry.⁶¹

Having grand ambitions does not remove the need for patience and planning. It is essential to exercise care and apply strategy when allocating resources and setting targets. Not all battles can be won, and some battles can only be won later. Start small, plan, and work diligently; every victory, as Connolly stressed, creates a “fortress” from which to launch new battles.⁶²

Closing Remarks: Learning from the Weaknesses in Makhan Singh's Work

Makhan Singh lived to see the elite transition in Kenya that he feared. It was not the mass of the people – the working-class, peasantry and poor – who took power but a new black African elite; land reform favoured the powerful, cheap labour, authoritarian workplaces and mass poverty continued; in place of a

60 Rucker, [1938] 1989, *Anarcho-syndicalism*, pp. 110-114.

61 Barker, T. 1923. *The Story of the Sea*. Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, pp. 66-69, 78.

62 Connolly, J. 1909. *Socialism Made Easy*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, p. 48.

unified nation, existing divisions were entrenched and inflamed; soon enough, there were no free trade unions or open elections either.

To be sure, the defeat of the British Empire was a great victory, but the fruits of the victory were not shared equally. Makhan Singh, the man, was marginalised, but so, too, were his greatest hopes.

There are, I think, several reasons for this outcome, first of which is the obvious point that this was the sort of outcome that the British imperial state wanted. It found ambitious men with whom it could make into real, emergent elites whose class interests coincided with an elite transition.

However, it is also important to admit that there were some important weaknesses in Makhan Singh's political approach. To say this is not to dismiss his incredible achievements, or to besmirch his legacy. It is to stand on his shoulders, so we can see further.

One reason was the failure of the Kenyan left, including Makhan Singh, to build an alternative, radical counter-culture centred on alternative ideas and aspirations. This profoundly limited working-class politics and policies. Even hostile colonial government reports admitted that Makhan Singh did not publicly promote his far-left views, nor did he try to form a distinct political organisation. In the 1960s, he "made not the slightest attempt" to disseminate his radical ideas "among the people," instead accepting the KANU manifesto "without the least reservation."⁶³

This cannot be explained as solely due to repression, as the local Ghadarites survived the repression of the 1910s. Makhan Singh was internally exiled in 1951, and the State of Emergency only started in 1952. In India, the Ghadar and Communist traditions withstood decades of repression. It also cannot be explained as the result of the racial factor, as some analysts suggest.⁶⁴ After all, a powerful left-wing tradition emerged in both Mozambique and South Africa. The Kenyan colonial government, for its part, clearly feared that Makhan Singh's ideas were dangerous, and could spread like wildfire amongst the black masses.⁶⁵

The effect was that nationalist formations like the Kenya Africa Union and then KANU had the field to themselves. No major alternative pole of attraction was created.

A second reason was a widespread tendency in sections of the left and Communist movements – even amongst some anarchists and syndicalists⁶⁶ – to think in terms of a two-stage struggle for national liberation.

In this schema, the first stage was independent statehood and majority rule, led by the nationalists; a second, socialist, stage was deferred to a later period. This does seem to have been how Makhan Singh approached the issues as well. His work with Kubai in the 1940s and efforts to work with Kenyatta and KANU in the 1960s bear this out as well.

The two-stage approach is convincing to many because independent statehood, a real victory, is easier to achieve than socialism and, initially, often a much more popular goal. It is also true that the achievement weakens the great empires. In addition, supporters can point to a few cases where the first "bourgeois" stage has moved quickly into a second, "socialist," stage: Russia in the 1910s, China in the 1940s and Cuba from the 1950s.

But in most cases, a two-stage approach leads to very serious problems for the left. It usually translates into the left supporting the nationalists, emphasising their loyalty and downplaying their views. The classic case is that of the South African Communist Party, which moved from a mass party at least equal in power to the nationalists in the 1940s, to serving as a junior partner to Nelson Mandela's African National Congress since the 1950s.

⁶³ See contemporary reports in Patel, 2006, *Unquiet*, p. 430.

⁶⁴ E.g. Stichter, 1975, *Workers, Trade Unions, and the Mau Mau Rebellion*, pp. 265-266.

⁶⁵ See Pyarally Rattansi, 2006. "Remembering Makhan Singh, One of the Great Heroes of Kenya," First Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture. Taifa Hall, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya, 20 March. Included in this collection.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Hwang D. 2010. *Korean Anarchism before 1945: A Regional and Transnational Approach*. In Hirsch, S.J. and van der Walt, L. (eds.). *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Post-colonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*. Brill: Leiden, pp. 95-130.

In such cases, not only does the left lose independence and power, but the socialist stage is endlessly deferred to an unspecified future time. The two-stage approach also lends itself to illusions that the more radical nationalists – men like Nelson Mandela, Abdul Nasser and Jaramogi Odinga – would adopt elements of socialism. The effect of these ideas is that the left focusses on winning over the nationalists, rather than building an independent mass base and alternative project.

The problem here is that the nationalists, however left-leaning, represent a very different project and class agenda when compared to the left. Anti-colonial nationalist movements are dominated by local elites whose class interests are frustrated by imperialism. Their aim is not to abolish the class system, but to (re) claim what they regard as their rightful place at the head of the state, and in the commanding heights of the economy. Capture of state power is essential to nationalist goals, while a powerful and independent left is a threat to these goals, as it challenges the power of local as well as foreign elites.

As a result, the achievement of the first stage often creates *new* barriers to the achievement of the second stage; it does not open the door, but adds new locks. It is not accidental that the nationalist parties, once having taken office, become the core of a new ruling elite that is hostile to the left project. As argued by Bakunin in the 1860s, and Frantz Fanon a century later,⁶⁷ after independence, a new local ruling class takes power – and is initially largely recruited from among the “young patriots” of the main anti-colonial party.

This is not a betrayal, nor the product of false consciousness, but the concrete expression of the class aspirations of local elites frustrated by imperialism. The basis of the social relations of exploitation and inequality remain unchanged. The “iron logic” of the local elites’ positions in the ruling class, Bakunin argued, soon turns yesterday’s heroic nationalists into “cynical bureaucratic martinets” and “enemies of the people.”⁶⁸

So, we see in Kenya today, as the 50th anniversary of independence arrives, the masses remain oppressed, while unions, the obvious champion of popular struggles, still struggle to recover from their defeats in the 1960s-1980s.

The alternative, the road not taken, is to build an independent left project, to win the working-class, peasantry and poor to a new worldview i.e. a radical counter-culture, oppositional to that of the ruling classes, and to (re)build independent, effective movements that can defend the masses, and then extend popular control over the larger economy and society i.e. a counter-power. This does not preclude tactical alliances with other forces – including nationalists, in some cases – but it does require fighting the battle of ideas and autonomy from other forces.

I thank you.

67 Fanon, F. [1961] 2001. The Pitfalls of National Consciousness, in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books.

68 Bakunin, M. 1980. *Bakunin on Anarchism*. 2nd edn. Black Rose Books: Montréal, p. 343.



The tin rondavels at isolated Maralal, northern Kenya, where Makhan Singh spent many lonely years during his 1950-1961 detention. Singh and Fred Kubai (trade unionist, involved in Mau Mau) helped form the East African Trade Union Congress in 1950. Other detainees at Maralal included Jomo Kenyatta.

Image source: Zarina Patel's collection.

The Living Wage: Problems and Prospects

Baba Aye

Public Services International (PSI), Nigeria

Introduction

Makhan Singh was a great champion of the working people, who understood that at the core of their suffering was wage labour, part of a class system based on exploitation. He championed trade unionism, class consciousness and the fight for justice, but he did not stop there. He argued that wage labour was inherently exploitative, and insisted on the need for a profound, socialist reconstruction of society in the interests of the majority.

The demand for a living wage has long been a key working-class demand. This is because *working people* make up the great majority in any capitalist society, and under capitalism, wages become the main means whereby working people secure income.

But their share of the social wealth which they create, represented by the wage share of national income, is insignificant compared to the share received by the infinitesimal minority constituting the dominant classes. These classes are largely freed from the drudgery of work; their wealth is based on appropriating a large part of the proceeds of the working masses' labour. This allows the dominant classes to enjoy the cultural advancement of society to the fullest extent. The state and its institutions defend the interests of this small group, the "1%," who employ most of the labour force.

The Rise of Wage Labour

Wage labour existed during Antiquity – the ancient world of Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome – but before the rise of capitalism, wages were not a key source of income. Wage labour expanded in the later period of the Roman Empire, but never became central to production.⁶⁹ Early philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero believed that manual labour, including for wages, brutalised body and soul.⁷⁰ Wage labour's low status was also due to the fact that it made the worker a dependent of the employer. Wage labour persisted in feudalism, but most working people in the feudal period were serfs, tied to the land and exploited by paying rent to the feudal lords.

The centrality of wage labour is peculiar to capitalism. Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution tore the feudal system asunder from the 1700s, as new factories and machines needed wage labour.

The serfs were dispossessed from the land, and became "free" labourers, no longer the subjects of one feudal lord or another, joining the working-class. Many independent craft workers, masters and journeymen alike, were run to ruin by the cheap manufactured goods made by workers using machines in large-scale capitalist production. They too joined the working-class. To feed themselves, members of

69 Banaji, J. 2007. *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 217.

70 MacMahon, A. 2012. Wage Labour. In Bagnall, P., Brodersen, K., Champion, C., Erskine, A. and Hübner, S. (eds.). *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient History*. Hoboken, New Jersey, pp. 7037–7038; also see Balme, M. 1984. Attitudes to Work and Leisure in Ancient Greece. *Greece and Rome*, volume 31, number 2, pp. 140–141, 146.

the continually growing working-class had to sell their labour power. Without a wage the typical modern worker would starve. They became “wage slaves,” only able to sustain themselves and their families by renting out their bodies and minds on a piecemeal, hourly, weekly or monthly basis. Labour power became a commodity, sold in labour markets to capitalist bosses in return for wages.

