

**Adding Red to the Black Atlantic?
Black revolutionary syndicalists and the
South African Native National Congress's Radicalisation, 1917-1920**

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The late 1910s saw colonial and proletarian revolt sweep the globe: in South Africa, union membership increased fourteen-fold, insurrectionary strikes took place in 1913 and 1922, and 1917 saw the launch of the first African and Indian unions. These latter, pioneering unions were, strikingly, based upon revolutionary syndicalism, a variant of anarchism, which locates them in the anarchist/ syndicalist current that was at the forefront of revolts in this era - not least in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and parts of Africa. They included the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) and the Indian Workers Industrial Union, both formed in 1917. Subsequently, the 1920 "One Big Union" congress in Bloemfontein saw the IWA and others merge into the expanded Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) on a radical platform.

A section of the generally moderate, elitist South African Native National Congress (SANNC, from 1923 the African National Congress, ANC) was radicalised, too, throwing itself into strikes and protests. While structural factors, such as postwar inflation and the larger climate of turbulence and instability, played a role in this radicalisation, the content and contours of the left shift can only be understood by examining the activities of black revolutionary syndicalists within that body, notably Fred Cetiwe, Hamilton Kraai and T.W. Thibedi. These men (and their allied Indian and white co-thinkers), influenced the editors of *Abantu-Batho*, the Cape and Transvaal SANNC structures, the 1918 Witwatersrand IWA -SANNC-ISL strike movement (and subsequent trial), the 1919 ICU -IWA Cape Town dockers' strike, the 1919 Witwatersrand anti-pass campaign, the 1918 and 1920 SANNC congresses, and the 1920 One Big Union congress.

Anti-capitalist, anti-statist, anti-authoritarian syndicalism: in South Africa, as in Cuba and the United States, syndicalism was an important current amongst black radicals. I suggest that Benedict Anderson's observation that the era was shaped by the "immense gravitational pull" of anarchism and syndicalism, long the "dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left," and "the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, *latifundism*, and imperialism," also applies to South Africa. Thus, the long-ignored role of anarchism and syndicalism needs to be reconsidered in local historiography, while the history of the ANC needs to be delinked from simplistic nationalist narratives. At the same time, the role of anarchism and syndicalism in the history of black politics in the Atlantic world requires the problematisation of accounts that reduce black radicalism to Pan-Africanism and its variants. While there was a transatlantic connection between SANNC nationalism and black American nationalism, attention must also be paid to another, radical, transatlantic connection: between black South African syndicalists and American working class radicalism, notably to the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, Wobblies).

This paper examines a key moment in the early history of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, formed 1912, renamed the African National Congress or ANC in 1923): its radicalization from 1918-1920. This episode was remarkable. A wing of this usually moderate, middle class grouping threw itself into strikes and protests, in the face of arrests and trials, and some key militants in the organisation identified with, as I will show, the most radical views circulating globally in that era, especially in the colonial and postcolonial world: anarchism and syndicalism.¹

¹ By "anarchism," I mean the revolutionary libertarian socialist current that emerged around Mikhail Bakunin and the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy in the International Workingmen's Association (1864-1877). An internationalist, rationalist movement seeking to mobilize the working class and peasantry against capitalism, the state and all forms of economic and social hierarchy and inequality, anarchism fought for a world based on common ownership, self-management, democratic planning from below, and production for need. "Syndicalism" is an anarchist strategy, pioneered by the Bakuninists; in line with anarchist opposition to the state and parliamentary politics, it argued that revolutionary labour unions should seize the means of production, becoming the workplace councils of the new society. Anarchism and its syndicalist progeny insisted that popular self-activity, outside and against the state, was a matter of revolutionary necessity. There is an extensive literature on these issues, including Wayne Thorpe, *'the Workers Themselves': Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour 1913-23* (Dordrecht, Boston, London/ Amsterdam: Kulwer Academic Publishers/ International Institute of Social History, 1989).; S. Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).; and Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (San Francisco, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009).

That is, I will show that the radical wing of the SANNC was, for a time, influenced by ideas going back to Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin; that this overlap between colonial nationalism and anarchism/syndicalism played a decisive role in shaping the content and contours of early SANNC radicalism; that, therefore, the first overlap between African nationalists and revolutionary socialists in South Africa took place well before the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was formed (1921) or oriented to African workers (1925); and that, finally, through an examination of this overlap, it becomes possible to recover, in part, the remarkable but largely forgotten history of pioneer generation of African anti-capitalist militants, among them Fred Cetiwe, Hamilton Kraai, and T.W. Thibedi.

Benedict Anderson's observation that the radicalism of the era, worldwide, was shaped by the "immense gravitational pull" of anarchism and syndicalism, long the "dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left," "the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, *latifundism*, and imperialism," also applies to South Africa in this period. The long-ignored role of anarchism and syndicalism needs to be reconsidered in local historiography, while the history of the SANNC needs to be delinked from simplistic nationalist narratives. Rather, we need to locate the SANNC firmly within the national and transnational radical currents of the globe in those years, not least anarchism and syndicalism, the better to understand both the SANNC *and* the role of revolutionary Bakuninist ideas in the colonial and postcolonial world

The SANNC was founded in January 1912 in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, prominent African "personalities" from across southern Africa, who arrived "formally dressed in suits, frock coats, top hats and carrying umbrellas".² Yet in 1918, the Transvaal SANNC was involved, alongside the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) and International Socialist League (ISL), in attempts to launch a general strike across the Witwatersrand in mid-1918, leading to a highly publicised trial of SANNC, IWA and ISL members for "public violence"; black radicals with triple membership of the SANNC, IWA and ISL played a key role in pushing the SANNC into an anti-pass law campaign in early 1919; later that year, IWA/ ISL members, linked to the Cape Native Congress, joined the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in waging a bruising dockers' strike; interventions at the 1920 SANNC congress failed to win the organisation to a programme of strikes and mass action, but led to the calling of a black union congress conference in Bloemfontein that saw the ICU, IWA and others

² Walshe, 1970, *op cit*, pp. 33-4

merge under the ICU banner into “one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi (sic.)”.³

African moderates were shocked at the SANNC’s executive congress in August 1918 in Bloemfontein, and then at the SANNC’s May 1920 Queenstown conference, by their encounter with a vociferous faction of what they termed “black Bolsheviks,” who “spoke almost in unison, in short sentences, nearly every one of which began and ended with the word ‘strike’”.⁴ “Socialism of the worst calibre is claiming our people”, exclaimed another prominent African moderate.⁵ Armed “with rallying catch phrases and a copious Socialist vocabulary they play as easily as on a piano upon the hearts of the illiterate mine labourers”. Meanwhile Prime Minister Louis Botha complained to parliament of the “serious state of affairs,” in which “attempts had been made to get the Natives on the Rand to organise themselves into a union ... where would it end?”⁶

In fact, this early radical period in SANNC/ ANC history would end, sooner rather than later. In 1920, the radical wing of the SANNC was roundly defeated, the party returning to its traditional policies of petitions and appeals to the British Crown and moderate white opinion. Great hope was placed in the Versailles Peace Conference, but while the conference played an important role in the decolonisation of East Europe, it flatly rejected African and Asian demands. Rebuffed, many colonial delegations set out on a path of militancy;⁷ the ANC, however, did not. The late 1920s saw a brief revolt by dissident western Cape ANC, and short-lived flirtation with the CSPA by ANC President Josiah Gumede.

But overall, until the mid-1940s, the SANNC/ANC was a small, moderate and often moribund organisation, with very little links to worker organising. Attempts by the ICU in 1926 to push the party into a general strike, and “cause revolution”,⁸ fell flat. As for the radicals of the late 1910s SANNC, some became moderates, while others found, with the rapid growth of the ICU in the years that followed, and then of the CPSA, a more congenial home in these formations.

Even sympathetic accounts of the early ANC note that its contacts with workers in these years were limited: of course, some workers attended ANC meetings, and the ANC spoke out

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 145-146.

⁴ Plaatje, [3 August 1918] 1996, in Brian Willan, ed., *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg/ Athens: Witwatersrand University Press/ Ohio University Press, 1988), p. 237

⁵ D.D.T. Jabavu, [July 1920] 1972, “Native Unrest”, in Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter, editors, 1972, *From Protest to Challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, vol.one, pp. 118-125. The quote is from p. 124. The pamphlet version, *Native Unrest: its cause and cure*, may be found in the Historical Papers collection, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand

⁶ Cope [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 196; also partially quoted in *The Workers’ Dreadnought*, 27 July 1918, “The International”

⁷ E. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ Report of private informer on 1926 ANC congress, appended to report by A.J. du Plessis to Divisional Criminal Investigations Officer, Bloemfontein, in Department of Justice file, JUS 915 1/18/26 part 1, National Archives, Pretoria

against bad conditions to government commissions, and even sometimes supported strikes.⁹ This evidence shows the ANC was sympathetic to workers, but this is not the same as actually playing a role in worker organising, or in the unions; even the strikes the ANC supported at the time, were strikes organised by others. As ANC and CPSA member JB Marks recalled, the ANC was “not dealing with trade unions,” and, as party loyalist Walter Sisulu noted, the party was quite unknown amongst black mineworkers in the 1930s.¹⁰

All of this makes the period 1918-1920 especially interesting: it was different, it involved direct involvement in the labour movement, and it was the great exception in these years, it was the *only time* before the 1940s that the SANNC was directly and overtly involved in unions and strikes. Thus, an investigation and *explanation* of this remarkable period in SANNC/ ANC is all the more intriguing. This requires an examination, in turn, of the precise *ideological* influences on the ANC at this time, and the distinctive contribution of anarchism/ syndicalism.

