

Anarchism and syndicalism in an African port city

**the revolutionary traditions of Cape Town's multiracial working class,
1904–1931**

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of anarchism and syndicalism in early twentieth century Cape Town, South Africa, drawing attention to a crucial but neglected chapter of labor and left history. Central to this story were the anarchists in the local Social Democratic Federation (SDF), and the revolutionary syndicalists of the Industrial Socialist League, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), and the Sweets and Jam Workers' Industrial Union. These revolutionary anti-authoritarians, Africans, Coloureds and whites, fostered a multiracial radical movement – considerably preceding similar achievements by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in this port city. They were also part of a larger anarchist and syndicalist movement across the southern African subcontinent. Involved in activist centers, propaganda, public meetings, cooperatives, demonstrations, union organizing and strikes, and linked into international and national radical networks, Cape Town's anarchists and syndicalists had an important impact on organizations like the African Political Organization (APO), the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, the Cape Native Congress, the CPSA, the General Workers Union, and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU). This paper is therefore also a contribution to the recovery of the history of the first generation of African and Coloured anti-capitalist radicals, and part of a growing international interest in anarchist and syndicalist history.

Introduction

This paper examines the development of anarchism and syndicalism in Cape Town, one of South Africa's two main port cities, in the early twentieth century.¹ One aim is to draw attention to a crucial but neglected chapter of labor and left history. The anarchist/syndicalist current in Cape Town was part of a larger anarchist/syndicalist movement active across the southern African subcontinent.² This movement has been almost totally ignored in the literature.

Second, the paper demonstrates that these revolutionary anti-authoritarians fostered – indeed, pioneered – Cape Town's important radical, multiracial socialist tradition. When describing that movement as a 'multiracial' one, the paper means the following: that its principles were determinedly internationalist, seeking to forge a movement across the color line; that its program opposed racial prejudice and racial discrimination, statutory and otherwise; and that its composition, both leadership and popular base, was multiracial, that is, African, Coloured and white.

This leftwing multiracial project was a truly remarkable achievement for the racially divided colonial South Africa of the time, and considerably predates the better-known efforts of the Com-

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 labor 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 Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves*; Salerno, *Red November*, *Black November*; and van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*.

² See van der Walt, 'The Industrial Union'; van der Walt, 'Bakunin's Heirs in South Africa'; van der Walt, 'The First Globalisation'; and van der Walt, 'Anarchism and Syndicalism.'

munist Party of South Africa (CPSA, formed 1921) – something that party’s preeminence in the literature has obscured. The multiracial anarchist and syndicalist project, of course, always operated in a working class divided by language, occupation, neighborhood, and race, compounded by mutual distrusts: this simply makes it all the more remarkable that these barriers were assaulted and, to an important extent, breached.

Third, in recovering this pre-CPSA history of left and labor militancy, the paper begins to piece together the forgotten story of the country’s first generation of African and Coloured anti-capitalist radicals. Few have been recognized – let alone canonized – in local nationalist and communist narratives; even now, the leading figures of this trail-blazing generation are largely known to us through contemporary police and press reports. Thus, this paper is a contribution to recovering this radical past, a past inextricably linked to the anarchists and syndicalist movement, in which these activists arose.

Finally, this paper is part of a growing international interest in the history of anarchism and syndicalism, now increasingly recognized as the ‘dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left’ from the 1870s, and ‘the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism’ by the early twentieth century.³

Before proceeding to details, some sketches will illustrate the vibrancy of Cape Town’s anarchist/syndicalist movement. In 1925, the mainly Coloured and African (and then Cape-centered) Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU, formed 1919) committed itself to organizing ‘the workers’ to capture, then self-manage, the means of production through the unions,⁴ thus ‘abolishing the capitalist class’ through direct action.⁵

The 1925 ICU constitution was based directly on that of the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Formed in Chicago in the USA in 1905, the IWW spread abroad rapidly, and became the leading syndicalist union in English-speaking countries, an important movement in Latin America, and influential in East and South Asia, and elsewhere; an IWW section was formed in South Africa in 1910. The IWW constitution thus traveled with the ICU across the southern African subcontinent, as the ICU became the largest African political movement in South Africa until the 1940s, and became transnational, too, with sections in South West Africa (Namibia, from 1920), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe, 1927), and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia, 1931).