Built into this system of wage-slavery was what Karl Marx describes as the “industrial reserve army” of unemployed workers.⁷¹ In pre-capitalist societies, generalised structural unemployment was rare.⁷² But the enhanced productivity of modern industrial society spawned a surplus of people available for hire in the labour market, the reserve army. This also served as a whip in the hands of the bosses, driving down wages and frustrating strikes.

The instinctive, initial response of the working-class was to target the new machines, which they blamed for the system of wage slavery. At the inception point of capitalist development, England, this often took the form of smashing machines, particularly those in textiles, then the leading industry.

As capitalist relations became generalised, and the working-class grew, trade unions emerged, winning recognition and concessions. The core of the working-class’ economic struggles now centred on better wages, along with improved working conditions.

The quest for improved wages represented workers’ desire to overcome poverty and inequality, and their battle against precarious forms of employment. This quest has thrown up powerful reform movements with, at times, transformative possibilities. One of these – arising from the movement of working women and men, the unemployed and youth, for better livelihood, respect, dignity and a better world – has been the campaign for a living wage.

The Working-Class, Wages and Livelihoods

“Labour creates wealth”: this is the motto of the Nigeria Labour Congress, the biggest union federation in Africa. It is essentially through work i.e. conscious activity at meeting our needs and ever-increasing wants by acting on raw materials or products of earlier labour, that humans have transformed the world, and themselves.

In primitive human societies, everyone worked. This was a time, however, when life was nasty, brutish and short. A growing division of labour and enhanced ability to master nature led to an increasing capacity to produce, resulting in a surplus. But with this came the separation of society into classes, with working people who laboured to meet the needs and wants of the population. It also enabled upper classes to appropriate the lion’s share of production, through their ownership of the means of production.

In pre-capitalist societies, the bulk of production was carried out to fulfil the local needs of communities. Labour acted on nature mainly to provide use values. The market, as Karl Polanyi argued in his seminal work, *The Great Transformation*, was not central to the economy.⁷³

But with large-scale capitalist industrialisation, goods and services – as well as labour power –were produced as commodities, sold at their exchange value in markets. This was critical for the process of expanding capital and securing profits for the bosses. There are deep power differences between the buyers (employers / bosses) and sellers (employees / workers) in labour markets. The bosses inherently have the greater power, whilst the workers as individuals are weakened by being in competition with each other, especially in periods of economic crisis when there are high rates of unemployment. This situation pushes wages down to the bare minimum as possible. Wages are the key to exploitation, as they do not represent the full value added by the worker through labour, but only workers’ cost of living.

Polanyi argued that the marketisation of society in general invariably led to a counter-movement that

71 Marx, K. [1867] 2014. *Capital, Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*. Scotts Valley (California): CreateSpace Independent Publishing.

72 Garraty, J.A. 1978. *Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy*. New York: Harper and Row.

73 Polanyi, K. 1944/2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.

tried to stop or mitigate the impact of market forces.⁷⁴ Labour market institutions are part of the counter-movements and include unions, collective bargaining, regulations, laws and policies. They help determine wages and working conditions and limit the operation of market forces.⁷⁵ Wage-setting rules, including through collective bargaining frameworks, institutionalised retraining programmes, and legislation for minimum wages, unemployment insurance and employment protection are examples.⁷⁶

Much more important to note, though, is the fact that labour market institutions never emerged simply as the benevolent gifts of the bosses or their states to workers. Rather, they arose as concessions to struggles of working-class people against impoverishment and the unilateral power of employers. Trade unions, first formed in the 1800s as the primary defence organisations of workers, fought tirelessly against poverty wages and terrible working conditions, and for reduction of the workday to eight hours.

It was, above all, the organising power of the workers' movement that convinced the lords and masters of the capitalist order to grant reforms as minimum wage legislation. The initial step in this direction was taken in 1894 New Zealand when the minimum wage was instituted for the first time in any country. The United States of America also introduced statutory minimum wages in 1938, as part of its response to the Great Depression.

During the "Golden Age" of capitalism, which started after the Second World War and was associated with the Keynesian welfare state, legislated minimum wages became generalised. Today, no less than 150 countries have set minimum wages by law.

The Quest for a Living Wage in the Post-War Period

But this legislation has not translated into a living wage or major reforms that can institute such a policy. In-work poverty is still rife, as minimum wages are set at low levels. Relative poverty, marked by rising social inequality, remains the order of the day. Absolute poverty, in the sense of utter destitution, remains the norm for the most poorly-paid working-class people across the world, particularly in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and South America.

Poverty is also not simply an economic category, bad enough as even that category is. It undermines the material and cultural development of women, men and children in every way conceivable. It promotes vulnerability and social exclusion of working-class people from the fruits of human development.

It is not surprising that campaigning for a living wage has been part of the working-class movement's struggle against impoverishment and for the full fruits of workers' labour to be returned. The struggle for a living wage goes back to the 19th century, preceding and partly informing the institutionalisation of national minimum wages.

The Webbs dated it to 1870s Britain, commenting that the "doctrine of a living wage" in this period was a direct challenge to the "doctrine of supply and demand" in open markets.⁷⁷ Trade unions initiated this challenge, winning the support of their communities and even a few employers to the cause. Mark Oldroyd, a manufacturer and Liberal Party MP, was one of the reform-minded employers who championed the living wage idea. This was not a completely new development. Adam Smith, a founding father of economic liberalism, had also earlier argued for the living wage as morally necessary and economically beneficial.⁷⁸

But, fundamentally, the living wage demand was driven by the working-class. For example, the

74 Block, F. 2008. Polanyi's Double Movement and the Reconstruction of Critical Theory. *Revue Interventions Économiques/ Papers in Political Economy*, number 38, pp. 1-16.

75 Gazier, B. 2001. Transitional Labour Markets: From Positive Analysis to Policy Proposals. In Schmid, G. and Gazier, B. (eds.). 2001. *The Dynamics of Full Employment: Social Integration through Transitional Labour Markets*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

76 Holmlund, B. 2014. What do Labour Market Institutions do? *Labour Economics*, volume 30, number C, pp. 62-69.

77 Webb, S. and Webb, B. 1902. *Industrial Democracy*. London, Longmans, Green, pp. 590-599.

78 Smith, A. [1776] 1976. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, volume 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 95-96.

Independent Labour Party (then affiliated to the Labour Party) adopted the living wage in its 1925 platform, and party leader James Maxton introduced a living wage bill to the British parliament in 1931. He argued that low wages reduced demand, leading employers to reduce production, ending in an economic crisis. This underconsumption argument was similar to those later used by Michel Kalecki and John Maynard Keynes. The bill was defeated despite Labour Party efforts.

The explicit demand for a living wage became more muted in the advanced capitalist countries in the era of the Keynesian welfare state. Newly independent African and Asian countries often legislated a minimum wage, but this was often set at levels inadequate for a decent livelihood. In these countries, which gained flag independence in the post-war period, the concept of a living wage as distinct from a national minimum wage, or a “cost of living allowance” never grew deep roots. This was partly due to post-colonial governments’ active weakening of unions. In western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, however, the social wage in the form of welfare and services helped raise incomes closer to a living wage level.

Wages in the Era of Neo-Liberalism

By the late 1970s, neo-liberalism had become dominant. There was a rolling back of state interventions and class compromises, leading directly to a decline in working-class living standards and employment. Free market fundamentalism had returned with a vengeance, and with it, a stress on flexible labour markets and austerity. Precarious work became the new norm, reinforced by global value chains that relied on contract labour at the national and international levels. Real wages initially stagnated, battered by inflationary pressures, before entering into a steep decline; collective bargaining now centred on nominal wage increments.

Decades later, the collapse of the Soviet Empire was followed by a shift in mainstream academia and policy-making towards an “end of history” narrative that declared there was no alternative to a gamut of anti-poor and anti-worker policies and programmes that made the rich richer and the poor poorer. The capitalist triumphalism of this period appeared to legitimise these brutal attacks and the neo-liberal class project that fostered them.

However, as Polanyi predicted, the expansion of unregulated markets generated counter-movements, including a revival of worker organising. The grave erosion of workers’ income and its dire impact on subsistence contributed to a rebirth of the living wage campaign by the end of the 20th century, notably in cities like Baltimore in the United States and London in Britain. For example, a community organising group known as the London Citizens was rebranded as Citizens UK in 2011, which established a Living Wage Foundation. Internationally, the living wage was included in the International Labour Organisation’s Decent Work Agenda. The Decent Work Agenda was adopted by the international trade union movement and the 2007 World Social Forum.

The onset of the Great Recession in 2007 generated hopes of a shift away from neo-liberalism. However, instead of establishing a new class compromise which could once again provide institutional guarantees for working-class people, governments and businesses adopted harsh neo-liberal measures. The aim was to make working-class people bear the costs of economic recovery.

In this context, it is not surprising that bosses around the world find it difficult to consider living wages, and only pay minimum wages reluctantly. Yet they have had no compunction whatsoever in increasing their own take-home pay, with numerous bonuses for the captains of industry and huge salaries and allowances for political office holders, as in countries like Kenya and Nigeria.

The Importance of Class Struggle

The reasons for this awful situation are easily identified. The fault is not in our stars, it is in ourselves. Freedom is not given, it is taken. And compromises, if such is what can be won at this time, are not won through grovelling before the dominant classes. It is essential to stand upright and fight for victories.