Explaining the radicalisation: inflation, militancy, anarchism and syndicalism

Structural conditions, such as rampant inflation, played an important role in the unrest. Prices rose from the start of the First World War, and inflation grew rapidly towards the end of 1917.¹¹ Prices for many commodities doubled by 1920; inflation reached twenty percent, but nominal wages remained static; the price of staple cereals may have risen by as much as 300 percent.¹² As Philip Bonner has argued in his pioneering study of the radicalisation of the Transvaal SANNC in this period, while rising prices could be presented as a necessary sacrifice in wartime (the SANNC supporting the British war effort), ongoing post-war inflation saw a “whole pent-up reservoir of frustration” start to “burst its banks,” with the immiseration of the African elite leading sectors to identify downwards with the mass of black workers, and the strike weapon.¹³

The global context of colonial and proletarian revolt, of which the Russian Revolution was one chapter, now doubt also partially accounts for the growing popular radicalisation and militancy, which was also expressed in the SANNC. In 1915, the Ghadr Party launched an armed rising in India, while 1916 saw the Easter Rising in Ireland; general strikes with insurrectionary characteristics took place in Mexico in 1916, followed by Spain (1917), Brazil (1918), Portugal (1918), Argentina (1919, 1922), and Italy (1920); there were radical *soviet* movements in Bulgaria,

⁹ For example, Peter Limb, "The Anc and Black Workers," in *Peace, Politics and Violence in the New South Africa*, ed. Norman Etherington (London, Melbourne, Munich, New York: Hans Zell Pubs, 1992).

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 291

¹¹ See Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 273-6 including table 1

¹² Bonner, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 279

¹³ Bonner, 1979, *op cit.*, pp. 279-280

Finland, Germany, and Hungary, and colonial insurgencies in China, the Czech lands, Egypt, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and Korea.

This was a period of explosive trade union growth, and of strike activity, across all of southern Africa as well, including Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique), Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and South West Africa (now Namibia).¹⁴ In South Africa itself, union membership rocketed: of 199 officially recorded strikes in South Africa from 1906 to 1920, 168 were in the period 1916 to 1920;¹⁵ union enrolment rose from around 9,178 in 1914, to 40,000 in 1917, to 135,140 in 1920.¹⁶ Until the late 1910s, trade unions in South Africa, which dated back to the 1860s, were largely white – although a partial exception must be made for the Western Cape, where a significant number of Coloureds were unionised. It was from 1917 that this changed, with the first African and Indian unions, starting with the IWA and the Indian Workers Industrial Union; the rise of the ICU in the 1920s saw African union membership finally outstrip that of whites.

However, such structural and contextual factors tell us very little about the *content* and *contours* of popular radicalism in South Africa in this period; by the same token, they tell us very little about the content and contours of the radical wing of the SANNC in the period 1918-1920, and about the *national* and *transnational* currents that shaped that radicalism, including anarchism/syndicalism.

Bonner noted the need to examine ideology and its vectors, specifically suggesting that the “influence of the ISL and IWA” on the SANNC radicals should not “be underestimated”.¹⁷ He did not, however, explore this “influence”. The role of the ISL and IWA has also been noted in other works, but even there, was rarely explored. The official ANC history, by Francis Meli, stressed the ISL’s remarkable commitment to working class internationalism, and to engaging the SANNC, but remained rather vague about the ideology and agenda of these radicals, who were dubbed simply “socialists”.¹⁸ Peter Walshe’s history of the early SANNC/ ANC also noted the impact of

¹⁴ On the regional strike wave, see Lucien van der Walt, “The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the Iww and the Icu, 1904-1934,” *African Studies* 66, no. 2/3 (2007), pp. 229-31

¹⁵ H.R. Pike, *A History of Communism in South Africa*, second ed. (Germiston: Christian Mission International, 1988), pp. 103-5; also see Jack Simons and Ray Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund, [1969] 1983), p. 333

¹⁶ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, p. 333; also see R.K. Cope, *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers’ Leader* (Cape Town: Stewart Printing, [? 1943]), p. 200 and van Pieter van Duin, “South Africa,” in *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870-1914*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn, Koln: Brill, 1990). p. 640 note 3

¹⁷ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 298

¹⁸ Francis Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the Anc* (Harare/ Bloomington and Indianapolis/ London: Zimbabwe Publishing House/ Indiana University Press/James Currey, 1988), pp. 56-62

“socialism” on African politics in the post-war period,¹⁹ but was weakened by a vague (and at times inaccurate) account of ISL politics.²⁰

The revolutionary politics of the ISL and IWA reconsidered

These analyses were further limited by several other factors. One was the notion that the ISL was a Marxist party. Bonner assumed that the ISL used “standard Marxist theory”,²¹ while Meli claimed that many of the founders of the formation were Marxists, inspired by the Russian Revolution.²² To be fair, these writers merely expressed the standard position in the literature of the time.²³ In point of fact, however, the ISL was a revolutionary syndicalist formation, profoundly influenced by the global Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the IWA was a revolutionary syndicalist all-African union launched by the ISL on IWW lines. Formed in September 1915, the first ISL congress, in January 1916 resolved “That we encourage the organisation of the workers on industrial or class lines, irrespective of race, colour or creed, as the most effective means of providing the necessary force for the emancipation of the workers”.²⁴ The “one Industrial Union will become the Parliament of Labour and form an integral part of the International Industrial Republic”.²⁵

Further inaccuracies regarding ISL policies exist in these texts. For example, Walshe argued that the ISL did not aim, on the whole, take any real interest in workers of colour, although some individual members dissented. In fact, building a strong base amongst Africans, Coloureds and Indians, and fighting for equal rights for all, was official ISL policy. In its view, racially exclusive unions and craft unions had to be replaced by revolutionary industrial unions open to all races, that, through mass action, could build towards a revolutionary general strike.²⁶

¹⁹ Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 89-108

²⁰ See Walshe 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 95-6, 169

²¹ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*

²² Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the Anc.*, p. 61

²³ A point I have made in several papers including Lucien van der Walt, “‘the Industrial Union Is the Embryo of the Socialist Commonwealth’: The International Socialist League and Revolutionary Syndicalism in South Africa, 1915-1919,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* XIX, no. 1 (1999). and Lucien van der Walt, “Bakunin’s Heirs in South Africa: Race, Class and Revolutionary Syndicalism from the Iww to the International Socialist League,” *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2004).

²⁴ *Int.*, 7 January 1916, “League Conference”; *Int.*, 14 January 1916, “The First Conference of the League”.

²⁵ *The International*, 22 February 1918, “Industrial Unionism in South Africa”, described as the “manifesto of the Solidarity Committee, reprinted here by order of the I.S.L. Management Committee”

²⁶ J.M. Gibson, 23 February 1916, “Race Prejudice,” *Int.*, emphasis in original.

Industrial Unionism is the only solution to the problem, organised on the broad lines of no colour bar ... To you the worker, no matter what your race or colour, belongs the future ... Yours is the historic mission to inaugurate the Co-operative Commonwealth, abolishing all class distinction, all class rule.

The One Big Union, uniting across craft and colour, would be the instrument both of revolution *and* of struggle against racially discriminatory controls and laws. The ISL explicitly aimed at “the abolition of all forms of native indenture, compound and passport systems; and the lifting of the native worker to the political and industrial status of the white”.²⁷ Calling for the abolition of the pass laws, the *International* argued:²⁸

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

These ideas were promoted by the *International* (the ISL weekly), pamphlets and leaflets, weekly public meetings, the distribution of a range of De Leonist and other revolutionary syndicalist booklets, and the establishment of a bookshop at the ISL offices in Fox street, Johannesburg. The ISL established sections across the Witwatersrand, and also had supporters in Pretoria, Pietermaritzburg and Durban in Natal, and Kimberley in the northern Cape. The ISL supported as many of the struggles of African, Coloured and Indian workers as possible, raising money, providing publicity and addressing crowds wherever possible, and forming a Native Labour Defence fund to raise money.²⁹ Under the capitalist system the “black proletarian’s portion is to slave for the white boss always; to grovel for a below subsistence wage, to die by the thousands in slum, location and kraal; to have no wants, no ambitions, no self-respect”.³⁰

For his part, Meli presented the ISL as a practically all-white organisation.³¹ This too, is not accurate. The ISL systematically engaged with black political organisations, held the first May Day rallies on the Witwatersrand directed at workers of colour, produced materials in isiZulu and

²⁷ *Int.*, 14 January 1916, “The First Conference of the League”.

²⁸ *Int.*, 19 October 1917, “The Pass Laws: organise for their abolition”.

²⁹ For example, *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 March 1919, “White Workers’ Sympathy with Natives”, quoted in Ulrich, 1998, *op cit.*, p. 8; *The International*, 7 March 1919, “The Terror in Africa”; *The International*, 7 March 1919, “The Ice Broken”; *The International*, 18 April 1919, “League Notes”; *The International*, 6 June 1919, “Labour Notes”; *The International*, 2 May 1919, “Defend Your Comrades!”; *The International*, 9 May 1919, “On the Drum”; *The International*, 25 July 1919, “The ‘Firm-and-Just’ Policy”; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 80

³⁰ *The International*, 7 March 1919, “The Terror in Africa”

³¹ Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the Anc.*, p. 61

seSotho, and formed four unions amongst workers of colour. Most of the leadership of these unions was recruited to the ISL, among them Cetiwe and Kraai of the IWA, Johnny Gomas and Fred Pienaar of the Clothing Workers' Industrial Union, and Bernard Sigamoney and R.K. Moodley of the Indian Workers Industrial Union.