The ICU was influenced, then, by syndicalism, even if it was never quite a syndicalist union. This influence is testimony to its longstanding connections to the anarchists, including the syndicalists. In 1920, the ICU had merged with a number of other unions – most notably, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA, formed 1917 in Johannesburg), with the aim of forming ‘one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi [*sic*].’⁶ This followed a joint IWA/ICU strike on the Cape Town docks in late 1919. The IWA was an all-African syndicalist union, explicitly modeled on the IWW vision: one Big Union against capitalism and state. It had 1000 members on the Cape Town docks and in Ndabeni, the city’s main African ghetto; this meant its membership comprised a tenth of the city’s total African population; it also had a

³ Anderson, *Under Three Flags*, 2, 54

⁴ Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa, *Revised Constitution*.

⁵ Reports on speeches, 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.

⁶ As quoted in Wickens, ‘The Industrial and Commercial,’ 97, also see 145–6.

strong Johannesburg section. The IWA was the very first union among African workers in South Africa – and in British-ruled southern Africa overall.

It is evident, then, that Cape revolutionary syndicalism had a mass African base, and an effective African leadership. Yet the IWA itself was but one of five syndicalist unions formed among workers of color in the 1910s, in Cape Town, Durban, Kimberley and Johannesburg. In 1918, the syndicalist Sweets and Jam Workers' Industrial Union (SJWIU) was organized among Coloured and African factory workers in downtown Cape Town. It was initiated by the Industrial Socialist League, a dynamic, IWW-inspired syndicalist political organization headquartered in the largely Coloured and immigrant District Six slum, a group which also worked closely with the Cape IWA. The League's members were 'coloured and Malay comrades,' and immigrant whites, often Jews.⁷

Active in the Cape Federation of Labour Unions (formed 1913), the Industrial Socialist League was formed in 1918 as a breakaway from Cape Town's Social Democratic Federation (SDF), formed in 1904. The SDF was one of the important pre-CPSA socialist groups. Open to socialists of all persuasions, it had a large and often dominant anarchist wing, including syndicalists. Like the League, the IWA and the SJWIU, the SDF argued for workers' solidarity across the color line. It practiced this through public meetings, where speakers often used both African and European languages to address multiracial crowds; through the promotion of integrated unions and equal wages via the Cape Trades and Labour Council (formed in 1899) and its successor Cape Federation of Labour Unions (formed 1913), and also through its leading role in the General Workers Union (formed 1905); and, finally, through its key role in massive multiracial unemployed demonstrations. All of these union bodies had a substantial Coloured base, and included important anarchist and syndicalist activists in their leadership.

The anarchist/syndicalist current that this paper discusses was, then, a multiracial one with a real presence across Cape Town's diverse working class districts and workplaces. Key movement figures were likewise drawn from across the racial spectrum and included Africans (Fred Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai of the International Socialist League, IWA, and ICU; Nodzandza of the SJWIU); Coloureds (B. Kies, Industrial Socialist League and SJWIU; A. Brown, Industrial Socialist League); and whites (Wilfred Harrison, SDF and Cape Federation of Labour Unions; H.B. 'Barney' Levinson, SDF and General Workers Union; C. Frank Glass, Industrial Socialist League). White immigrants founded and always played a prominent role in the movement, that is true, but it developed deep roots locally and a multiracial character. The IWA, after all, was the city's single largest anarchist/syndicalist body.

The Cape Town anarchist/syndicalist movement also engaged with, and even overlapped with, the liberal nationalist organizations formed by people of color. The (mainly Coloured) African Political Organization (APO, formed in 1902) worked with the SDF and the General Workers Union. The (African-based) Cape Native Congress worked closely with the IWA in Ndabeni, and both Cetiwe and Kraai enrolled, the better to spread their syndicalist ideas. In 1920, the Cape Native Congress joined the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, formed 1912, renamed the African National Congress, ANC, in 1923).