Working-class reforms are won through mass struggles that challenge the bosses' system. Minimum wages and the social wage are won through class struggles and social protest. Collective bargaining and social dialogue cannot replace the raw transformative energies of workers' power, which is needed to win important reforms.

Waves of struggles by the working-class have relied on strong trade unions, a platform for organising working-class people to fight back. The 1920s -1930s hunger marches in Britain, the 1945 "COLA" ("cost of living allowance") strike in Nigeria⁷⁹ and the wave of mass strikes in 1940s Kenya⁸⁰ are a just a few of the striking examples of mass movements shutting down workplaces and drawing working-class communities into popular resistance against ruling classes and oppressive states.

As noted earlier, many African countries have legislated minimum wages, but these have been set at levels too low to support working-class people. We must demand and fight for reviews of, these national minimum wages. In Nigeria, for example, trade unions have noted that the minimum wage was last reviewed in 2011, when it was set at 18 000 Naira a month, or \$120. This was meant to be reviewed every five years but this has not happened.

Furthermore, many parts of the government have made it clear that they would oppose any upward revision. As I speak, some of these have not paid state sector workers' salaries for months, and some have yet to even apply the 2011 wage determination. These same government officials who oppose higher wages for workers on the grounds that there is not enough money nonetheless enrich themselves, corruptly as well as legally, to the tune of millions of dollars. Meanwhile indigenous capitalists and multinational corporations in Nigeria are receiving some of the highest returns to investment anywhere in the world.

Thus, the issue really is not a lack of resources for workers to be paid higher wages; it is about the ruling classes controlling the wealth.

Conclusion

Fighting for improved wages continues to be central to the struggle of the working-class. Workers will only win significant advances towards the living wage campaigns by organising, by bringing workers' power to bear on policy formulation, and by winning over a broad spectrum of working-class people across workplaces and communities in a common struggle against austerity, precarious work and poor wages.

However, no permanent victories are possible within capitalism. An important lesson we can draw from the 20th century is that the bosses will bide their time, waiting for opportunities to reverse earlier victories and increase their share of the social wealth. Neo-liberalism has provided a potent means to achieve these goals.

Therefore, while pursuing progressive reforms like minimum wages that are living wages, and progressive taxation that can fund universal public services, we need to see such gains as simply steps on the road to defeat the capitalist system of which wage-slavery is an integral element. This entails aspiring to, and organising to build a post-capitalist world, where labour is no longer a commodity, and production is not principally around production for profits, one enabling the fullest development of all women, men and children, carried out in solidarity, for the benefit of all, including the generations yet unborn.

79 Oluwide, B. 1993. *Imoudu Biography: A Political History of Nigeria, 1939-1950*. Ibadan: Ororo Publications.

80 Zeleza, T. 1993. The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya: The Era of the General Strikes. *Transafrican Journal of History*, volume 22, pp. 1-23.



Makhan Singh addressing a meeting of the Kenya Federation of Labour, Mombasa, 8 November 1962. Singh and others on the left were marginalised by the independent Kenyan government, which banned strikes and established the Central Organisation for Trade Unions (COTU) under government-control in 1965. COTU is now independent.

Image source: Zarina Patel's collection.

Contemporary Labour Struggles in Sub-Saharan Africa: Successes and Challenges

Antonater Tafadzwa Choto

Zimbabwe Labour Centre

I would like to start by expressing my utmost appreciation for the invitation to present a paper at this Memorial Lecture for a dedicated trade unionist: the great Makhan Singh. This is a great opportunity to discuss pertinent issues facing the working-class with a diverse array of trade unions. It is important that unions, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, share experiences, successes and challenges at this critical juncture for the working-class movement globally.

This Memorial Lecture is being held at a time when university lecturers and nurses in Kenya are on strike, following the government's failure to honour pay rates set out in the collective bargaining agreement. It takes place after a strike by doctors which only reached a settlement a week back, Friday 30 June 2017. It is not only the doctors in Kenya who have been on strike: the doctors in Zimbabwe have been on strike as well, while a civil servants' strike was narrowly averted by the government conceding the payment of a 2016 bonus for government workers. There have also been notable strikes in Nigeria and South Africa.

These strikes offer a glimmer of hope and inspiration for the workers of sub-Saharan Africa, especially after the win by doctors in Kenya, whose lowest strata will now be getting wages of \$2 200-\$8 000 (these are US dollars). This shows that if workers fight back in unity, they can win their demands.

In order to understand the challenges and successes of contemporary labour struggles in sub-Saharan Africa, I will first briefly trace the history of workers' struggles in the region, followed by the impact of globalisation and neo-liberal policies on labour. In the second part, I will attempt to assess the problems and prospects for labour struggles in sub-Saharan Africa.

A Brief History of Trade Unions in Sub-Saharan Africa

Class struggles arose as a direct result of the emergence of classes and private property. In the "primitive" communalist mode of production, there was neither private property nor a class division: labour was undertaken for human survival and needs and was equally distributed, and the means of production were common property.

But as classes emerged, labour ceased to be provided just for human needs, and when necessary, but was increasingly provided for the accumulation of wealth by the owning classes i.e. slave-owners, feudal landlords, and modern factory and industrial owners. This system, with the unequal distribution of the products of labour through exploitation emerged with slavery (or ancient society), and was further entrenched by feudalism, and then in the capitalist system.

This situation resulted in tensions and marked the beginning of labour struggles. Slaves revolted against their exploitation by slave-owners. The first recorded strike was undertaken by slaves working on the pyramids in ancient Egypt downing their tools. In the Roman Empire, the slave Spartacus led a massive slave revolt against the masters and the Roman state. Similar rebellions can be found throughout medieval

history, including peasant wars, and in the Americas, especially once the trans-Atlantic slave trade began.⁸¹

These class struggles continued into the capitalist era, and led to the formation of trade unions. In capitalism, the bourgeoisie (or capitalists) owns and controls the means of production, and the proletariat (working-class) has to sell its labour power for wages in order to survive. In this situation, there arose the need for the workers to struggle for better working conditions and wages.

In Africa, organised labour emerged with the introduction of capitalism through colonialism. Colonialism involved land and other resources being expropriated, grabbed from the local people by colonisers who sought to accumulate wealth. Even so, local populations resisted by refusing to work in the new farms, mines, and factories. In order to force people to enter wage labour, a number of mandatory taxes were introduced, along with other measures.

Black African workers went on strike as early as the 1840s. White workers from Europe introduced trade unionism to African workers, in both southern and north Africa. In South Africa, the first unions were formed in 1881 by white artisans.

The emergent South African unions lacked rights and faced hostile employers. For example, in 1884, when the trade union movement was still in its infancy, company thugs shot and killed four workers from the diamond mines around Kimberley in the course of a dispute. In 1913, 21 people were killed, and 80 wounded by British imperial troops sent in by General Smuts, then Minister of Mines, to preserve “law and order” in the course of a general strike by white workers on the Witwatersrand.⁸²

Although some black African workers had joined unions by 1910 in a number of countries in the continent,⁸³ trade unionism really took off amongst black Africa workers from the 1920s, a notable case being the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, founded in 1919 in Cape Town, which spread across five countries and lasted into the 1950s.⁸⁴ Union struggles surged throughout Africa, with some major victories being achieved, giving workers’ confidence and know-how. Growing militancy and confidence saw a wave of strikes across the continent in the 1940s. In 1945, for example, there was a general strike in Nigeria.

The 1946 black African miners’ strike in South Africa helped inspire the African National Congress (ANC) to adopt the ANC Youth League’s militant Programme of Action in 1949. In Kenya, Makhan Singh helped transform the Indian Trade Union into the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, which included both black African and Indian workers. Kenya witnessed its first general strike in 1947: this started with African railway workers and spread across the colony. In 1948, there were general strikes in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Senegal, in which figures like Joshua Nkomo rose to prominence.

Union aims broadened to include political demands, like an end to colonialism. Workers played significant roles in the liberation struggles that led to independence. Trade unions provided organisational resources and communication channels, as well as industrial muscle, for advancing the liberation struggles. In Kenya this was seen in the formation of the East African Trade Union Congress, with Makhan Singh as secretary, and Fred Kubai the president in 1950. The Congress called for the complete independence of East Africa, setting the stage for a confrontation with the colonial government. One outcome was Makhan

81 Aye, B. 2013. Fundamentals of Trade Unionism, and Challenges of the Trade Union Movement in West Africa, online at <http://solidarityandstruggle.blogspot.com/2013/08/fundamentals-of-trade-unionism-and.html>

82 *South African Worker*. 27 February 1937. 15th Anniversary of 1922 Rand Strike, online at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/15th-anniversary-1922-rand-strike-south-african-worker-27-february-1937>

83 The first unions including Arab, Asian, black African or Coloured (and *mestiço*) workers in Africa include the General Workers Union in South Africa (1905), the *Association des Ouvriers Sénégalais de Kayes* in Senegal (1907), the *Ligue Internationale des Ouvriers Cigarretiers et Papetiers du Caire* in Egypt (1908), the *Associação das Artes Gráficas de Lourenço Marques* in Mozambique (1911) and the Indian Trade Union in Kenya (1914). See Patel, Z. 2006. *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi: Zand Graphics/ African Books Collective, p. 57; van der Walt, L. 2019, *Beyond Decent Work: Fighting for Unions and Equality in Africa*, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p. 9, note 36. *Note by editors*.