The IWA and ISL also included notable African militants like Thibedi, who was a "genius at getting people together, whether workers in a particular industry, women, location residents, or whatever was needed at the moment";³² the IWA was crucial, in both Johannesburg and Cape Town, in generating a layer of African activists who championed struggle against capitalism, direct action, and syndicalist organisation. (Meanwhile, in Cape Town the Industrial Socialist League—not to be confused with the ISL—formed the revolutionary syndicalist Sweets and Jam Workers' Industrial Union amongst Africans and Coloureds; key syndicalists of colour in this city included Nodzandza, B. Kies, A. Brown).³³

Thus, if we look at the local anarchist and syndicalist movement in South Africa *as a whole* – including the specific *political* Industrial Socialist League in syndicalist *unions* on the Town, Durban, and Kimberley, clear that the movement as a with an important cadre of



groups like the ISL (and the Cape Town), *and* the Witwatersrand, and in Cape and the IWA – it is quite whole was a multiracial one people of colour.

³² Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 108.

³³ See Lucien van der Walt, "Anarchism and Syndicalism in an African Port City: The Revolutionary Traditions of Cape Town's Multiracial Working Class, 1904–1931," *Labor History* 52, no. 2 (2011).

*Fred (Reuben) Cetiwe, a leading figure in the syndicalist IWA*³⁴

Anarchism and syndicalism in the colonial and postcolonial world

It should be mentioned, finally, that there was nothing unusual about the influence of anarchism, in its revolutionary syndicalist form, on bodies like the ISL, IWA, the Clothing Workers' Industrial Union, the Horse Drivers' Union, the Indian Workers Industrial Union, the Industrial Socialist League and the Sweets and Jam Workers' Industrial Union.

Eric Hobsbawm notes that before 1917, "the revolutionary movement" was predominantly "anarcho-syndicalist."³⁵ "Between Marx's death and Lenin's sudden rise to power in 1917, orthodox Marxism was in the minority as far as leftist opposition to capitalism and imperialism was concerned – successful mainly in the more advanced industrial and Protestant states of Western and Central Europe, and generally pacific in its political positions."³⁶

Anarchism and syndicalism predominated in the left and labour movements for many years across the colonial and postcolonial world, large parts of in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe and Ireland, and played a key role in anti-imperialist struggles in many of these countries, sometimes well into the 1950s.³⁷ This influence was starkly evident in the late 1910s, not least in the Ghadr Party, in the unions linked to the Easter Rising, and in the risings in Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Portugal, Argentina, Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Czechia, Egypt, China and Korea. (Indeed, 1918 to 1920 saw the first successful anarchist revolution took place in the Ukraine, in a revolutionary secession by the wealthiest and most important of Russia's colonies).

The emergence of the SANNC

³⁴ From T.D. Mweli Skota, editor and compiler, [? 1930] n.d, *The African Yearly Register: being an illustrated biographical dictionary (who's who) of black folks in Africa*, R.I. Esson, Johannesburg, p. 292

³⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Abacus, 1993). pp. 72-3. The unusual spelling of "marxism" appears in Hobsbawm's text.

³⁶ B. Anderson, "Preface," in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism and Social Revolution*, ed. Steven J. Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010)., p. xiv; also see Lucien Van der Walt and Steven J. Hirsch, "Rethinking Anarchism and Syndicalism: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience, 1870–1940," in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism and Social Revolution* ed. Steven J. Hirsch and Lucien Van der Walt (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010)., p. xxxv

³⁷ Van der Walt and Hirsch, "Rethinking Anarchism and Syndicalism: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience, 1870–1940.", pp.

The founders of the SANNC were members of the African elite, a group had emerged by the late nineteenth century from amongst wealthier chiefs and westernized Africans, and included small capitalists, prosperous farmers, educated professionals and skilled workers, both in the Orange Free State and Transvaal, in the Cape, and Natal.³⁸ The SANNC (and early ANC) were moderate nationalists, who sought, like many others in the colonial world of the British Empire, a fair and just integration *into* the Empire. They did not advocate republicanism or independence, and stopped for many decades short of calling for universal franchise: the 1923 ANC constitution affirmed it sought only for “equal rights for all civilised men”;³⁹ only in the 1940s did the ANC even admit women to full membership.

The initial leadership comprised twelve ministers, a building contractor, a teacher, a newspaper editor, and a labour recruiter and interpreter, supplemented by an upper “house of chiefs” modelled on the British House of Lords.⁴⁰ Seeking better deal in modern South Africa, the SANNC also inculcated a conservative outlook and respect for African tradition.⁴¹ Like the leadership, much of the membership was drawn from the African elite: it is often described as a “petty bourgeoisie,” but if it included sections of the pre-colonial African aristocracy, capitalists, and professionals, it also included rather more modest groups, like clerks, teachers, compositors, carpenters and other skilled workers.

In the Cape—and to a rather more limited extent, Natal—this elite had access to the qualified franchise, but from the late nineteenth century also faced increased obstacles. The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, as a British dominion that merged British colonies, Afrikaner republics and African territories, entrenched colonial relations and white domination. The qualified franchise was retained in the Cape and Natal, but only at provincial level: no person of colour could take a seat in the national parliament; the African “reserves” were governed through traditional authorities, the chiefs and kings reduced to tax collectors and labour recruiters; Africans, in general,

³⁸ See Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 86; Colin Bundy, 1972, “The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry”, *African Affairs*, no. 71; Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido, 1983, “Inboeksellings and Oorlams: the creation and transformation of a servile class”, in Belinda Bozzoli, editor, 1983, *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: capitalist penetration and popular response*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg; Tim Keegan, 1983, “The Sharecropping Economy, African Class Formation and the 1913 Natives Land Act in the Highveld Maize Belt”, in Belinda Bozzoli, editor, 1983, *op cit.*; Jon Lewis, 1984, “The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry: a critique and reassessment”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol.11, no. 1; Marks, S. and R. Rathbone, R., editors, 1982, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African class formation, culture and consciousness, 1870-1930*, Harlow, Longman; Nicole Ulrich, 1998, *Class, Race and Protest in Bloemfontein, 1919-1925*, paper presented at the Postgraduate Forum, University of the Witwatersrand. A fascinating study of the African intelligentsia is provided by Ntongela Masilela, 2003, “New Negro Modernity and New African Modernity”, paper presented to The Black Atlantic: literatures, histories, cultures forum, Zurich

³⁹ Quoted in Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 387

⁴⁰ Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 36

⁴¹ See Masilela, 2003, *op cit.*, pp. 33-38

could not carry weapons, except “police boys” who were given *assegais* (spears), not guns; Africans were largely forbidden to drink “White liquor”.

Even the African elite, such as it was, lived in a situation where cheap and unfree African labour, often migrant, formed the bedrock of the mines – as well as state industry, and the growing commercial farming and manufacturing sectors –and where the cheapness of African labour was primarily a function of the blacks’ historic incorporation into the country as a subject people: in this sense, local “capitalist relations of exploitation were constructed upon colonial relations of domination”.⁴²

The 1913 Land Act restricted African land ownership to the reserves, and banned all African land tenure elsewhere, besides labour tenancy, crippling the African peasantry and emergent capitalist farmers.⁴³ The Urban Areas Act of 1923 segregated business districts to the disadvantage of African, as well as Coloured and Indian, merchants. The civil service thwarted the careers of the educated, outside of a few areas like translation, while a discriminatory welfare system was firmly in place. The Cape and Natal franchises were whittled away from the late 1920s,⁴⁴ while most voting qualifications for white men were abolished in 1931, with white women were fully enfranchised in 1930.

Despite its elitism, and its small size and weak structures, the early SANNC/ ANC did raise issues affecting all Africans, including workers.⁴⁵ Naturally, in doing so, and as acting as a key voice for African grievances, it acted as a pole of attraction to at least some workers.

Initial links between the SANNC, ISL and IWA

According to the ISL, racially exclusive and craft unions had to be replaced by industrial unions open to all races; parliamentary socialism had to be replaced with mass action and the revolutionary general strike; the focus on white labour had to be replaced with an organising drive across the colour line, on a class basis.⁴⁶

⁴² Colin Bundy, “‘Left, Right, Left, Right’: the CPSA in the 1930s and 1930s”, in Colin Bundy (ed.), *The History of the South African Communist Party*, Cape Town: Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies, University of Cape Town, 1991, 32.

⁴³ See Colin Bundy, 1972, *op cit.*, pp. 384-5

⁴⁴ Africans were removed from the common voters’ roll in the Cape in 1936, and could henceforth vote for three White members of parliament and three in the Cape provincial Council; Africans countrywide could elect four White senators. A separate Natives’ Representative Council was also established: elected through a complicated formula, it was purely advisory. Coloureds were removed from the common voting roll in the Cape in 1957, and were separately represented in parliament by Whites until 1969, when a Coloured Persons’ Representative Council was created. A nominated South African Indian Council was only formed in 1964.

⁴⁵ Limb, “The Anc and Black Workers.”, p. 285

⁴⁶ J.M. Gibson, 23 February 1916, “Race Prejudice,” *Int.*, emphasis in original.

The ISL placed enormous emphasis, from the start, on forming revolutionary syndicalist unions, on the IWW model, amongst workers of colour, and on recruiting African, Coloured and Indian members, and on building an African, Coloured and Indian cadre. An early recruit was Thibedi, an African schoolteacher who joined the ISL around 1915 after hearing ISL militant S.P. Bunting in Johannesburg.⁴⁷ A brilliant man with a “genius at getting people together, whether workers in a particular industry, women, location residents, or whatever was needed at the moment”,⁴⁸ he had some connections with the SANNC, and lived in Johannesburg.