Anarchist and syndicalist activities in the town centre, the factory districts, and the docks, and in District Six and Ndabeni, involvement in activist centers, strikes, demonstrations, meetings, publishing, all created an oppositional, proletarian, anti-capitalist counter-public. This was a

⁷ *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes, hereafter WD.

counter-public that consciously crossed the color line, swimming against the tide of segregation in the country.⁸ The anarchist/syndicalist current was also embedded in national and transnational radical networks, including links to the IWW's racially integrated Marine Transport Workers' Industrial Union, the anarchist Freedom Press in London, and the ICU across southern Africa. Finally, the current played an important role in the launch of the CPSA, and in early dissent within the party, where 'syndicalist concepts remained' for 'many years after its foundation.'⁹

Overall, then, the important anarchist/syndicalist traditions of the first three decades of the twentieth century laid an important foundation for subsequent labor and left activism in Cape Town. Moreover, if in later years that left was predominantly Marxist – communist and Trotskyite – it started out Bakuninist – that is, of the broad anarchist tradition, including its syndicalist offshoot.

Early Cape labor and the left in the literature

This paper's arguments run contrary to the accepted wisdom. This is partly because it uses new (or revisits neglected sources), and pays more attention to the early Cape left than previous works. It is also, however, because the general understanding of left and labor history in South Africa has been deeply imprinted with the problematic interpretations of the 'Communist school.' By this phrase is meant the pioneering works on labor and left history developed from the 1940s by intellectuals associated with the CPSA and its underground successor, the South African Communist Party (SACP, formed 1953).

For all their undeniable merits, these works centre on establishing the CPSA/SACP's claim to be the working class 'vanguard' of 'true socialists,'¹⁰ bathed in the light of 'Marxist-Leninist science.'¹¹ This corpus – popular accounts,¹² compilations,¹³ general studies¹⁴ and biographies¹⁵ alike – centers on constructing a triumphalist story of the party; its predecessors, rivals and internal dissidents get short shrift. 'Communist school' accounts indicate there was an anarchist and syndicalist presence in Cape Town and elsewhere, but simultaneously caricature it as marginal, sectarian, and even racist.¹⁶ Basic errors of fact are common in these accounts: the SDF, for example, is always presented as a tiny church of abstract 'evangelical socialists,' outside of mass movements, oblivious to racial issues,¹⁷ and dogmatically Marxist;¹⁸ all of these claims are manifestly untrue. The Industrial Socialist League is designated an unimportant curiosity,¹⁹ redeemed only

⁸ Cf. Shor, 'Left Labour Agitators,' 150.

⁹ Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*.

¹⁰ 'Introduction by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, National Chairman of the South African Communist Party,' to Bunting, *South African Communists Speak*, xv.

¹¹ Dedication on frontispiece of Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*.

¹² For example, Cronin, 'Rediscovering our Socialist History'; Cronin, 'Origins and 'Native Republic'; Forman, *Chapters in the History*; Mbeki, *The Struggle for Liberation*.

¹³ Bunting, *South African Communists Speak*; Bunting, *Letters to Rebecca*.

¹⁴ Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*; Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us*; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*.

¹⁵ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*; Cope, *Comrade Bill*.

¹⁶ See van der Walt, 'The Industrial Union'; van der Walt, 'Bakunin's Heirs in South Africa'; and van der Walt, 'Anarchism and Syndicalism.'

¹⁷ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 139–40, 142–3.

¹⁸ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 96.

¹⁹ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 215.

by the fact that some members supposedly saw the Leninist light in helping found the CPSA.²⁰ The revolutionary IWA and the SJWIU, among the most important leftwing Cape organizations, are almost entirely ignored.

The 'Communist school's' claims have nonetheless left a deep imprint on subsequent scholarship; its texts are usually treated as reliable scholarly sources, despite their function as party polemics, and despite their demonstrable inaccuracies. Indicative of this is the literature's ongoing repetition of the 'school's' dubious views of the pre-CPSA left, and the continued lack of serious work on the CPSA's predecessors and early dissidents.²¹ There can be few countries where the communist party's own views still so profoundly shape the literature on left and labor history.