84 See Lucien van der Walt, 2013. “Makhan Singh, Ghadar, the IWW and Communism: Legacy and Relevance to African Trade Unionism Today,” Second Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture, Louis Leakey Memorial Hall, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya, 5 December. Included in this collection.

Singh's detention in 1950; he was only released eleven years later, in 1961.

However, the stage had been set for a growing showdown, leading to Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) gaining independence in 1957, followed by Nigeria and Senegal in 1960, Kenya in 1963, and Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) in 1964. Unions were also crucial players in the struggle against apartheid in South West Africa (now Namibia) and South Africa. The 1980s saw a series of general strikes, or “stay-aways,” and the rise of massive union formations like the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1982, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985. These were led by the likes of Cyril Ramaphosa, who would go on to play a key role in the negotiations that led to non-racial multi-party elections in 1994.

However, independence created new challenges for organised labour. Many trade unions were placed under the direct control of the ruling parties and governments, notable examples being Kenya's Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) established in 1965, and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), established in 1981. In some cases, like South Africa, the unions were not directly integrated into the state or the structures of ruling parties, but continued to operate independently. Even then, however, they have often entered into close relationships with the ruling parties, a key example being the alliance between COSATU and the ANC in South Africa, one fruit of which is Ramaphosa ending up as a Deputy President of the country.

Globalisation and Neo-Liberal Policies

While the effects of post-colonial governments' efforts to control or co-opt unions cannot be discounted, the present state of the union movement in Africa cannot be understood without situating it in the world capitalist crisis that started in the 1970s, and the globalisation and neo-liberalism that followed.

The prices of the raw materials on which many sub-Saharan African economies and states relied – for example, agricultural produce and copper – fell sharply, negatively impacting the economic growth in the region. States started to go bankrupt and failed to pay salaries, resulting in job loss.

In 1981 the World Bank published the Berg Report on the social and economic crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, which played a key role in the shift towards neo-liberalism. The Report fostered a major shift in terms of how development was to take place, and the conditions on which overseas development aid and loans would be provided to the region. It reduced the crisis to the mismanagement of the economy and resources to poor governance and excessive state intervention by unaccountable, corrupt and inefficient government bureaucrats and political leaders.⁸⁵

In response to this report the Bretton Woods Institutions – namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – insisted that African states adopt neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) as the condition for loans. The SAPs were supposed to achieve economic recovery through trade liberalisation, fiscal austerity and an improved balance of payments, reducing fiscal deficits and increasing economic efficiency through trade liberalisation. State spending on wages and services was cut back, and privatisation promoted. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, desperate for funds, were essentially coerced into adopting SAPs as a precondition for aid, loans and grants, not only from the IMF and World Bank, but also from other donor countries and agencies.

Across Africa, neo-liberal policies were imposed by authoritarian and undemocratic states. These included one-party states like Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and military juntas as in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana, and Nigeria. However, the rise of neo-liberalism was not confined to Africa. Key moments in the global victory of neo-liberalism (the “Washington Consensus”) included the rise of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in Britain and the United States of America, respectively, in the 1980s. Both leaders pursued massive attacks on trade unions and labour rights, the most notable being

⁸⁵ Lugalla, J.L.P. 2005. Globalisation and Structural Adjustments in Sub-Saharan Africa. *The University Dialogue*, number 8, online at https://scholars.unh.edu/discovery_ud/8

the crushing of the great miners' strike in Britain in 1984-1985.

Such developments enabled a widespread deregulation of labour markets, which is expressed in the rise of mass unemployment and rapid growth of precarious and flexible jobs.

The Impact of Neo-Liberal Policies in Africa

Neo-liberal IMF and World Bank policies benefited wealthy elites at the expense of the majority of working people. The results of the implementation of SAPs across sub-Saharan Africa have been disastrous from the point of view of the masses.

There was no visible economic recovery, but millions of jobs were lost as the state sector retrenched workers and as local industries collapsed. Very few new jobs have been created since, resulting in mass unemployment for those leaving schools and colleges every year.

Existing and new jobs were and are increasingly casualised, with falling wages, a loss of job security and a denial of benefits like bonuses. A wide range of jobs have been outsourced. Meanwhile there were large reductions in government expenditure on health and education, and a removal of subsidies to agriculture, with serious effects on the working-class and peasantry.

These developments have resulted in the decline of wage work, leading to a reduction in trade union membership and finances. As a result, there has been an increased growth of the informal sector, which has now become the main employer in much of sub-Saharan Africa.

At the same time, however, SAPs and austerity provoked a massive wave of labour struggles from the mid-1980s into the 1990s, which quickly became politicised and helped drive struggles for democracy. Notable examples include Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where unions asserted their independence from the state and exercised their power.

However, the struggles for democracy usually took the form of multi-class popular fronts, involving alliances between organised labour with students, the middle class, sectors of local business, and disgruntled politicians. In terms of leadership and ideology, the latter forces usually dominated, although some trade union leaders rose to very prominent positions in the movements and in the reformed governments that they helped establish. Notable examples include Frederick Chiluba in Zambia, who became state president following multi-party elections in 1991, and Morgan Tsvangirai in Zimbabwe, who became prime minister in a government of national unity in 2009.

But these movements failed to mount a serious challenge to neo-liberalism, and the governments they helped establish typically continued to implement the very same measures that moved the workers into mass struggle.

This was partly because of the low levels of proletarian class-consciousness seen in these pro-democracy struggles. There was often an unquestioning acceptance of neo-liberal thinking, and hostility towards left ideology and politics. This must be understood against the background of many repressive post-independence governments claiming to be socialist, including in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, it is important to note that pro-democracy movements in sub-Saharan Africa also peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was the period of capitalist triumphalism, with the upheavals in Eastern Europe and China in 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was also the period that saw Western social-democracy move rightwards with Blairism and the "third way" policies.

Such events had their repercussions on African trade unions, both those which had looked towards the Soviet Union and Stalinism, and those which were more closely tied to the western trade union counterparts. This was expressed in Chiluba's adoption of neo-liberal policies in office, including the privatisation of the Zambian copper mines, and in the programme of the union-backed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe. The same process was reflected in COSATU in South Africa, although to a lesser extent.

Weaknesses Within the Trade Union Movement

I have, so far, highlighted the impact of external factors on unions, considering neo-liberalism, flexible labour, mass unemployment, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is also necessary, however, to examine the weaknesses within the trade union movement itself. After independence, as noted, the new governments sought to control or co-opt labour in order to weaken their power, preventing them from realising their potential. This had long-term negative effects on the unions.

A similar pattern has continued in the democratic era. Where new ruling parties are unable to co-opt the unions, they often undermine their influence by forming and funding splinter unions. The hand of the ruling class is strengthened by the resources at its disposal. If workers go on strike, they are threatened with replacement by the massive reserve armies of the unemployed, which are outside the unions and prepared to work for lower wages. The state, whether authoritarian or democratic, can bring in riot police and soldiers.

But it is not only the ruling parties that seek to control labour movements. The opposition often courts unions for its own reasons, seeking to make them into politically dependent, junior partners.

This state of affairs makes it difficult for unions to make independent political and economic demands, as we have seen with the ZCTU and MDC in Zimbabwe, and COSATU and the ANC in South Africa. For example, COSATU currently supports Ramaphosa and the ANC, despite their hand in the Marikana massacre of 16 August 2012, where 34 striking workers were shot and killed, and 78 injured.

Way Forward: Building the Unions and Alliances with the Masses

The world is currently at crossroads, comrades, and it is critical that we build up the organised labour movement, also working together with the informal workers, unemployed, women, youth, and the rural people to bring humanity back into our lives.

The structural problems in capitalism and the recurrent crises and instability of neo-liberalism have been dramatically exposed by the Great Recession of 2008-9. Trillions of dollars of public money were paid out to the bankers, while the working-class, peasantry and the poor faced savage austerity cuts and attacks.

This has led, over the last decade, to fresh waves of resistance and struggles across Africa, from the south to the north, centred on workers, youths, students, peasants, women, and the middle classes. The year 2010 saw huge movements for democratic reforms in the Middle East and North Africa, notably the “Arab Spring” in Egypt and Tunisia. In both of those countries, unions played a key role.

The year 2012 saw strikes in much of Africa.⁸⁶ The fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt was followed by 30 000 textile workers staging a week-long strike over wages, and actions in the ceramics industry. Around 280 000 teachers and 10 000 lecturers went on strike in Malawi, Kenya and Swaziland; doctors also went on strike in Kenya. Labour unrest shook investor confidence in Namibia. This was also the year in which a six-week long strike on the South African mines led to 46 deaths, mostly due to clashes with the police but some as result of inter-union rivalry. The strikes, which started in platinum mines and involved the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union, spread to gold mines and the NUM. Civil servants and railway workers struck in Zimbabwe, and there was worker action in Botswana, Burkina Faso and Tunisia.

Struggle is back on the agenda, but has increasingly moved from protesting authoritarian rule to the crisis of neo-liberal globalisation. This is why the struggles have taken place worldwide, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, to movements in Brazil, South Korea and France. These have drawn in large numbers of youth, the unemployed, and white collar and professional workers and civil servants.

Globally, the dominance of the ideology of neo-liberalism seen in the 1990s has broken down; there is

⁸⁶ Kamau 2012, A.W. “Labour Strikes are Becoming a Rising Concern across Africa.” *Brookings*, 18 October. Online <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2012/10/18/labor-strikes-are-becoming-a-rising-concern-across-africa/>

no longer a Washington Consensus.