Key to the ISL’s approach to people of colour was linking its principled opposition to national oppression with active and *specific* efforts to mobilise people of colour around *both* class and national concerns.⁴⁹ The *International* stressed that its approach was on a working class basis:⁵⁰

We give increasing attention to the native workers not because they are natives but because they are workers... We are not concerned with the civil disabilities of Indian storekeepers or native lawyers or coloured middlemen. For us they all belong to the parasitic class. Our concern with the natives and our faith in them is our concern in them as workers, as potentially the revolutionary proletariat...

Given the absence of an African trade union movement, activists from the ISL found that “increasing attention to the native workers” involved, initially at least, contact with the existing nationalist groups, notwithstanding its criticisms of such formations. In February 1916, an ISL meeting in Johannesburg protested the 1913 Land Act,⁵¹ the “first coming together in the Transvaal of white socialists and the African National Congress”.⁵² The ISL viewed the Land Act as a “barefaced attempt” to drive the African worker “cheap, helpless and unorganised, into the labour market ... ensuring to employers generally and particularly industrial employers, that most coveted plum of modern Imperialism, plentiful cheap labour”.⁵³

In June 1916, it hosted the SANNC’s Robert Grendon at a June 1916 meeting “with a large number of natives”, and welcome SANNC vice-president, and it was declared to “boisterous

⁴⁷ On Thibedi, see Lucien van der Walt, “Thibedi, T.W. (1888-1960)”, in Henry Louis Gates and Emmanuel Akyeampong (eds.), *Dictionary of African Biography*, Oxford University Press (in press); also Drew, (ed.), *South Africa’s*, 72 note 19; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 108; *Umsebenzi: the voice of the South African Communist Party*, May 1991, “Party Pioneers: T.W. Thibedi: the first African Communist”, vol. 7, no. 2 (new series).

⁴⁸ Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 108.

⁴⁹ See van der Walt, “Reflections”.

⁵⁰ *The International*, 22 February 1918, “Pro-Working class, not Pro-Colour”. This is also reproduced in Hirson, 1988a, *op cit.*, pp. 105-6

⁵¹ *Int.*, 18 February 1916, “Workers of the World Unite”.

⁵² Forman, “Chapters”, 54.

⁵³ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 54

approval” it was declared that the white unions’ colour bar policies must end.⁵⁴ The meeting was attended by a “full and good humoured audience, with a large number of natives” present, including Msane, “the veteran spokesman of the industrialised native”.⁵⁵ (Some political difficulties were inevitable, as when Grendon, in line with the SANNC’s support for the British war effort, proposed a motion of sorrow at the death of Lord Kitchener, shocking the ISL).⁵⁶

Other meetings followed. In July 1916, a Johannesburg meeting discussed the “barbarities to which the Indians in Natal were treated”.⁵⁷ In March 1917, the ISL held a protest meeting against the newly proposed Native Affairs Administration Bill (finally passed in 1927), which essentially granted the Governor-General the right to rule Africans by decree.⁵⁸ The meeting was “an historic occasion as socialists demonstrated for the first time on the Rand against racial legislation that did not directly affect whites”.⁵⁹ The meeting, with a “large sprinkling of natives” and “a solid block of whites in full sympathy”, was addressed by the ISL’s Bunting and Ivon Jones, and the SANNC’s Msane and Horatio Mbelle.⁶⁰ Horatio Mbelle commended the ISL for its “sincere sympathy”.⁶¹ An article in the *International*, condemning the Bill, was subsequently reprinted in by Natal’s *Ilange Lase Natal*, published by John Dube, president of the Natal SANNC.⁶²

The ISL declared itself definitely pleased with “the increased interest and freedom” shown by Africans in its meetings, and commented that “the hilarity and good feeling” which integrated meetings “produce in the mind must be due to the fact that Socialism is beginning to right a great wrong”.⁶³ SANNC speakers shared the platform at the ISL’s 1917 May Day event, which was disrupted by white thugs – such attacks on ISL were now becoming a regular event.⁶⁴ In 1918, the ISL’s May Day celebrations took place in Ferreirstown, a mainly Coloured area, the first time May Day in the Transvaal was “directed to non-European workers”.⁶⁵ The speakers were also an interracial group. Besides white ISL militants like H.C. Hanscombe and T.P. Tinker, they also included Thibedi, and R. Talbot-Williams of African Political Organisation (APO, renamed the African People’s Organisation) – a formation that essentially the SANNC’s Coloured equivalent.

⁵⁴ *Int.*, 9 June 1916, “Another Blow to Colour Prejudice”.

⁵⁵ *The International*, 9 June 1916, “Another Blow to Colour Prejudice”

⁵⁶ *The International*, 16 June 1916, “Disloyalty”

⁵⁷ *The International*, 28 July 1916, “Branch Notes”

⁵⁸ *The International*, 16 March 1917, “Workers of the World Uniting”

⁵⁹ Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 198; also see Johns 1995: 71

⁶⁰ *The International*, 16 March 1917, “Workers of the World Uniting”

⁶¹ *The International*, 16 March 1917, “Workers of the World Uniting”

⁶² *The International*, 4 May 1917, “American Reveries”

⁶³ *The International*, 9 June 1916, “Another Blow to Colour Prejudice”

⁶⁴ *Int.*, 4 May 1917, “Mob Law on Mayday” and “Hooliganism: the Last Ditch”.

⁶⁵ Forman, “Chapters”, 65-66.

Having committed itself publicly to the formation of unions amongst people of colour, who were neglected by the existing unions, the ISL launched an Indian Workers' Industrial Union "on the lines of the IWW" in Durban in March 1917.⁶⁶ In mid-1917, the ISL launched a weekly night school for Africans in Johannesburg, with classes on political economy and the One Big Union. Sessions attracted around thirty regular students. Bunting, Dunbar and Gibson were prominent lecturers, stressing the ISL wanted to "make the natives who are the working-class of South Africa be organised and have rights as a white man".⁶⁷

The Africans who enrolled seem to have been largely drawn from multi-racial slums of Johannesburg, and the nearby black "locations". The great majority enrolled gave addresses in downtown Johannesburg – Commissioner Street, Fox Street, Sauer Street, and Marshall Street were particularly prominent – although one was from Village Deep Mine, and another from "No. 3 Compound, Crown Mines"; both mines bordered on Johannesburg.⁶⁸ A number were already active in the Transvaal Native Congress. (Holding the weekly meeting on Thursday nights probably played an important role in making it very difficult for workers from the mine and municipal compounds to attend: it was generally far more difficult for these workers to secure permission to leave the compounds during the week than at the end of the Saturday shift).

In September 1917, the classes were transformed into the IWA, a union explicitly modelled on the IWW; in fact it was known as the IWW until a meeting in October.⁶⁹ "If we strike for everything", Dunbar commented, "we can get everything ... If we can only spread the matter far and wide amongst the natives, we can easily unite".⁷⁰ This was the first African trade union in South Africa's history – indeed, one of the very first, if not the first – in Britain's African empire. Rather than advocate the narrow bread-and-butter trade unionism suggested by some accounts, he called for a direct challenge to the cheap labour system: "natives should first of all have political rights so as to avoid pass laws, and then they will be able to strike for the other things".⁷¹ Dunbar explained the class system, stressing the revolutionary potential of the "workers, every working man, black

⁶⁶ *Int.*, 7 April 1916, "Call to the Native Workers"; *Int.*, 3 August 1917, "A Forward Move in Durban".

⁶⁷ Wilfrid Jali, report on meeting of 19 July 1917, "The ISL and Coloured Workers".

⁶⁸ Membership list in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17, *op cit.*

⁶⁹ R. Moroosi, report on meeting of 11 October 1917, "The ISL and Coloured Workers", in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17. The reference was not lost on State officials: in a confidential letter to the Commissioner of Police, the Secretary for Native Affairs asked if "the title of the society adopted at certain meetings, viz. 'Industrial Workers of the World' is generally recognised?" It was possible that "this is a branch of the wider organisation which would appear to have been suppressed in Australia and New Zealand". See Secretary of Native Affairs to Commissioner of Police, 14 November 1917, 983/17/F.473, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17

⁷⁰ Wilfrid Jali, report on meeting of 26 July 1917, "The ISL and Coloured Workers".

⁷¹ Such statements show that Dunbar's argument that there was not a "native problem but a workers' problem" at the first conference of the International Socialist League by no means meant he viewed that the special oppression of African workers was irrelevant. See *The International*, 14 January 1916, "The First Conference of the League". The hostile interpretation is put forward by Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 193.

and white”,⁷² and the necessity for “all the workers black and white to come together in a union and be organised together and fight against the capitalists and take them down from their ruling place”.⁷³

The IWA was run by a committee elected by the membership; the key figures were recruited into the ISL. The IWA’s and ISL’s Cetiwe, who was educated at Qumbu in the Eastern Cape and who worked in Johannesburg as a picture framer’s assistant,⁷⁴ embraced ISL doctrines. Addressing a meeting of the IWA in May 1918, for instance, he urged that “we should go to Compounds and preach our gospel”.⁷⁵

We are here for Organisation, so that as soon as all of your fellow workers are organised, then we can see what we can do to abolish the Capitalist-System. We are here for the salvation of the workers. We are here to organise and to fight for our rights and benefits.