Compounding the problem is the traditional focus of labor and left scholarship on Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand in the interior, the heartland of an industrial revolution that from the 1880s reshaped all of southern Africa.²² Yet Cape Town was the main urban centre in the region from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries, and it remained the second most important urban centre for many years after the industrial revolution.

Hub of the Cape Colony (which passed from the Dutch East India Company to the British Empire in 1806), Cape Town was also the site of the first recorded strike in southern Africa (1752),²³ the launch pad for the largest uprising against slavery in the old Cape (1808),²⁴ and the site of many mutinies (notably in the 1790s and 1850s).²⁵ It was the site of the first local trade union, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiner (hereafter 'the Carpenters'), formed in 1881 as a branch of the British union,²⁶ and of ongoing multiracial unemployed movements (notably in the 1880s and 1900s).²⁷ It was the birthplace and for many years headquarters of the SDF, Industrial Socialist League, ICU and the CPSA, and subsequently, the 'home territory' of Trotskyism.²⁸ In short, Cape Town was long 'the Left Bank' of South Africa.²⁹

²⁰ Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 37.

²¹ Besides the work of the present author, there is to date but one study of the Industrial Socialist League: Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, reprinting as Chapter material which first appeared in 1981; the League also features in Hirson, 'Death of a Revolutionary' and Hirson, *Frank Glass*. The SDF is discussed in Ticktin, 'The Origins' and Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' but much of the story told in this paper is missing from those accounts. The commendable work of Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, nonetheless gives the early twentieth century left in South Africa only 20 pages: pp. 20–40; there is also some material in passing in Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*; Johns, 'The Birth of Non-white'; Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial'; Wickens, 'The One Big Union Movement.'

²² For an overview of the literature, see Bonner et al., 'Rethinking Worlds of Labour'; also see Lewis, 'South African Labour History.'

²³ See Worden, 'Artisan Conflicts in a Colonial Context.'

²⁴ Ulrich, *Abolition from Below*.

²⁵ Mabin, 'The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth,' 282.

²⁶ Andrews, *Class Struggles in South Africa*, 12–3.

²⁷ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 108–111.

²⁸ Nasson, 'The Unity Movement,' 189–90.

²⁹ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth*, 24.

Context and background

In 1910, the Cape Colony was incorporated into the newly formed British dominion, the Union of South Africa, as a province.³⁰ It had been overtaken by Johannesburg as a commercial, manufacturing and population centre, but nonetheless benefited handsomely from the industrial revolution once its merchants modernized the harbor and set up the first railway links to Johannesburg and Kimberley, the latter an important diamond mining centre.³¹ Significant manufacturing and service industries emerged, partly as a result of access to cheap imported inputs for products like paint and soap.³²

The key staging point for the British troops in the region's wars from the 1860s to the 1900s, Cape Town was also the seat of the new Union parliament. It was the main point of entry for tens of thousands of European immigrants who arrived from the late nineteenth century.³³ Many immigrants went inland to the Witwatersrand, but thousands stayed in the booming port city, where finances, tramways and urban rail, building and construction grew rapidly, and where industrial employment doubled from 5612 persons in 487 establishments in 1891, to 11,474 in 611 plants in 1904.³⁴ By 1904, Cape Town had more than doubled in size to 170,000 inhabitants, up from 79,000 in 1891.³⁵ This growth included 34,000 European immigrants (mainly British, but also including around 9000 East European Yiddish Jews), 21,000 Coloureds, 9000 Africans, 2000 local Afrikaners, 2000 Indians,³⁶ and others like the small Afro-Caribbean community. These figures refer only to the *settled* population, for the city always had a large and influential transient population of sailors, soldiers and travelers.