This situation has seen a growing attraction to left and anti-capitalist ideas, especially amongst the youth, and a deep crisis for social democratic and reformist politics. In the United States, Bernie Sanders received widespread support, while left-winger Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership of the Labour Party despite stiff resistance from the party's Blairite right. The new South African Federation of Trade Unions, which started as a breakaway from COSATU, rejects the ANC and adopted a radical socialist approach.

However, the crisis of neo-liberalism has also seen a rapid growth in right-populism, and even some revival for fascism, currents which have made inroads into the working-class. This is shown by the rise of Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France and Narendra Modi in India. In Africa, populist nationalism is expressed by Michael Sata and Edgar Lungu's Patriotic Front in Zambia, in Mugabe's indigenisation and land reform policies, and in the Jacob Zuma ANC faction's "radical economic transformation" project and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party.

In sub-Saharan Africa, radical anti-capitalism in the unions is still weak and lagging behind that of the West. But chances of growth are high, given the failure of neo-liberalism. There are immense opportunities for labour struggles across Africa, and on a higher ideological plane than before.

To move forward requires fighting against fragmentation and building trade unions into bigger, more diverse unions, cutting across state sector and private sector unions and involving more women and youths. There is a need to build democratic and participatory unions. The rank-and-file members of the union need to be empowered to build and run strong unions. Unions need to be financially independent and rely on subscriptions from their members, not on donor funding or on union investment companies. Solidarity actions within the same country, but also across borders, is also key. A notable example was the solidarity that was given to Zimbabwean workers when COSATU's South African Transport and Allied Workers Union refused to offload weapons destined for Zimbabwe's military in 2008.

Conclusion

Although neo-liberal globalisation has resulted in huge attacks on workers, which – coupled with weaknesses in the unions, including undemocratic, co-opted and ideologically bankrupt union bureaucracies – has led to a decline in workers' power, things are changing. Pushed into desperation, the African working-class is beginning to fight back, although at this stage unevenly across the continent. Workers still remain the vital cog of all economies across Africa, and capitalism cannot function without them.

So, workers retain massive potential power, even if their numbers have fallen. Crucially, there must be a massive ideological reorientation of the unions and working-class to the left, with an anti-neo-liberal battle that unites the poor, exploited, and oppressed classes. The working-class must integrate its struggle, not into new popular fronts, but with the struggles of other marginalised, impoverished, and oppressed sections of society, like the unemployed youth, the peasants, and the informal sector.

The major challenge that we face today is the need to raise the ideological consciousness of the working-class so that the next wave of labour struggles is not focused on the removal of individual politicians or specific parties, but the removal of the capitalist system.

This can be done through education. As the Zimbabwe Labour Centre (ZLC), we have already started this at the local level, empowering the workers to identify the neo-liberal capitalist system as their principal enemy. In 2015, we started a regional Southern Africa Education Programme, including Namibia and South Africa: capitalists build solidarity, and operate across borders. As the working-class, we need to do the same.

In the global village, the future for labour struggles is beyond borders.

And so, I end by saying *Aluta Continua*: the struggle continues!



Makhan Singh was released in 1961, after over 11 years in detention. His friend Oginga Odinga (right) initially served as vice-president under Jomo Kenyatta, but broke away, forming the socialist Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966; this was banned in 1969, and Odinga arrested.

Image source: Zarina Patel's collection.

Makhan Singh and the Ghadarites

Zarina Patel,
AwaaZ Magazine

Most writings on the South Asian diaspora in East Africa emphasise the trade and commercial activities of the migrants who have been visiting, and settling, in these territories.⁸⁷

However, though very much smaller in number, there were South Asians, especially during the colonial period who played a major political role. They spearheaded the anti-colonial struggle and helped to move it from limited ethnic confines into the national arena. As in the economic sphere, their impact on history far exceeded their numbers. One such Kenyan South Asian mobilised the workers and peasants and popularised the tenets of socialism. This was Makhan Singh, the founder of Kenya's trade union movement.

Makhan Singh was born in 1913 in what was then India. Gharjak, his birthplace, was a small village in the Punjab hinterland, then part of India; the area is now partitioned between India and Pakistan; his home village of Gharjak is now in Pakistan. He had a very modest family background. Sudh Singh Jabbal, Makhan Singh's father, was a carpenter belonging to the Ramgharia sect in the Sikh community.

Asian Workers in Africa

Life in colonial India was not easy: Sudh Singh struggled to earn a living from carpentry, printing, religious service and even a stint in the army. The last secured him a pension of 20 rupees a month and with this meagre income, in 1920, he sailed on a dhow to Mombasa; leaving behind his wife, Isher Kaur, and his seven-year-old son, Makhan Singh.

Travelling to East Africa was not unknown; Sikh artisans had been recruited from the Punjab to work on the Uganda Railway and on completion, of the 37 747 labourers, 2 493 had died and 28 254 had returned to India. The 7 000 who stayed on were joined by their families, friends and compatriots. Prior to the railway project, Indians had settled largely in the coastal areas of East Africa. By 1921, the population of Indians in Kenya had reached 22 822 and amongst these some were acquaintances of Sudh Singh.

Sudh Singh signed a three-year contract as a carpenter with the Uganda Railway. His monthly salary was 55 rupees with a 50-rupee bonus, rations and travelling expenses both ways. Irked by colonial discrimination, the artisans banded together to form the Railway Artisans Union and Sudh Singh became its secretary. The authorities, however, did not take kindly to these developments. In 1923, three months prior to the termination of his contract, Sudh Singh was dismissed and the Union was closed down.

It was a period of increasing agitation in the country by Harry Thuku's East Africa Association (formed 1921) and the East African Indian National Congress (which spanned Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Zanzibar, and held its first conference in 1914) led by its secretary, Manilal Desai, demanding basic rights, justice and equality. In the same year a White Paper entitled the "Devonshire Declaration" was promulgated in England stating that black African interests were paramount, negating the demands made by Kenya's Indians.

After a short visit to India, Sudh Singh returned to Kenya and undertook a series of jobs before settling down in Nairobi and starting a printing press. In 1927 he brought over his wife, Satwant Kaur, his 14-year old son, Makhan, and his daughter, Kulwant Kaur, to Nairobi.

87 An earlier version of this paper was presented at "Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean" conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 20-23 August 2006.

Resistance Politics and Radicalism

In the same year Jomo Kenyatta, then Johnstone Kamau, entered the public arena. The following year, in 1928, Isher Dass, a fiery Marxist originally from the Punjab, was brought to Kenya by Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee, the founder of the East African Indian National Congress. 1927 also saw the resurgence of the Ghadar Party (see later).

Makhan Singh himself had lived his childhood in a very revolutionary period and region of India's history. He must have heard about the First War of Independence, the revolt of the Ghadarites, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and experienced the injustices of British colonialism. From a deeply religious father he had imbibed the humanitarian ideals of the Sikh gurus, and read about Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and Lenin's socialist theories.

A series of circumstances had a major influence on Makhan Singh. He spent his childhood in India at a time when the movement for *swaraj* (independence) was gaining momentum. In 1917 his father may even have personally witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre where a British regiment led by General Dyer killed 379 men, women and children and wounded scores more. Following this, a mighty wave against everything British swept the land and the demand for complete independence was raised. Mahatma Gandhi introduced his philosophy of non-violent struggle against the colonialists while the followers of Lenin and the October Revolution propounded their theories of *The Last Stage of Imperialism*.

The Punjab hosted the seat of British imperialism (Delhi) in South Asia: over the centuries the region had been invaded by Aryans, Greeks, Mughals and now the British. It was rich agriculturally and intellectually, and was the melting pot of several religions; Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam. Its very existence was replete with revolutionary fervour and Makhan Singh had partaken from it.

The Rise of the Ghadar Party

Groups of Sikhs had migrated to North America at the turn of the century and settled in San Francisco and Vancouver. There, in 1913, they, together with some educated Hindus and Muslims, formed the Ghadar ("revolutionary") Party.⁸⁸ The Ghadarites established strong ties with the communists of the Soviet Union and had branches all over the world, including East Africa. Owing to their opposition to the British and consequent affinity to the Germans, they were severely victimised during the First World War. Hundreds were killed, imprisoned or exiled in the Punjab by the British rulers. In British East Africa the Ghadarites were charged with sedition – three were shot, two hanged, eight imprisoned and about 20 were deported to India. Two of them, L.M. Salve and Keshavlal Dwivedi, were founder members of the East African Indian National Congress.

The Ghadar Party was later revived in India and in 1926 part of it was renamed the *Kirti Kisan Sabha* (Workers and Peasants Party) and became formally allied with the Communist Party. Many Ghadarites continued to work and settle in Kenya and the country became an important staging post for members travelling between Moscow and Delhi. The Ghadarites, apart from other activities, had formed a poetry group (Kavey Phulwari) in Nairobi and Makhan Singh, by far the youngest of the group, used to accompany his father to their meetings. In Kenya the Ghadarites earned their living as artisans but did their political work underground; very little is known about them except for the few who later associated with Makhan Singh in his trade union activities.

It is evident that though India's interaction with East Africa is manifested mainly through trade, there has been a significant impact of political influence and input. It is the achievement of independence in India which gave a boost to other anti-colonial movements both directly and indirectly. Just one case illustrates the connection. Udham Singh who, in a London street, shot and killed Sir Michael O'Dwyer to avenge the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, had worked as a fitter in Nairobi. There were other such

88 Patel, Z. 2006. *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi: Zand Graphics/ African Books Collective.

connections and Makhan Singh was one of the key players who spearheaded the struggle for freedom up until the time he was detained.