Cetiwe worked closely with Kraai: another IWA and ISL member, he had been educated at Peddie in the Eastern Cape, and who was then working in Johannesburg as a foreman and a deliveryman.⁷⁶ Revolutionary syndicalist literature in African languages like isiZulu and seSotho circulated across the Witwatersrand, including into the mine compounds, and even moved with migrants to rural Rustenburg, Heilbron, and Cala.⁷⁷ In August 1917, the ISL hosted a conference of radical trade unionists,⁷⁸ including Cetiwe, Kraai and Thibedi, who also participated in the follow-up congress in Easter 1918.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, the IWA and ISL were meeting with the SANNC and the APO. In November and December 1917, the IWA had two joint meetings with the APO and the Transvaal SANNC on the question of organising African and Coloured workers.⁸⁰ The IWA also had a joint meeting with

⁷² Wilfred Jali, report on meeting of 26 July 1917, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17

⁷³ Wilfred Jali, report on meeting of 26 July 1917, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17

⁷⁴ T.D.M. Skota, *The African Yearly Register: being an illustrated biographical dictionary (who's who) of black folks in Africa*. Johannesburg: R.I. Esson, no date given [?1932], 137; *Int.*, 13 September 1918.

⁷⁵ Unlabelled report, May 1918 (full date illegible), in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17

⁷⁶ Skota, 167; *Int.*, 13 September 1918.

⁷⁷ Also see Hirson and Williams, 173, and F.A. Johnstone, "The IWA on the Rand: socialist organising amongst black workers on the Rand 1917-18", in Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 258-260.

⁷⁸ This account draws heavily on Johns, 66-68.

⁷⁹ Johns, 67-8.

⁸⁰ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 73; Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*

the APO, on the question of
and nine IWA members were
Political Organisation



organising workers of colour,
elected to address an African
meeting.⁸¹

Hamilton Kraai, activist in the syndicalist IWA

While the APO's Talbot-Williams subsequently wrote an IWW-style pamphlet on *The Burning Question of Labour* for Coloured workers (published in both ISL and APO edition),⁸² relations with the SANNC in Johannesburg were initially more fraught. At an IWA meeting on the 3 January 1918, hostility towards the Transvaal SANNC was quite evident: "some of the members seemed to dislike the members of the Congress to join us as workers".⁸³ One member, for example, insisted "we must not talk about Congress anymore, as they are the men who organise rich and high people who are the men who suck our blood and sell us".⁸⁴

While the November 1917 joint meeting between the IWA, APO and Transvaal SANNC went fairly smoothly, the second meeting saw a marked division between the "horny handed" IWA, taking up one side of the hall, and a smaller group of Transvaal SANNC leaders, "more sedate and

⁸¹ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 73; Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 258

⁸² Copies may be found on the 1918 microfilm of *The International* at the Johannesburg Public Library, and in Department of Justice, "International Socialist League, reports on the activities of", JUS 526, 3/527/17, National Archives, Pretoria.

⁸³ As quoted in Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 260

⁸⁴ As quoted in Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 260

middle-class looking”.⁸⁵ The “Industrial Workers put in good class war points, and ... seemed to have a knack of ‘riling’ the T.N.C. ‘respectables’ beyond all patience”. Indeed, a Mr. Sebeho of the IWA almost came to blows with the Thomas L. Mvabaza, after he demanded to know what the SANNC was doing for black workers.⁸⁶

This reflected the ISL’s own critique of the SANNC (and APO) as a party of the black elite, “completely alien to the great mass of the Native proletariat”.⁸⁷ The critique *was* true in many ways – the APO and SANNC were very moderate, and routinely lined up with “law-and-order” – *but there was* some space for cooperation, as the ISL’s own experience in Johannesburg from 1916 had shown. Moreover, a radical wing was emerging at the time in the Transvaal SANNC, opposed to the moderate leadership.⁸⁸ This wing overlapped with the IWA and the ISL, since militants like Cetiwe, Kraai and Thibedi played an active role in all three organisations.

The syndicalists, in turn, began to have an important influence on other SANNC figures at the time, notably C.S. Mabaso, Mvabaza, Daniel Letanka, and J.D. Ngojo. All of these figures were involved with the SANNC paper, *Abantu Batho* (“The People”), while Ngojo was also a member of the IWA. Mvabaza had attended ISL meetings since 1917, and his speeches at the time clearly showed the imprint of that organisation’s ideology, which presented the demand to the crowd.⁸⁹ It was testament to the impact of revolutionary syndicalist bloc in the SANNC at the time was that the paper moved from criticising the IWA⁹⁰ to vigorously promoting it in its columns:⁹¹

Perhaps the people outside Johannesburg are not aware that there is an organisation of workers which is trying to organise itself called the Industrial Workers of Africa. It has been found that the whole country, its money and wealth, is made by labour, but all for nothing ... These men have found out that it is necessary to start an organisation which is known as the Industrial Workers of Africa.

⁸⁵ *The International*, 4 January 1918, "A Unique Meeting"

⁸⁶ Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 260

⁸⁷ *Int.*, 5 April 1918; *Int.*, 19 October 1917, "The Pass Laws: organise for their abolition"; *Int.*, 19 October 1917, "Beware of Labour Cranks".

⁸⁸ Philip Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917- 1920: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand", in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness 1870-1930*, Harlow: Longman, 1982.

⁸⁹ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 294; also see "Mvabaza, Thomas Levi", in Verwey, editor, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 193-5

⁹⁰ It initially referred to the ISL as “cranks” best avoided, drawing a scathing attack from the *International*. See *The International*, 19 October 1917, "Beware of Labour Cranks"

⁹¹ Quoted in *The Workers’ Dreadnought*, 20 April 1918, “From South Africa”

With their orientation towards the working class movement, the African syndicalists were a far cry from the “Black bellwethers for the capitalist class” lambasted in the International.⁹² They were eloquent proof that neither the African middle class, nor the African nationalist organisations, were politically homogeneous, and that the fact that the nationalists raised grievances around racial discrimination and prejudice attracted people who formed the nuclei of radical factions that rejected the politics of nationalism itself.

It was inevitable, then, that tensions between the syndicalists and the traditional SANNC approach, of moderation, deputations and petitions, would play out in within the SANNC itself. The hold of the moderates and conservatives was under a great deal of pressure at the time, particularly on the Witwatersrand. The countrywide upsurge of worker action and African interest in trade unionism suggested an alternative to the traditional approach of deputations and petitions, and whole layers of the African elite across the Witwatersrand were in turmoil as inflation and racial discrimination pressed them ever closer to the urban African workers amongst whom they lived.⁹³ As the SANNC leadership became deeply fractured by political and social divisions, the more prosperous, particularly those with independent sources of income, tended to remain loyal to the old ways, while more marginal layers cast around for an alternative – and some to socialism and syndicalism.⁹⁴ The rise of the IWA and ISL was crucial in winning a section of the politically active Africans on the Witwatersrand to a revolutionary syndicalist outlook.

If the ISL was correct in its *overall* account of the class character of nationalism, it had not adequately recognised the *contradictions* that could emerge *within* nationalist groups. The activities of the African syndicalists in this period showed that these contradictions were important, although the ISL never fully grasped the lesson: a March 1921, for example, the ISL’s David Ivon Jones still dismissed “The Native Congress” as merely a “small coterie of educated natives ... black-coated respectables”.⁹⁵

Revolutionary syndicalists, the SANNC and 1918 Witwatersrand general strike movement

The process of radicalisation was demonstrated by the attempted African general strike of July 1918. Earlier that year, 152 African municipal workers were sentenced to hard labour for breaching their contracts by striking: this inflamed black Johannesburg. Inspired by a successful

⁹² Cope [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 212-3

⁹³ As noted, particularly, by Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*

⁹⁴ Millenarian movements also had a powerful appeal: see for example Robert Edgar, 1988, *Because they Chose the Plan of God: the story of the Bulhoek massacre*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, and Couzens, 1982, *op cit.*

⁹⁵ Ivon Jones, [29 March 1921] 1981, *op cit.*, p. 53

strike by white workers at the Johannesburg power station,⁹⁶ the Africans in the municipal compounds had also gone on strike.⁹⁷ A wave of anger at the sentencing swept the Africans in the multi-racial slums of downtown Johannesburg. From June 1918, there were a number of joint rallies by the IWA, ISL and Transvaal SANNC.⁹⁸

At these meetings, the influence of revolutionary syndicalism was evident. The first meeting was organised on June 10 at the Ebenezer Hall in Main Street, Johannesburg, by the Transvaal SANNC. The moderate Horatio Mbelle proposed that a petition be sent to the Governor-General in protest against the sentencing.⁹⁹ His view was challenged from the floor by an IWA member named Mtota, who called for a general strike to be held if the workers were not released.¹⁰⁰ When another moderate, Isaiah Mbelle, the secretary-general of the SANNC, replied that the "Congress at Bloemfontein decided its sentiment was against any form of strike," and that if "we do not stop the strike the whole of Johannesburg will be in flames" the crowd told him to "let it burn".¹⁰¹

Tinker, then acting secretary of the ISL, proposed a second mass meeting, under IWA and Transvaal SANNC auspices, and -person joint committee of the IWA, the ISL and Transvaal SANNC was set up on to propose the way ahead at a subsequent meeting.¹⁰² This effectively placed the leadership of the campaign largely in syndicalist hands, for even the SANNC figures on the committee, like Mvabaza, were influenced by the revolutionary syndicalists. It was from this point that the rallies began to develop into a general strike by Africans across the Witwatersrand.