Cape Town's heterogeneous population was shaped by the larger southern African pattern of a racially structured, class-divided, white-dominated colonial society, but it had unique features too. In the first place, there was a large Coloured population, comprising the majority of the working class. 'Coloureds' in South Africa refers to the category of Westernized mixed-race people of color: largely descended from the old Cape Colony's underclasses, most spoke Afrikaans, followed by English.³⁷ In the racial hierarchy, Coloureds stood above the indigenous Bantu-language-speaking Africans (or 'natives' in the old parlance), but below the dominant whites.

In South Africa as a whole, Coloureds were but 9%, behind whites at 21% and Africans at 67% of the population. However, in Cape Town and the larger Western Cape heartland of the old Cape, they formed the overall majority.³⁸ Moreover, most Coloureds lived in the western and northern

³⁰ For an overview, see Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century*, chaps 1, 2.

³¹ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 11–3, 16–7, 43–6, 129–130; Mabin, 'The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth,' 288–9, 295–8, and 290, Table 2, 295, Table 3.

³² Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 130; also see Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 70–1.

³³ Perhaps 114,000 immigrants arrived within two years of the end of the Anglo-Boer War, including many demobilized soldiers: Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' 2–3.

³⁴ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 130; also see Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 70–1.

³⁵ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 11, Table 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130–1.

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, 186–209.

³⁸ The population of South Africa was estimated in 1911 as around six million, comprising 4,000,000 Africans (around 67% of the total), 1,276,000 whites (around 21%), 525,000 Coloureds (around 9%), and 150,000 Indians (around 2.5%); van Duin, 'South Africa,' 640, n. 38.

Cape, areas where the combined Coloured and white population was the overwhelming majority – a situation quite unique in the Union. In 1921, for example, Africans comprised a mere 4% of Cape Town's population,³⁹ despite being two thirds of the total Union population.

Now, given that most – but certainly not all – urban African workers were subject to a racialized battery of coercive labor controls, including pass laws and indenture, Coloured and white predominance in the Western Cape region meant that the majority of the working class was *free* labor – also a unique situation in the country.

In addition, since 1872 the Cape operated a relatively accessible class- rather than race-based male franchise, which was retained at provincial level after Union. One consequence was that while only two-thirds of Cape white men could vote in 1909, qualified Africans and Coloureds, among them workers, comprised 15% of the electorate, and 21% six years later.⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the Union, voting was almost entirely restricted to white men.⁴¹ This situation, a legacy of mid-Victorian liberalism, should not be idealized. Yet it was sufficiently real to ensure that the Coloured vote was important in many districts. It helped, for example, the APO's leader, Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman, secure a seat on the Cape Town Council from 1904 to 1940, and on the Cape Provincial Council from 1914 to 1940.⁴²

The Cape franchise defined the politics of both the APO and the SANNC, focused for years on unsuccessfully campaigning for the defense of the Cape system, and its gradual extension countrywide. Neither body was particularly militant in its first few decades, even if radical factions occasionally and briefly came to the fore. The APO was critical of racial discrimination, but often insisted that Coloureds (particularly the educated and propertied Coloured elite) intrinsically deserved better treatment than 'the native races.'⁴³ The SANNC was led by the educated and propertied African elite, marginalized under Union. It too put its faith in moderation, deputations, and the justice of the British Crown. It only formally embraced universal suffrage and mass actions from the mid 1940s. Eager to demonstrate respectability, both groups' leaders stressed their loyalty to the British Empire, actively supporting (for instance) the 1914–1918 war effort.⁴⁴

Most Coloureds were working class, and most were laborers; however, there was an important layer of skilled workers, many formally qualified.⁴⁵ The urban Coloured working class grew quickly, the number of Coloureds in commercial and industrial occupations in the Western Cape rising from 9% in 1891 to 20% in 1904, with masons doubling, and clerks, storekeepers and hawkers tripling.⁴⁶ In Cape Town, many lived alongside poor whites and Africans in impoverished neighborhoods, most famously the overcrowded, rack-rented District Six.⁴⁷

³⁹ Budlender, 'A History of Stevedores,' 6, Table IV.

⁴⁰ Ticktin, 'The Origins,' 42; see also Adhikari, 'Let us Live for Our Children', 48. These whites were only enfranchised in 1931.