Makhan Singh's Early Days in Kenya

Makhan Singh was 14 years old when he arrived in Kenya. He enrolled in, and graduated from, the Duke of Gloucester School (now Jamhuri High School) in 1931. Though a brilliant student, the family could not afford to send him for further education so he joined his father's printing press. Makhan Singh was a serious and diligent young man who understood, and was opposed to, colonial as well as communal injustice both in Kenya and in India. Mixing with the workers in his father's press had made him keenly aware of the exploitative and inhuman conditions to which Kenyan workers were subjected.

Joining the Union Movement

Influenced by his father's earlier trade union activities, Makhan Singh was drawn into union organising. From the time the Imperial British East Africa Company had arrived in Kenya, workers organisations and strike actions had been instituted by black Africans, Indians and even white Europeans. In 1935, artisans and workers from other trades made one more attempt at reviving the Indian Trade Union they had formed. Makhan Singh had attributed their past failures to the lack of proper organisation and, not surprisingly, was now requested to take up the post of secretary and be the full-time organiser. It was a task without remuneration yet Makhan Singh, at the age of 22, accepted it.

One of the first things he did was to change the name to the non-racial Labour Trade Union. Management committees now met regularly, minutes were recorded, correspondence was attended to and dues collected. The newspapers published Makhan Singh's letters and he kept the workers informed through hand-bills, pamphlets and public meetings. He wrote regular newsletters by hand and cyclostyled them for distribution. These were in Punjabi using the Gurmukhi script; the publicity material was in Urdu, Gujarati, Swahili and English. Later the languages included Gikuyu and Dholuo. The union went from strength to strength and when, in 1937, workers in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika, became involved, the name was changed to the Labour Trade Union of East Africa.

The union fought for, and won, a raise in the wage structure and an improvement of working hours and conditions. These successes motivated black African workers who now began to join the Labour Trade Union of East Africa in large numbers. Some of the issues raised were:

- Do not work for low salary, work 8 hours a day, and be paid monthly, not by hours.
- Railway and Public Works Department workers are temporary, and should be made permanent.
- Congratulate press workers for establishing their own Union.
- Reduce school fees.
- Compensation should be paid by Government on injury at work.
- Appeal to all Kenyan workers to unite.

The handbill dated 31 October 1936 had a distinctly ideological content. It was addressed to "our worker comrades" and told them that the "struggle between capitalists and workers has started in earnest."⁸⁹

Poetry, Unity and Politics

Not only was Makhan Singh a good organiser and trade unionist, he was also an excellent communicator and understood well the needs of ensuring effective communications between trade unions and workers. It was largely his influence that shaped the successful strikes and publishing policies of the trade union movement in Kenya.

⁸⁹ Shiraz, D. 2006. *Never Be Silent: Publishing and Imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963*. London: Vita Books.

Though well versed in the Sikh religion, Makhan Singh refused to observe the ritualistic practices of the *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples). His poetic thoughts, written entirely in Punjabi, show a transition from admiration of the Sikh gurus and the values they espoused to concerns about untouchability, the oppression of women and Hindu-Muslim unity. Increasingly he focused on the exploitation of the workers by capitalists, the subject of imperialism and the need for workers, black African and Indian, to unite. He kept in touch with the on-going struggles in India and hence the vision of freedom was never far from his consciousness.⁹⁰

Singh was well aware of the need for a political organisation to not only achieve broad political goals, but even to fulfil the objectives of the trade union movement. For this reason, he involved himself with the East African Indian National Congress. As a member of the executive and standing committees, he strove constantly to sensitise members about the plight of workers and to work towards closer cooperation between the unions, the East African Trades Union Congress, the Labour Trade Union of East Africa and the emergent black African nationalist organisations such as the Kikuyu Central Association, the North Kavirondo Central Association, the Taita Hills Association and the Ukamba Members Association.

The 1939 General Strike and After

On Sunday, 23 July 1939, the Labour Trade Union of East Africa held its third annual conference on *Azad Maidan* (Freedom Ground) behind Desai Memorial Hall. One of its resolutions was a demand for workmen's compensation, 8-hour day, 45-hour week. Support from the Kikuyu Central Association and the enthusiasm of the black African workers acted as a catalyst with the result that an on-going strike by black African railway apprentices in Mombasa was electrified into what became popularly known as the Mombasa African Workers General Strike of 1939.

The government was alarmed and its report noted that the strike had been organised by Makhan Singh and the Kikuyu Central Association. The government's disapproval of trade unions in general and its hostility to Makhan Singh, the general secretary of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, were unmistakable, and in the Legislative Council in January 1940, Major Grogan asked rhetorically if Makhan Singh could be imprisoned for subversive activities.

Meanwhile, on 28 December 1939, Makhan Singh had left for India; it was a trip he had planned for many months previously. The Second World War had commenced and trade union activities had, of necessity, to take a back seat. Makhan Singh and his Labour Trade Union of East Africa colleagues took a neutral stand in the war. Makhan Singh's overriding concern was the oppressed condition of the working-class. His lifelong struggle was to mobilise and organise workers, both in Kenya and in India, to liberate themselves.

Trade unionism appealed to the skilled and semi-skilled Indian workers, particularly in the building trades and on the railway.⁹¹ However it was utopian to think that these workers who were better paid than black Africans, often solely on racial grounds, would back a truly multi-racial union. Makhan Singh was therefore a lone general unable to retain the loyalty of more than a section of the Indian working-class, and held at a certain distance by the black African militants in Nairobi who increasingly looked upon trade unionism as part of the black African nationalist struggle in which it was difficult for Indians to participate. The Kikuyu Central Association's support of the Union actually weakened the enthusiasm of some of the Indian members, many of whom preferred, for understandable reasons, to retain the racial terms of service which gave them better terms than it did the black Africans. The professional class in the East African Indian National Congress also held Makhan Singh at a distance.

90 Makhan Singh Papers, University of Nairobi archives.

91 Clayton, A. and Savage, D. 1974. *Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895-1963*. London, pp. 210-214.

An Indian Interlude

With all these various dynamics at play perhaps he needed time for reflection and an opportunity to share his concerns with comrades in India. It so happened that he did spend time with the comrades, but it was in rather unexpected circumstances. Makhan Singh was well aware of British displeasure so on landing in Bombay he disguised himself and travelled 500 kms north to a textile mill in Ahmedabad to work with the union there. But it was not long before the police located him and he was imprisoned without trial.

Makhan Singh remained in various jails until 1942 when he was restricted to his village in Gharjak. The restriction order was lifted in January 1945. Makhan Singh had met many like-minded comrades during his internment and sometime during this period, had joined the Communist Party. As one of his literary contributions he had translated chapters from Marx's *Das Kapital* into Punjabi, using the Gurumukhi script. After his release he involved himself with mobilising in the peasant movement.

August 1947 was the date for India's independence as well as the creation of Pakistan. In the new dispensation, Gharjak was ceded to Pakistan and Makhan Singh, together with his wife and her family, all crossed over to India. In spite of the entreaties of his comrades, Makhan Singh then decided to return to Kenya. His own words were: "One aim of my life, the freedom of India, has been achieved"; he felt he would be more useful here. He sailed back and celebrated India's independence on the high seas.

Post-War Militancy

No sooner was he back than the immigration authorities served him with a Quit Order. He had in fact been declared a prohibited immigrant and his re-entry into the country had been an administrative slip-up. Makhan Singh's return to Kenya aroused the gravest apprehensions among the colonial authorities as they feared his popularity with the African masses and his ability to organise them. With his clear and unbending principles, he was a formidable and uncompromising adversary.

A series of civil court cases followed and Makhan Singh was acquitted on 21 December 1947. It was a rude home-coming but, undeterred, he plunged into the operative running of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa and the East African Indian National Congress, and took on additional tasks with the East Africa Students Federation and the Kenya Youth Conference. The next three years were the most intense and active period in Makhan Singh's life.

He developed a close association with the left-wing journalists of the *Daily Chronicle* and, apart from contributing articles, often anonymously, participated with some of them in a Marxist study group. In the East African Indian National Congress, he made strenuous efforts to inject a more hard-line anti-colonial and pro-African agenda. He strongly opposed, even going on a hunger strike, the communal franchise that was being introduced by the government for the Indian community; but without much success.

In October the government revived the deportation case which had not been resolved and Makhan Singh was arrested. This third phase of the litigation ended in Makhan Singh's favour, and he was released on 18 October 1948. Having won a major victory, Makhan Singh became more ambitious and in November applied for a certificate of Permanent Residence under the Immigration (Control) Regulations of 1948.

The government introduced an amendment to that bill in the Legislative Council, adding the proviso "if it is in the interests of the colony." All three readings were gone through the same night of 21 December 1948, and even before the bill was gazetted, it was published on 4 January, 1949. Makhan Singh's application dated 20 November 1948, for a certificate of permanent residence was rejected on the premise that "he was a person not born in this colony."

On the trade union front, the white Settlers, together with some employers and government officials from Legislative Council and the Labour ministry, were calling for "opposition to furtherance of trade unionism." What they were really afraid of was the part the trade unions had already played, and were now playing: intensifying not only the trade union struggles but also the nationalist movement.