The central role of the syndicalists and those linked to them in this campaign – which was, it is worth stressing, the closest South African syndicalists ever came towards organising a general strike – has been gleaned from many accounts, which treat the protests mainly as a Transvaal Native Congress movement, while doing little to unravel the political influences on the Congress at the time.¹⁰³

At the next rally, attended by a thousand, on June 19,¹⁰⁴ the joint committee addressed the crowd,¹⁰⁵ and the predominant influence of the syndicalists in that structure was soon clear: it

⁹⁶ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 289; Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 66

⁹⁷ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 290-1

⁹⁸ Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 263, 271 note 834

⁹⁹ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 291; Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 66

¹⁰⁰ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 291

¹⁰¹ Report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 19 June 1918 by unknown detective, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17, *op cit.*

¹⁰² Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 263

¹⁰³ Forman studiously avoids mentioning the presence of Industrial Workers of Africa members: there are just "speakers" or members of the Transvaal Native Congress: Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 66-9

¹⁰⁴ Report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 19 June 1918 by unknown detective, in JD 3/527/17. Bonner gives a figure of 1,000 people present; the *International* estimated twice as many: Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 292; *The International*, 21 June 1918, "Native Unrest"

¹⁰⁵ Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 263

proposed, to acclaim, that the imprisoned strikers be released at once, and that all African workers on the Witwatersrand should be given a wage increase of 1-shilling-a-day from July 1, failing which an African general strike would take place across the Witwatersrand.¹⁰⁶ According to Mvabaza, speaking for the committee,

If they do not agree to pay every native 1/- per day then the strike will follow on the 2 July 1918. There will be no native working from Springs to the West Rand.¹⁰⁷

The capitalists and workers are at war everywhere in every country... The white workers do not write to the Governor-General when they want more pay. They strike and get what they should.¹⁰⁸

Tinker also spoke, stating that there were also black and yellow socialists, and supported the proposal for a general strike. However, he stressed the need for thorough "industrial organisation" as the means of organising a successful strike, and the need to avoid giving the police a chance to use violence.¹⁰⁹ Tinker also went to caution against giving the police a chance to use violence against the workers:¹¹⁰

If the natives knew their force, they could destroy Johannesburg in a day or stop the mines in an hour; but to do that they would have to organise and all come out on strike, for which 20,000 men were necessary. Let them go home and organise, and tell the other boys to come out; if they meant to come out on Saturday the 29, they must be quick. The strike was not for one shilling a day but for Africa which they deserved.

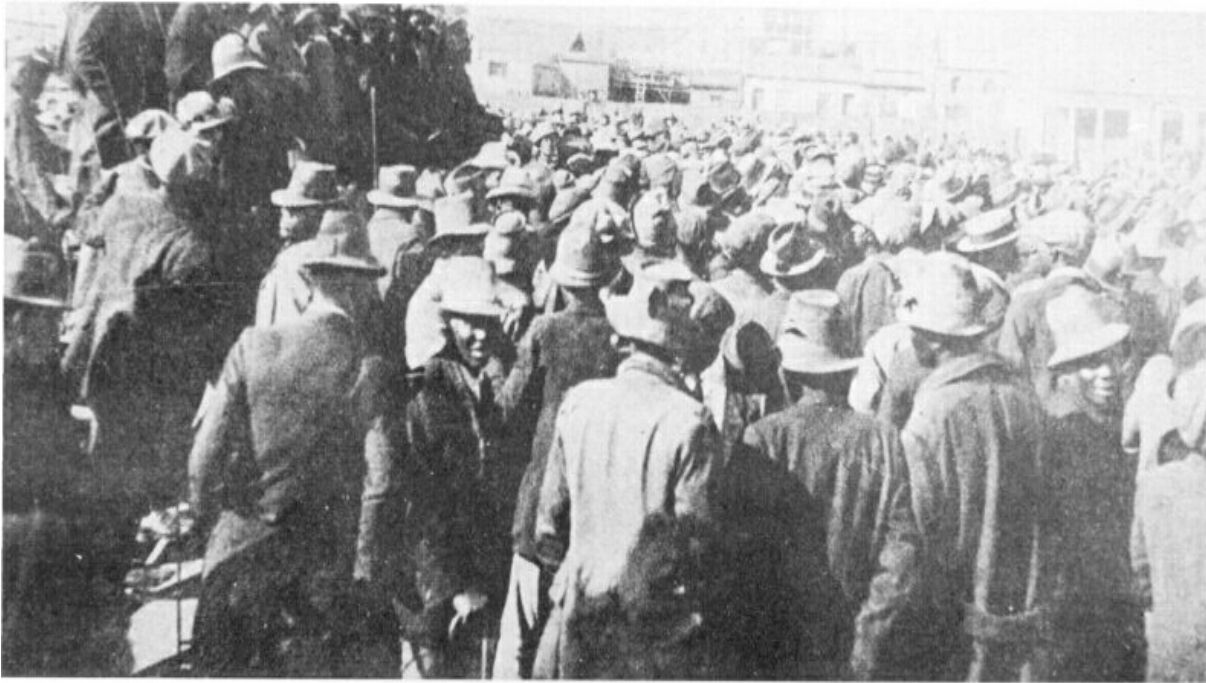
¹⁰⁶ Unnamed detective, 19 June 1918, report on meeting of TNC and Industrial Workers of Africa, in These files are hereafter referred to as Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17; also see Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 294

¹⁰⁷ Report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 19 June 1918 by unknown detective, in JD 3/527/17. It is clear from this document that the resolution had been developed in the committee, and was not simply Mvabaza's personal view, an impression that does arise from some of the literature.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Luli Callinicos, *Working Life: townships and popular culture on the Rand, 1886-1940* Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1987, p. 90.

¹⁰⁹ *The International*, 21 June 1918, "Native Unrest"; also see Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 67. The source materials are somewhat contradictory at this point. At least one police report states unequivocally that Tinker was *not* given the platform. See report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 19 June 1918 by unknown detective, in JD 3/527/17.

¹¹⁰ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 68; also see *The International*, 2 August 1918, "The Geweld Case"



A

mass rally in Johannesburg in June 1918, addressed by speakers from the IWA, ISL and Transvaal SANNC.¹¹¹

These developments alarmed the conservative nationalists in the Transvaal SANNC. Isaiah Mbelle telegraphed the Minister of Justice to inform him that the “senior officers of our congress” were having trouble “calming the natives” and appealed for clemency for the sanitary strikers as soon as possible.¹¹² Msane circulated a leaflet that argued against strikes and boycotts along the lines, which called on African workers to “approach your employers in the proper way... Not a single man must leave work.”¹¹³ Sol Plaatje, another SANNC moderate, noted the uproar that ensued: “Mr. Msane became very unpopular among the younger native workers on the Reef ... and earned ... the name among the natives of ‘Isita- sa Bantu’”, enemy of the people.¹¹⁴

By this stage the momentum for a general strike was very powerful indeed, and another joint committee was quickly established to propose a concrete strategy to secure the demand. The general strike was provisionally set for ten days’ time, that is, July 1. Department of Mines correspondence at the time showed a clear appreciation of the situation:¹¹⁵

Native meetings still continue. Intention to pull out all town natives. To this end being assisted by native women. If successful will then try Mine natives. At present

¹¹¹ Peter Kallaway and Patrick Pearson, 1986, *Johannesburg: images and continuities: a history of working class life through pictures, 1885-1935*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, p. 97

¹¹² Cited in Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 292

¹¹³ Quoted in Willan, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 208 note 36

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Willan, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 207

¹¹⁵ Memorandum of 2 April, probably 1918, cited in Alexander, 2001, *op cit.*, p. 521

all quiet on mines. Bunting, Tinker, Ritch, Andrews [identified with ISL] are very active. Strong application force necessary to prevent present position becoming dangerous.

The authorities and large sections of the white public were alarmed. The government mobilised soldiers, and marched through Johannesburg in a show of strength. However, the general strike, set for 1 July 1918, was called off at the last minute. The cancellation of the strike probably reflected the view amongst members of the ISL and IWA that the African working class was not organised enough to carry out a protest on this magnitude,¹¹⁶ possibly some cold feet at the prospect of leading a vast movement, and certainly the lack of a decisive programme of action. The IWA held a meeting on Thursday, June 27, attended by around 160 people, including members of the ISL and the Transvaal SANNC, but nothing concrete was decided. A meeting the next day, also attended by Talbot-Williams, was just as indecisive.¹¹⁷

There is little doubt that the general strike would have been at least a partial success. The news that the strike was called off did not reach everybody in time. Several thousand African mineworkers therefore went on strike on a number of gold mines, to be met by armed police.¹¹⁸ There were clashes at several compounds, where mineworkers, armed with pick handles, iron bars and pipes, and axes fought the police. Given that the strike movement was centred amongst the urban Africans of Johannesburg, and given the difficulties of communicating with workers in the compounds, who often only received news of events off the mine premises on the weekends when they visited friends in town and at other mines,¹¹⁹ this mix-up was inevitable.