⁴¹ In Natal province (formerly British Natal), a highly restrictive system enabled a small number of people of color (mainly Indians) to qualify for the vote; there were no such openings in the northern provinces. The Cape system was phased out from the 1930s, as the province was brought in line with the system used elsewhere.

⁴² Rosenthal, 'Abdurrahman, Dr. Abdullah,' 1. People of color could not sit in the Union parliament under any circumstances.

⁴³ For example, Abdurahman, 'The 1910 Presidential Address, Port Elizabeth, Cape,' 34. See Adhikari, 'Let us Live for Our Children', 16–37; Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 204–7; Goldin, 'The Reconstitution of Coloured Identity,' 162–3; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 22–5, 40–1, 70–4.

⁴⁴ Adhikari, 'Let us Live for Our Children', pp. 48–9; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 84–7.

⁴⁵ Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 19–21.

⁴⁶ Goldin, 'The Reconstitution of Coloured Identity,' 159; also see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 12, 65–6.

⁴⁷ Particularly evocative of conditions is Pinnock, 'From Argie Boys to Skolly Gangsters.'

Cape whites and Coloureds were relatively integrated socially, especially in the working class, where intermarriage was not uncommon; this persisted despite growing official and popular pressures for segregation. Integration in the unions was also unmatched elsewhere in country. While unions on the Witwatersrand generally barred people of color (the syndicalists were the exception), Cape craft unions usually admitted Coloured artisans,⁴⁸ while Cape Town bodies like the General Workers Union and Tailors' and Tailoress' Union successfully recruited people of color. The Cape Federation of Labour Unions therefore remained outside the segregationist South African Industrial Federation (SAIF, formed 1914), active elsewhere.⁴⁹ The SAIF was linked to the South African Labour Party, formed in 1909) on a platform combining social democracy and racial segregation.⁵⁰

The SAIF was considerably bigger than the Cape Federation, which had 16 affiliates by 1919, the largest with barely 400 members; and around 6000 strong.⁵¹ Cape unions were typically fragile, cautious, and short-lived; at least five clothing workers' unions rose and fell from 1900 to 1925.⁵² Most were craft unions, for qualified tradesmen only, although there were also some general and industrial bodies, notably the General Workers Union, the Tramway Workers' Union, and the National Union of Railway and Harbor Servants (NURHAS, formed 1910). In this city, class struggle was waged at a 'low level of intensity,' compared to the storm center of the Witwatersrand, where bloody revolts were common.⁵³

In summary, Cape Town was particularly conducive to multiracial socialist activities. Thus, a Rhodesian visitor to the CPSA head offices in Cape Town was stunned by social mixing quite 'impossible' to imagine back home.⁵⁴

This is *not* to claim that a multiracial left could not and did not emerge elsewhere, for the local history of anarchists, syndicalists, and communists attests otherwise; it is just that it was rather more difficult elsewhere. This integration was not simply the result of unique Cape conditions; it was also consciously constructed *and* defended by left and labor activists from the turn of the century in the face of substantial and deepening racial division.

It must not be forgotten that Coloureds faced accelerating educational and residential segregation, unequal pay, and white domination of better jobs.⁵⁵ Craft unions excluded all unskilled workers, which meant in effect most Coloureds, and almost all Africans.⁵⁶ Some Cape unions (like the Plasterers' Union) barred Coloureds from joining; some (like the South African Teachers' Association) were open, but highly discriminatory; others (like the bricklayers') had Coloured membership, but racially segregated branches.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 164–185; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 16–7; van Duin, 'Artisans and Trade Unions'; van Duin, 'South Africa.'

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 94–5; Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 93–5.

⁵⁰ In the mid 1910s, the party (partly because of Cape union pressure, and partly with its eye on the Coloured vote) briefly relaxed its color bar to allow Coloureds to join – but only if they agreed to maintain 'white standards': Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 82.

⁵¹ See Giffard, 'Cutting the Current,' 10. The SAIF claimed 47,000 members in 45 affiliates that year: Hessian, 'An Investigation into the Causes of the Labour Agitation on the Witwatersrand, January to March, 1922,' 6.