The trade union movement was moving ahead in full force. In September 1948, the LTUEA had held a very successful conference on the cost of living and the wage structure. In another conference held in January 1949 Fred Kubai, the acting general secretary of the Transport and Allied Workers Union, proposed the formation of a permanent central organisation of trade unions to deal with problems common to all registered unions. Makhan Singh was appointed convenor. An important stage had been reached in the development of trade unionism in Kenya.⁹²

In March, the government reacted by banning a number of left-wing periodicals from abroad e.g. the *Labour Monthly* of London, *New Africa* of New York, the *Guardian* of Cape Town and *People's Age* and *Blitz* of Bombay. Religious sects such as Elijah Masinde's "Dini ya Msambwa" and others were also banned. In the *Daily Chronicle* of 12 March, Makhan Singh wrote: "So, in the name of preventing the spread of Communism in Africa the drive against the workers and peasants movement goes on in Kenya."⁹³

On Sunday, 1 May 1949, the East African Trades Union Congress was launched with Fred Kubai as its president and Makhan Singh as the general secretary. It lost no time in organising workers and agitating against unfair laws and practices. In the following year, the governor, Sir Philip Mitchell, in a lengthy speech at the Rotary Club of Nairobi, spoke of the "The New Tyranny," in reference to the menace of communism. He did however admit that there was no openly organised revolutionary party in Kenya, and no organised propagation of party ideology.

On Trial and in Internal Exile

Meanwhile, on 30 March 1950, it was announced that Nairobi was to be raised to the status of "city." The East African Trades Union Congress called for a boycott of the celebrations and Makhan Singh declared: "there are two Nairobis – that of the rich and that of the poor. The status of the latter Nairobi has not changed and there is nothing for us to celebrate."⁹⁴ The Kenyan African Union, and its leader Jomo Kenyatta, were ambiguous in their support to the campaign and the boycott.⁹⁵ However, the degree to which the call for the boycott upset the settlers and their leaders is evident in this *Kenya Weekly News* editorial: "The simple fact is that there is no room for a Labour Department and for Makhan Singh in Kenya ... the continued tolerance of Makhan Singh's activities is a gross betrayal of the true interests of the Africans whom he seeks to deceive and to lead astray. It is high time that Kenya [were] rid of him and of others like him."

Though increasingly marginalised in the East African Indian National Congress, Singh's appeals for a united non-European front did finally materialise when the EATUC brought together, literally on one stage, the three major organisations representing the colonised people of Kenya. On Sunday 23 April 1950, the EATUC, the East African Indian National Congress and the Kenyan African Union jointly held a huge meeting of about 20 000 people in Kaloleni Social Hall under the chairmanship of the Honourable Eluid Mathu.

Towards the end of the meeting, Singh, seconded by Kubai, moved an addendum to a resolution. It demanded "the complete independence and sovereignty of the East African territories." This was the first time that such a radical and revolutionary idea had been publicly expressed. The die was cast.

On Monday, 15 May 1950, at 6.30 a.m., Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were arrested at their respective homes in Pumwani and Park Road. News of the arrests spread like wildfire and a general strike was declared in Nairobi and other parts of Kenya. It lasted 10 days.

The rest is well-known.⁹⁶ After a stage-managed trial, Kubai was imprisoned and Makhan Singh was detained. Banished to the arid wastelands of Kenya's northern frontier district, Makhan Singh spent

92 Singh, M. 1969. *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, chapter 16.

93 *Daily Chronicle*, 12 March 1949.

94 *Daily Chronicle*, 7 March 1950.

95 *East African Standard*, 6 March 1950.

96 See Singh, 1969, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement*, chapter 18 for a detailed narration.

eleven and a half years isolated from his colleagues and family. Several times the government offered to release him on condition that he leave Kenya never to return. Makhan Singh would not hear of it. He was constantly subjected to censorship whims and authoritarian orders; as one colonial District Commissioner said to him: "If we cannot prosecute you, at least we can persecute you."

Makhan Singh's phenomenal capacity for work, his singleness of purpose and his selfless dedication and commitment seemed to provide him with great inner strength. He read widely, made copious notes and was theoretically, well-grounded. Though a very private person, he was friendly and approachable and ever willing to share his knowledge and ideas with like-minded colleagues. Though a man of few words; he would passionately propagate and defend his ideas.

Release and Marginalisation

Jomo Kenyatta was released on 14 August 1961 and Makhan Singh on 18 October 1961. In the intervening years, much had happened. The EATUC had been suppressed, the trade union movement had been reorganised by Fred Kubai, Aggrey Minya, Pio Gama Pinto, A.S. Rao, Pranlal Sheth, Bildad Kaggia, J.J. Simon, J.D. Kali and Kibara Kabutu. Kubai and Kaggia had taken over central control of the Kenyan African Union and co-ordinated Mau Mau activities in the city as well as in the reserves. A new central trade union organisation was formed in 1952, the Kenyan Federation of Registered Trade Unions which became the Kenya Federation of Labour in 1965: it was allied to the pro-USA International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) with Tom Mboya as its general-secretary.

A State of Emergency had been declared, and the Kapenguria Six had been arrested, tried and detained. Although the defence team for the Kapenguria Six included top-level lawyers – led by Denis Pritt who had successfully defended Ho Chi Minh in 1931-1932 against France – the men got seven years each. The supreme commander of the Mau Mau armed forces, Dedan Kimathi, was captured in 1956 and hanged in 1957. Along with large-scale counter-insurgency, this helped break the back of the rebellion.

But it had become patently clear to the British that a political settlement was the only viable solution to the insurgency. Hence in 1957 the first black African members of the legislature had been elected and Oginga Odinga, Tom Mboya and Daniel arap Moi had taken their seats. A succession of constitutions had followed, political parties had been formed and KANU had won the first general election. The East African Indian National Congress, which had lost its Muslim membership, was renamed the Kenya Indian Congress.

Makhan Singh was driven to his home on 22 October 1961 to a tumultuous welcome from wananchi and Asian, political and trade union activists. Replying to a journalist's question, Makhan Singh declared: "I am a communist". It was the ideology he had practised all his adult life and to which he remained faithful to the last.

As Britain prepared to hand over power to the Africans, the focus on fighting colonialism shifted to managing the logistics of an independent state. Ideologically, a two-line struggle ensued – pro-people, socialist-oriented versus neo-colonial, market-driven factions. MPs such as Pio Gama Pinto, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Bildad Kaggia, Tom Okelo-Odongo and activists such as Ambu Patel, Pranlal Seth and Makhan Singh belonged to the socialist orientation and soon found themselves being side-lined. The Cold War took its toll.

Makhan Singh was denied any kind of public role, including any substantive position in the labour movement. He was not only ignored, he was harassed, baited and humiliated. He was expelled from the Printers and Kindred Trades Workers Union of which he was an official and became a victim of the anti-Asian hysteria which infected the newly independent state.

The post-independence ideological divide was reflected in the labour movement too. In 1965 the KANU government intervened and formed a Central Organisation for Trade Unions (COTU) bringing the unions under its control. In the face of such un-democratic and anti-people politics, Makhan Singh relinquished his aspiration to participate in the government of the day.

Instead he joined the Historical Association of Kenya and devoted the rest of his life to researching and writing the history of the Trade Union Movement. His two books, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952* and *1952-56 Crucial Years of Kenya Trade Unions* are, to date, the only record of this history and are thus in themselves a priceless legacy. He passed away in Nairobi on 18 May 1973 at the age of sixty, forgotten and unrecognised by the government of the day.

Conclusions

Makhan Singh's independence of thought extended to organisational independence. Though he associated/communicated with national and international persons and organisations, he was adamant about maintaining the autonomy of Kenya's trade union movement. Though he described himself as a communist, he was not a member of any party (except briefly when he worked with the Communist Party of India), nor did he promulgate any dogma. He refused to affiliate the unions to any labour organisation, East or West, or subordinate them to any political party, and even when he used legal processes, he did not seek to make unions an arm of the state.

Whether such independence is feasible, when so much of our lives seem to depend on donor money, is debateable. However, it cannot be gainsaid that, in independent Kenya, the affiliation of COTU to KANU and its direct subordination to the government under Kenyatta and Moi regimes), seriously undermined COTU's primary mandate to serve its membership, the Kenyan working-class.

It is only in the new millennium and with the opening of the democratic space that COTU is beginning to re-define itself but clearly it has a long way to go before it can extricate itself from the grip of the extraneous forces it became embroiled with. Makhan Singh's most important legacy remains, of course, the trade union movement itself.

But perhaps of even greater significance for us in Africa today is the role model Makhan Singh left us. He had an exceptionally high degree of self-discipline and focus of purpose. He was resolute, ever hopeful and convinced of the rightness of his cause. In order never to be compromised, he structured his entire life-style and thinking so as to minimise dependency on material needs and personal considerations. He was a fearless humanist; totally devoid of religious, caste or racial bigotry, and a supporter of equal rights for women. Freedom and justice for the working-class was his *raison d'être*. His life informs us that such principle, commitment, honesty and sacrifice are not just utopian ideals but are possible, and, in fact, essential to revolutionary leadership.

In post-independent Kenya, pro-people and left-leaning ideologies persist but to date the translation into practice is glaringly absent. Makhan Singh, and his comrade Bildad Kaggia, were two patriots who were reviled, neglected and rejected by the very powers they had helped to put in place. Their crime was their resolute adherence to their principles and their absolute refusal to be compromised. Both men lived and died in conditions of personal suffering and deprivation but left a priceless legacy for generations to come. Our present-day leaders have much to learn from these heroes.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision endures in South Africa, Makhan Singh is another South Asian migrant whom history has yet to fully validate.

Speaker Profiles

Baba Aye is a trade unionist and socialist active in social movements over the past three decades. During the military dictatorship in Nigeria, he was a leading pro-democracy activist and served as spokesperson for the National Association of Nigerian Students. For nearly twenty years, he served in the Medical and Health Workers' Union of Nigeria, becoming Deputy Secretary General. He was a founding member of the Labour Party in Nigeria, serving on its executive; he was also chairperson of Socialist Workers League, and currently edits its bi-monthly organ, the *Socialist Worker*. Baba Aye has published journal articles, conference papers and book chapters on political-economy, ethno-religious identity, migration, health-care, democracy, industrial relations, ecology, women's liberation, trade and development. He is the author of the book *Era of Crises and Revolts: Perspectives for Workers and Youth* (2012), and is a contributing editor at the *Review of African Political Economy*. He has a Masters in Labour Policy and Globalisation from the Global Labour University.