The wildcat strikes soon extended beyond the gold mines of the Witwatersrand to the coalmines at Witbank,¹²⁰ where a series of strikes began in August,¹²¹ the first major strikes at the town.¹²² The strikes at the collieries were partly a response to broader factors such as inflation, but the example of African unrest on the Witwatersrand and the mix of nationalist, socialist and syndicalist ideas at the time, were also important.¹²³ Unlike the situation on the Witwatersrand, the

¹¹⁶ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 295

¹¹⁷ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 116 note 1

¹¹⁸ *The International*, 5 July 1918, "Capital and Labour"; Wickens gives the number as 15,000: Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 114

¹¹⁹ A point stressed by T. Dunbar Moodie in his examination of the backdrop to the 1946 African mineworkers' strike: see Moodie, 1986, *op cit.*, pp. 7-12, 30

¹²⁰ Bonner, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 277

¹²¹ Alexander, 2001, *op cit.*, pp. 517-520

¹²² Alexander, 2004, *op cit.*, p. 127

¹²³ Alexander, 201, *op cit.*, pp. 519, 521

strikers at the collieries won a number of concessions, including better food and an amended shift system.¹²⁴

These developments showed the *potential* for a decisive action in 1918, providing a compelling demonstration of the spread of radical ideas and a militant mood, and the willingness of African workers to confront employers and the State. The movement of 1918 placed local syndicalists on the verge of leading a general strike, but they stepped back, and the opportunity was lost.

Subsequently, eight people were then arrested for incitement to public violence.¹²⁵ Five were ISL members (Bunting, Cetiwe, Hanscombe, Kraai and Tinker), and a sixth was a member of the IWA and the SANNC (Ngojo). The remaining two were Mvabaza and Letanka of *Abantu-Batho*. Police raided the ISL head office in Fox Street, and confiscated “practically everything of importance”, also raiding the homes of the whites accused.¹²⁶

This political trial, the first in modern South Africa to place both Africans and Whites in the dock together, may be seen as the forerunner of the trials of the 1940s and 1950s.¹²⁷ All of those arrested were either members of the syndicalist ISL and IWA, or of both, or were at least strongly sympathetic to those formations. It is by no means an exaggeration, then, to suggest that the trial was, in part, a trial of Witwatersrand *syndicalists*. This is even more evident when it is noted that the main aim of the prosecution was to blame both the African sanitary workers, and the July strikes by African mineworkers on the IWA and ISL. The arrestees were, in short, hardly the gallery of nationalist leaders portrayed in some works: what they shared most was a close, often formal, connection with the revolutionary syndicalist movement.¹²⁸

The whites, as well as Cetiwe and Kraai, “seized the occasion to make propaganda for the cause of industrial unionism for all and socialism for South Africa”,¹²⁹ submitting lengthy statements on syndicalism.¹³⁰ While the case collapsed, however, there were real consequences for many involved. Cetiwe, Kraai and Hanscombe (a shop assistant), all lost their jobs as a direct result,

¹²⁴ Alexander, 2001, *op cit.*, pp. 519-520 and p. 520 note 103

¹²⁵ Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 78.

¹²⁶ *The International*, 26 July 1918, “No Socialism for Natives: the case of ‘Luke Messina his mark’”; also see *The Socialist*, September 1918, “Proletarians Black and White, Unite!” and 7 September 1918, “The International”

¹²⁷ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 68-69

¹²⁸ See, for example, Luli Callinicos, *Working Life: townships and popular culture on the Rand, 1886-1940*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987, 90; Forman, “Chapters”, 69; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 78.

¹²⁹ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 75

¹³⁰ See *The International*, 30 August 1918, “The Need for industrial Organisation”, which was the submission to the court by Tinker; 6 September 1918, “Socialism and Violence”, submission to the court by S.P. Bunting; Hanscombe’s statement was not reproduced in the *International*, but is described in a note after S.P. Bunting’s statement as revolving on “passages from IWW literature on the subject” of violence.

leading the *International* to appeal for comrades to come to their assistance.¹³¹ When S.P. Bunting visited his mothers' family, the Lidgetts, in Natal in August, his fellow train passengers kept whispering and pointing at him,¹³² and the family ostracised him.¹³³ S.P. Bunting also launched a counter-claim for wrongful arrest.¹³⁴

The IWA was also severely shaken.¹³⁵ It was, however, soon reorganised by Thibedi, the Johannesburg IWA secretary from June 1918, with a "gratifyingly large attendance".¹³⁶ In October 1918, Tinker revived the study groups for Africans in Johannesburg.¹³⁷ Finally, two members of the IWA (most likely Cetiwe and Kraai) were present at the January 1919 annual ISL conference.¹³⁸

The Cape Native Congress, the IWA and the ICU

Connections between the revolutionary syndicalists and the SANNC also continued. W.H. "Bill" Andrews, the ISL's industrial organiser, was part of the ISL delegation that attended the December SANNC conference, which the ISL viewed as an opportunity, "however scanty", to "increase intercourse between white and black workers".¹³⁹ Andrews was invited to address the event, and outlined, with the help of translators, the ISL's aspirations to the "organisation of the wage workers, irrespective of race, colour or creed" to "take and run industry", abolishing exploitation and oppression.¹⁴⁰ (The Mayor of Johannesburg was also invited, however, and the delegates passed "loyal resolutions to the Flag after declaring their gross disabilities under its sway").¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, in March 1919, Cetiwe and Kraai played a leading role in a civil disobedience campaign against the pass laws, initiated by SANNC radicals. The campaign started with a meeting in the Vrededorp slum in western Johannesburg on Sunday the 30th March, where passes were collected from Africans present.¹⁴² A crowd marched on the Johannesburg pass offices on Albert

¹³¹ *The International*, 13 September 1918

¹³² S.P. Bunting, [letter of 31 August 1918] 1996a, in Brian Bunting, editor, 1996a, *op cit.*, pp. 31-2

¹³³ S.P. Bunting, [letter of 1 September 1918] 1996a, in Brian Bunting, editor, 1996a, *op cit.*, p. 33

¹³⁴ Letter from Deputy Commissioner of the Central Investigation Department, Transvaal Division, K.R. Vachell, 21 October 1918, "S.P. Bunting, Johannesburg, claim for unlawful arrest", to the Deputy Commissioner of Police in the Transvaal, held in file Department of Justice, JD 3/882/18, National Archives, Pretoria, entitled "Charge of Public Violence: S.P. Bunting"

¹³⁵ *Int.*, 26 July 1918, "No Socialism for Natives: the case of 'Luke Messina his mark'"; *Int.*, 13 September 1918. It did not collapse, as suggested by some sources, like Johns, 76; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, 132; Alex La Guma, *Jimmy La Guma*, edited by Mohamed Adhikari ed. Cape Town: Friends of the South African Library, [1964] 1997, 84.

¹³⁶ *Int.*, 13 September 1918; *Int.*, 28 February 1919.

¹³⁷ *The International*, 25 October 1918, "Native Study Class"

¹³⁸ *The International*, 10 January 1919, "1919 Annual Conference"

¹³⁹ *The International*, 13 December 1919, "A Native Congress"

¹⁴⁰ *The International*, 21 December 1918, "Nationalism Freedom's Foe"

¹⁴¹ *The International*, 21 December 1918, "Nationalism Freedom's Foe"

¹⁴² This account of events is based on Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 300-303; Hirson with Williams, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 182-3

Street the following day, led by two distinct SANNC leaderships, the radicals, represented by Cetiwe and Kraai, and their allies, like Mabaso, and the moderates, represented by Horatio Mbelle. For IWA members, an attack on the pass laws was essential. As Cetiwe said,¹⁴³

These passes are main chains, enchaining us from all our rights. These passes are the chains chaining us in our employers' yards, so that we cannot go about and see what we can do for ourselves ... It is the very same with a dog ...

Following an unsatisfactory meeting at the Pass Office, the deputation addressed the crowd, which sang "Rule Britannia" and gave three cheers for the King before putting its passes in sacks, and collecting passes from surrounding streets, gathering 2,000 in this way.¹⁴⁴ Police then waded into the crowd and began arresting people.¹⁴⁵ Subsequently, the protests spread quickly across the Witwatersrand, with groups going around collecting passes in bags and taking them to pass offices, where officials were informed that the passes were no longer wanted.¹⁴⁶

As arrests mounted, trials of protestors became the focus of the campaign. Large African crowds gathered outside the Magistrate's Court in Johannesburg, and made several attempts to rescue those on trial. As a result, police began moving the prisoners between the jail and the courts in columns with mounted guards.

Bunting appeared frequently in the Magistrate's Court as a *pro bono* attorney for the Africans arrested. He was assaulted by whites outside the court during a lunch hour towards the end of March, being "frog-marched" – carried along the streets face down by four people, each holding a limb.¹⁴⁷ By the time the pass law campaign died out in May, over 700 Africans had been arrested, receiving sentences ranging from extremely high fines of £10 (or two months in jail), to four months hard labour plus eight lashes.¹⁴⁸

Conservative Transvaal SANNC leaders had "serious misgivings" from an early stage, staying away from meetings, as did a growing number of the moderates. Both jumped at an offer by the Director of Native Labour to grant one week's grace in which Africans could obtain duplicate passes,¹⁴⁹ which effectively nullified the entire campaign.

¹⁴³ Report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 23 May 1918 by Wilfred Jali, in JD 3/527/17.