⁵² Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 93–4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68–9.

⁵⁴ Lessing, *Under my Skin*, 350.

⁵⁵ See Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 127–8; also van Duin, 'South Africa,' 627–8, and Simons, 'Organised Coloured Political Movements,' 213.

⁵⁶ Stuart, 'I Look Back,' 3–4.

⁵⁷ Adhikari, *Let us Live for Our Children*, 31; also see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 16.

Cape Africans found little shelter. The African working class minority was concentrated in the roughest work, and increasingly confined to two grim segregated ‘townships’ or ‘locations’: the Docks Native Location for single, often migrant, men, and Ndabeni for families, working class as well as elite. The former housed around 1800; the latter was built for 700 but had 3500 by 1918. Lacking streets and lights, Ndabeni was surrounded by a patrolled barbed wire fence, and adjacent to a sewerage dump.⁵⁸ Compounding African problems, Coloured organizations like the APO often took a leaf out of the SAIF/SA Labour Party book, and pursued pro-Coloured color bars. The Cape Town municipality and the government-run harbors were repeatedly lobbied to hire Coloureds, rather than Africans.⁵⁹

Thus, as the veteran local anarchist Henry Glasse, based in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, told anarchist luminary Piotr Kropotkin, the Africans were housed in ghettos, segregated in the trains, pushed off the pavements, and subject to curfews, and always ‘robbed and ill-treated’ ‘in the land that was once their own – their Fatherland!’⁶⁰ Glasse’s sympathy for the oppressed races was, as is shown in the next section, quite typical of the anarchist/syndicalist movement – indeed, one of its defining features.

Across the color line: the SDF, anarchism and mass organizing

In ignoring, or caricaturing the Cape’s anarchists and syndicalists, the literature does a great disservice to working class history in South Africa, and to a pioneering generation of African and Coloured activists. The SDF, for instance, barely features in the literature: I provide here the first serious discussion of a group whose achievements included organizing multiracial unions and unemployed demonstrations, producing the country’s first twentieth century socialist paper, the monthly *Cape Socialist*, and being the first socialist group in South Africa to have its members jailed for their beliefs. It also helped found the CPSA, providing many of its key figures. Even ‘Communist school’ texts grudgingly concede its role in fostering local socialism.⁶¹

The SDF had been founded on May Day, 1904.⁶² In 1905 it coorganized Cape Town’s first May Day with the Cape Trades and Labour Council.⁶³ Initially, it was a moderate and reformist body; its founding program did not even mention socialism.⁶⁴ This program reflected the influence of Jack Erasmus and a man called Blackburn. Blackburn founded the SDF with Harrison and J.L. Page, reputedly an orator of ‘Hyde Park fame.’⁶⁵ Blackburn was a member of H.M. Hyndman’s moderate Marxist SDF in Britain; Erasmus envisaged the Cape SDF as a branch of the British

⁵⁸ See Budlender, ‘A History of Stevedores,’ 12–5, 18, and Wickens, ‘The Industrial and Commercial,’ 46–8.

⁵⁹ See Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 214; Budlender, ‘A History of Stevedores,’ 22–3; Simons, ‘Organised Coloured Political Movements,’ 218–20. Coloureds were (at least nominally) included alongside whites in color bar legislation: Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 88–9, 128–36.

⁶⁰ Henry Glasse, ‘International Notes: South Africa,’ *Freedom*, November–December 1905.

⁶¹ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 139–40, 142–3.

⁶² Jack Erasmus, ‘Social Democratic Federation: Annual Report,’ *South African News*, 8 June 1905, press clipping in Max Nettlau Collection, International Institute of Social History.

⁶³ Ticktin, ‘The Origins,’ 330.

⁶⁴ Social Democratic Federation, [1904] 1973, ‘The Cape Town Social Democratic Federation’s Fighting Platform, 1904,’ available as Appendix B, I, 2, in Ticktin, ‘The Origins,’ 497.

⁶⁵ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 3–4.