Antonater Tafadzwa Choto is the Centre Director for the Zimbabwe Labour Centre, whose Working People's College equips officials and leaders in working-class organisations to effectively represent workers in collective bargaining, dispute resolution and policy advocacy. The Centre does not just work with unions, but with workers' committees and rank-and-file movements. Choto has a wealth of experience as a social justice activist in strikes and social justice struggles in Zimbabwe, including advocating for a Constitution and Labour Act that would guarantee workers' rights and a living wage. In her current position, Tafadzwa works with all the trade union federations in Zimbabwe with a view to assisting the working-class to build a strong, united voice. She is also a member of the International Socialist Organisation of Zimbabwe, and was imprisoned. The initial charge was treason, later changed to inciting public violence – a charge she is still challenging in the High Court.

Zarina Patel, writer and artist, is author of *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh* (2006), and Managing Editor of *AwaaZ* Magazine. Her other books are *Challenge to Colonialism: The Struggle of Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee for Equal Rights in Kenya* (1997), *Manilal Ambalal Desai: The Stormy Petrel* (2010) and *The In-between World of Kenya's Media: South Asian Journalism, 1900-1992* (2016). She has been involved in a range movements and struggles, including underground during the Kenyan dictatorship. Patel's fight for women, struggles against a corrupt Bohra priesthood, fruitful efforts to save Jeevanjee Gardens from land grabbers, work with the organisation Kikuyus for Change and the Kenyan Constitution Review process and her co-founding Kenya Asian Forum are a few illustrations of her diverse contributions to post-independence Kenya. She is the subject of George Gona's biography, *Zarina Patel: An Indomitable Spirit* (2016). Also see <https://zarinapatel.net/>

Piyarally Rattansi was Professor Emeritus at University College London where he headed the Department of History & Philosophy of Science from October 1971-September 1995, a period of 24 years. He was born in Kenya on the 15th of October 1930, and there he did his schooling. Before travelling to the UK to join the London School of Economics and Political Science, he spent a couple of years working as a cub reporter with the South Asian-owned Daily Chronicle newspaper in the late 1940s. This was the heyday of the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya and the Chronicle was a strident voice in support of this struggle. Its offices were the meeting ground for many of Kenya's nationalist leaders, and these included Makhan Singh. It was therefore most appropriate that he, who had a very personal relationship with Singh, address the first Makhan Singh Memorial Lecture. Dr. Rattansi passed away on the 23rd of August 2022.

Lucien van der Walt is Professor of Industrial and Economic Sociology at Rhodes University, South Africa, also serving as Director of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU). He has long been active in worker and union education, including with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), DITSELA, the Workers' Library and Museum, the Global Labour University and NALSU's Eastern Cape Worker Education Project including its Vuysile Mini Workers School. A prize-winning scholar, his books include *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Post-colonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution* (2010/2014, with Steve Hirsch), *Negro e Vermelho: Anarquismo, Sindicalismo Revolucionário e Pessoas de Cor na África Meridional nas Décadas de 1880 a 1920* (2014), and *Politics at a Distance from the State: Radical and African Perspectives* (2018/2022, with Kirk Helliker). His work has been translated into Czech, French, German, Greek, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish and Zulu. He has served in unions and movements, including as media officer for the Anti-Privatisation Forum. Also see <https://lucienvanderwalt.com/>

About *AwaaZ* Magazine: The flagship of *AwaaZ* Publications

AwaaZ Magazine is published tri-annually out of Nairobi, Kenya. It aims to provide a broad platform for debate and reflection on issues of both contemporary and historical interest.

What started off in 2002 as a focus on the role of the South Asian community in the historical, political and socio-economic spheres of Kenya, has now broadened to cover the larger debates on diversity, democracy, human rights and social justice. The magazine also critically examines the role of minorities both as communities in Kenya and East Africa; as well as a concept of human rights in a society, be they ethnic, racial, gender based, sexual or political.

For more information on *AwaaZ* Magazine and its work, please visit <https://www.awaazmagazine.com/>.

About NALSU and the Eastern Cape Worker Education Project

The Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) has been committed to labour education in the Eastern Cape since its inception in 2014. We view worker education as something to be undertaken in partnership with worker organisations, including engagement with such organisations about content and the approach that would be most advantageous to workers and would contribute to the strengthening of the working-class movement. We are named in honour of Dr Neil Hudson Aggett, a union organiser and medical doctor who died in 1982 in an apartheid jail after enduring brutality and torture.

What is NALSU?

NALSU, founded in 2012 and publicly launched in 2014, emerged from a partnership between Rhodes University and the Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEDEAT) of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government, guided by a Steering Committee that included representatives of COSATU and NUMSA, the Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council (ECSECC), and others.

NALSU is formally located in the Department of Sociology and Industrial Sociology at Rhodes University, and Members of the NALSU team come from the following two academic departments: (i) Sociology and Industrial Sociology and (iii) Economics and Economic History.

NALSU is committed to labour studies, the development of a new generation of labour studies specialists, and supporting worker education as part of a commitment to working with unions and other working-class movements. It runs a large seminar programme, which draws in activists, unionists, students and academics from Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), and is research-active, including on policy issues. For more information on NALSU and its work, please visit see <http://www.ru.ac.za/nalsu/>.

Eastern Cape Worker Education Project

Our Eastern Cape Worker Education Project has evolved from a broad commitment made at the launch of NALSU to an established worker school series and an approved short course for trade unions. Our approach to worker education is progressive and pro-labour in orientation; non-sectarian and non-aligned; university-based (and not in competition with other components of worker education in unions, LSOs and workplaces) offering a mixture of content, debate / critical reasoning, and hard skills in writing, analysis and basic research; academically rigorous; and located in structured partnerships with working-class movements in building customised content.

Vuyisile Mini Worker Schools

NALSU has been central to the organisation and delivery of the Vuyisile Mini Winter Schools since their launch in 2015. Funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), each winter school brings together approximately 50 participants from a range of unions – mainly from East London, Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage – for four days of discussions and debates. The participants are fully-funded, and reside in Makhanda Rhodes University residences for the duration. The fifth Vuyisile Mini Winter School will be held in late 2021. The series is named after Vuyisile Mini, a well-known Eastern Cape trade unionist who was particularly active in Port Elizabeth and who was executed in 1964 for his role in the anti-apartheid armed struggle.

Short Course Programme: Policy, Theory and Research for Labour Movements

The NALSU team started working on the idea of an accredited short course for unions and allied working-class civil society organisations in the Eastern Cape after the launch of the Vuyisile Mini Worker School Series. Our proposal for such a short course was formally approved by Rhodes University in late 2017 and a module was piloted in 2018 in Port Elizabeth. In 2019, we launched the course in partnership with the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Education and Training Authority (merSETA). Following the completion of the first module in 2019, the programme was delayed by the onset of COVID-19, with the second module completed in 2020, and modules three and four completed in 2021. From 2022, we intend to offer two modules on an annual basis. The modules are (i) South African political economy and the global crisis, (ii) state institutions and labour law, (iii) history and debates in the workers' and socialist movement, and (iv) building organisations.

The historic role of unions as forces for democracy, equality and decent work underlines the necessity of union revival and growth. The working-class in Africa has a long history of struggle, victories and defeats, as well as martyrs. Africa's union movements are remarkably resilient, with unionisation rates in southern and north Africa today higher than those of Asia or the Americas – second, in fact, only to northern Europe.

It is important to remember and reclaim this working-class history, not just to honour our past, but in order to draw inspiration and lessons that can be applied today. Yet little has been drawn from the deep well of historic experiences of labour organising in Africa over the last 150 years, a history that reveals a remarkable range of alliances, ideas, innovations, organisational forms, stunning victories and avoidable defeats.

This publication is a contribution to the process of rediscovering and reflecting on that past, of thinking beyond national boundaries and official narratives, and of facing the challenges facing the working-class and poor today. It collects the four Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures delivered in Nairobi, Kenya, from 2006 to 2017, and an additional paper on the life of Makhan Singh, for whom the Lectures are named. The Lectures were organised by AwaaZ Publications of Nairobi, working with the Kenya Human Rights Commission, and were embedded in workshops with Kenyan unionists.

All the authors have long-standing links to the working-class movement, and delve into the politics of working-class struggles in different countries, engage with Makhan Singh's legacy, and grapple with the challenges of today. They include Baba Aye (Nigeria), Antonater Tafadzwa Choto (Zimbabwe), Zarina Patel (Kenya), Pyarally Rattansi (Kenya) and Lucien van der Walt (South Africa).

Jointly published by Zandgraphics Ltd, Kenya and the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa, this collection is an international and internationalist venture in the best traditions of the workers' movement.

We dedicate this publication to Makhan Singh of Kenya, and to Neil Aggett and Vuyisile Mini, trade unionists killed by the apartheid state.

This collection is the second in NALSU's Labour Studies: Working-Class Education Series. We gratefully acknowledge the support and efforts of all contributors, friends and colleagues, those who attended the Memorial Lectures and the Nairobi workshops, the family of Makhan Singh and the Kenya Human Rights Commission. We thank the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), which funded the publication of this booklet for its initial launch as part of NALSU's November 2021 Vuyisile Mini Workers School, an annual event backed by the FES.