¹⁴⁴ Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 82

¹⁴⁵ Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 82

¹⁴⁶ *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 10 January 1920, "The Colour Bar"

¹⁴⁷ Eddie Roux, [1944] 1993, *op cit.*, pp. 82-3

¹⁴⁸ Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 83

¹⁴⁹ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 302-3



*T. William "T.W." Thibedi, of the IWA and ISL*¹⁵⁰

IWA members of the SANNC led a rank-and-file revolt, but with little long-term effect. At a mass meeting in Vrededorp on 6 July 1919, Thibedi challenged the decision to accept one week's grace from the floor, with approval from the crowd. Another member of the audience accused the speaker, Mabaso, of being bribed. This led to a rush on the platform in which Mabaso narrowly avoided being assaulted.¹⁵¹ Thibedi tried to use the mood to organise a split in the SANNC. A new IWA leaflet argued that "All workers are poor therefore they should have their own Council", the IWA: "you must know what you are in the Country (rich or poor)".¹⁵²

Thibedi also advertised a meeting "of all labourers" at St. Mary's Hall in Johannesburg in July 1919, where he argued that 25,000 workers must be recruited to the IWA so that a renewed offensive on wages and passes could be launched in May 1920.¹⁵³ Announcing that he had left the SANNC, Thibedi argued "Congress don't utilise money properly, they use it for themselves, and we, the working men, get nothing":

¹⁵⁰ Henry R. Pike, 1988, *A History of Communism in South Africa*, Christian Mission International, Germiston, second edition, p. 154

¹⁵¹ Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 303

¹⁵² The leaflet is reproduced in Hirson, 1988a, *op cit.*, p. 107. Also see Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, p. 263 and Peter L. Wickens, 1974a, 'The One Big Union Movement among Black Workers in South Africa', in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. 7/ 3, p. 395, note 27

¹⁵³ Report on meeting of 26 July 1919 at St. Mary's Hall, Government Native Labour Bureau, GNLB 278 354/17, *op cit.*

We must separate and call ourselves the Labourers and have our own leaders. The workers must separate from Congress.

However, he misjudged the situation, and the meeting broke up in disarray.

Meanwhile, within the Transvaal SANNC, the radicals were fighting a losing battle. The body was, in fact, pushed to agree to a second general strike on 1 October 1919, but this fell through. Letanka, Mvabaza and Ngojo moved away from the syndicalists, allowing the conservative nationalists to realign the organisation with the traditional politics of the larger SANNC.

Subsequently Cetiwe and Kraai left for Cape Town, settling in the segregated African ghetto, Ndabeni. They aimed to organise the IWA on the docks: these employed the largest single workforce in the city, as well as the majority of the city's Africans. The union's first Cape Town meeting was held on 10th July 1919 in cooperation with the Industrial Socialist League, in District Six. It was attended by "200 native and coloured", and the "speeches appeared to be the reverse of pacific".¹⁵⁴ With fresh members enrolled, union offices were set up in Francis Street. Plans were made to get "well-known native leaders" to address future meetings, and to set up close links with the Cape Native Congress,¹⁵⁵ connections that were soon made.

By November 1919, the Cape IWA had enrolled 1,000 members,¹⁵⁶ mainly Africans from the Docks Location and Ndabeni: at 1,000, it resented almost a tenth of the city's total African population. The Cape IWA was slightly larger than the ICU, formed in Cape Town in January that year, and based primarily amongst Coloured and West Indian stevedores.¹⁵⁷

After a polite September 1919 request for a wage increase on the docks was ignored, the IWA, the Cape Native Congress and the ICU held a joint rally on the public holiday of the 16th December, next to the IWA stronghold of Ndabeni. It is simply not true that the ICU had "taken the initiative" in these events.¹⁵⁸ At the meeting, attended by 800 and chaired by the IWA's Kraai,¹⁵⁹ it was the IWA's Cetiwe who proposed the strike, and it was Cetiwe who, in the name of the IWA, sent the municipality the ultimatum: 10 shillings a day for unskilled workers, or strike action.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ *Int.*, 25 July 1919; F.V. Pickard, "Report of meeting of Native Workers held at Winter Gardens hall, Ayre Street, Capetown, July, 10th, 1919", Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17.

¹⁵⁵ Peter L. Wickens, "The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa" (PhD, University of Cape Town, 1973), p. 51 note 3, 52

¹⁵⁶ See Debbie Budlender, "A History of Stevedores in Cape Town Docks" (Honours, University of Cape Town, 1976), p. 18; on ICU membership, see Wickens, "The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa", pp. 56-7

¹⁵⁷ Clements Kadalie, *My Life and the Icu: The Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist*, Stanley Trapido ed. (London: 1970), p. 40

¹⁵⁸ *Contra*. Baruch Hirson, *Frank Glass: The Restless Revolutionary* (London: Porcupine Press, 2003), pp. 21-2

¹⁵⁹ Peter L. Wickens, "The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa", Ph.D. diss., University of Cape Town, 1973, 67.

¹⁶⁰ Fred Cetiwe, 21 December 1919, "To the Mayor of the City of Cape Town", in "Strike of Natives in Docks", 3/CT,

Initially supported by the Cape Federation of Labour, largely comprised of craft unions, and the National Union of Railway and Harbor Servants (NURHAS), a predominantly white union, the strike really rested on the IWA (based amongst Africans) and the ICU (based amongst Coloureds). The two unions held daily mass assemblies in the city centre in the mornings, followed by evening meetings on Adderley Street.¹⁶¹ Police and soldiers began to evict strikers from the Docks Location on Christmas Eve,¹⁶² the unions squabbled, and the strike disintegrated, as the IWA and the Cape Native Congress withdrew. Reconciliation was later effected: the IWA and ICU held a joint meeting of 300 in March 1920.¹⁶³

From the Cape strike to “One Big Union”

Cetiwe and Kraai had tried to push the SANNC towards a policy of militant strike action at its annual congress in 1918, and repeated the performance at the congress of 1920. They were defeated, but the SANNC did resolve to support a general labour conference in Bloemfontein that year. The meeting drew in emerging unions from across the country, including the ICU and IWA, which resolved to merge under the ICU banner into “one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi”.¹⁶⁴ Ultimately Clements Kadalie, the leader of the original ICU, established himself as the key ICU leader.

The reference to “one great union” was no mere rhetorical flourish: the ICU repeatedly invoked the vision of “abolishing the capitalist class” through one big strike,¹⁶⁵ devised a constitution based on that of the IWW,¹⁶⁶ and drew the ire of the CPSA for its “pronounced anarcho-syndicalist tendencies”.¹⁶⁷ It was far too eclectic, in fact, to be truly called syndicalist – Garveyism was a major influence, for example – but syndicalism was certainly part of its heady ideological mix. In the 1920s, the ICU would explode across the country with over 100,000

4/1/4/286, F31/4, Cape Archives. This was more than double the minimum wage of 4 shillings established the previous year: Barry Kinkead-Weekes, “Africans in Cape Town: the origins and development of state policy and popular resistance to 1936”, MA diss., University of Cape Town, 1985, 205. All mention of the Industrial Workers of Africa is absent from Kadalie’s autobiography.

¹⁶¹ Clements Kadalie, 42; Wickens, 69-74.

¹⁶² Kadalie, 43; Wickens, 73-79, 82-83.

¹⁶³ Wickens, 84.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Wickens, 145-146.

¹⁶⁵ For instance, Divisional Criminal Investigations Officer, Witwatersrand Division, 1 May 1926, Confidential Report to Deputy Commissioner, South African Police, Witwatersrand Division, Johannesburg, in Department of Justice file, JUS 915 1/18/26 part 2. Pretoria: National Archives.

¹⁶⁶ Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, “Revised Constitution of the ICU”, in Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, [1925] 1972, 325-326.

¹⁶⁷ Alfred Nzula, [1935] 1979, “The Struggles of the Negro Toilers in South Africa”, appendix to Alfred Nzula, I.I. Potekhin and A. Zusmanovich, [1933] 1979, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, Zed Books, London, edited and introduced by Robin Cohen, 206.

members, mainly African, at its height. Moreover, the ICU also spread into neighbouring colonies, spreading elements of syndicalism even further afield.¹⁶⁸

Conclusion: putting red in the Black Atlantic

Tim Couzens has suggested that two “transatlantic connections” to black America shaped local African politics, including the SANNC: a connection to moderates like Booker T. Washington, and to more radical nationalists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey.¹⁶⁹ Recognition of the syndicalist connection to the SANNC, and the importance of black syndicalists in the IWA, suggests another “transatlantic connection”, a connection to *working class* America, and, specifically, to the interracial *syndicalist* tradition represented by the IWW. Indeed, if one envisages the political and social connections between African communities on the Atlantic seaboard as a “Black Atlantic”,¹⁷⁰ it follows that syndicalism was *also* part of the world of the Black Atlantic.

The long-ignored role of anarchism and syndicalism needs to be reconsidered in local historiography, while the history of the SANNC needs to be delinked from simplistic nationalist narratives. At the same time, the South African case provides an important example of the praxis of anarchism and syndicalism in the colonial and postcolonial world. Contrary to claims that anarchism had “almost nothing to do with the anti-colonial struggles that defined revolutionary politics in this century”,¹⁷¹ the depth and breadth of anarchist and syndicalist anti-imperialism must be recovered, the better to understand the history of labour and the left in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, East Europe and Latin America. And to “recall anarchism, which Leninist Marxism suppressed”, is, Arif Dirlik argues, to rethink the meaning and possibilities of the socialist tradition, and “recall the democratic ideals for which anarchism ... served as a repository”.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ See Lucien van der Walt, 2007, “The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW and the ICU, 1904-1934”, *African Studies*, 66: 2/3, 2007, 237-243.

¹⁶⁹ Couzens, 1982, *op cit.*

¹⁷⁰ Paul Gilroy, 2002, *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

¹⁷¹ Christopher Day, *The Historical Failure of Anarchism: implications for the future of the revolutionary project*, Chicago: Kasama Essays for Discussion, [1996] 2009, 5; also see Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution and Other Essays*, Philadelphia: Monkeywrench Press and the Worker Self-Education Foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1994, 3–6, 21, 23 (but cf. 123).

¹⁷² Dirlik, 1991, *op cit.*, pp. 3-4, also see pp. 7-8