SDF, and as an election vehicle for the Cape unions.⁶⁶ This was not to be. Blackburn returned to England; Erasmus clashed with Harrison over plans for the SDF newspaper, the *Cape Socialist*, launched 1906, and stormed out.⁶⁷

The tenuous links to the British SDF had been broken, and the floodgates of anarchism opened as Harrison became the main SDF figure. A skilled organizer and charismatic orator, this 'staunch and unwavering class fighter'⁶⁸ was an outright anarchist who embraced Kropotkin's doctrines, visiting Freedom Press in 1911.⁶⁹ A former British soldier, demoted for fraternizing with Afrikaner prisoners in the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), he was a carpenter and trade unionist.⁷⁰ It was Harrison who first used the word 'communism' in the South African press – in reference, however, to Kropotkin's anarchist-communism.⁷¹

Harrison was an 'inveterate soap-box orator' to the multiracial audiences typical of SDF public events, breathing 'hellfire and brimstone at capitalism' with a 'fluent tongue.'⁷² For unlike the more segregated Witwatersrand proletarian public sphere, SDF events regularly attracted substantial numbers of Coloureds and Africans.⁷³ Here Harrison would declare:⁷⁴

Capitalism was on its last legs ... Fields, factories and workshops were to be owned and controlled by those who worked in them ... Kropotkin had proved that the problem of production had been solved. It now remained only a question of ownership and distribution ... laws – as we know them – will be quite unnecessary.

Even critics were impressed by the 'forceful and appealing way' he 'presented his case': it 'might almost have convinced many that the Social and Economic Revolution was about to take place next day, or at the very latest by the end of that week.'

The SDF was always a politically diverse group, including 'anarchists, reform socialists, [and] guild socialists.'⁷⁵ As a visible and dynamic force, it also attracted some moderates, like the Scottish stonemason Bob Stuart, union 'boss' of the Cape Federation of Labour Unions from 1915 to 1941.⁷⁶ But few moderates stayed: Stuart for example left when he saw the SDF was under the control of 'young Communists.'⁷⁷

⁶⁶ See Erasmus, 'Social Democratic Federation,' see note 62; Special Correspondent, 'Capetown's Meeting of Sympathy,' *Cape Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 1905, press clipping in Max Nettlau Collection, International Institute of Social History; James Kier Hardie, 'In Cape Colony,' *The Labour Leader*, 5 May 1908; James Kier Hardie, 'South Africa: Conclusions,' *The Labour Leader*, 22 May 1908; also Ticktin, 'The Origins,' 330–1, 333–4, 498, Appendix B, I, 4; Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' 18.

⁶⁷ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 5–6, 9–10.

⁶⁸ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 96–7.

⁶⁹ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 32, 38, 119–20; Wilfred Harrison, 'Anarchy,' *Voice of Labour*, 1 July 1910, hereafter VOL.

⁷⁰ On Harrison, see Boydell, 'Foreword,' vii–xiv, and Boydell, 'My Luck was In', 123–6, 133–42; Gitsham and Trembath, *A First Account of Labour*, 167–8; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 123–6, 133–40; Walker and Weinbren, *2,000 Casualties*, 57.

⁷¹ Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' 217.

⁷² Boydell, 'My Luck was In', 41; Boydell, 'Foreword,' viii, ix.

⁷³ Forman, *Chapters in the History*, 42–4; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 74–7, 139–40.

⁷⁴ Boydell, 'Foreword,' viiii.

⁷⁵ Johns, *Raising the Red Flag*, 31.

⁷⁶ Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 21–2, 95–7.

⁷⁷ Stuart, 'I Look Back,' 3–4; also Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 23, 52–3; Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 96; Ticktin, 'The Origins,' 415. Given that Stuart left in the early 1910s, he presumably meant anarchist-

While the SDF never became altogether anarchist, it was the anarchists and syndicalists who usually dominated – it just cannot be meaningfully described as ‘Marxist,’⁷⁸ nor should it be conflated with its namesake, the British SDF. Its strong ‘anarchist section’ included key militants like ‘Levinson, Strauss, Hahne, Ahrens and others,’⁷⁹ among them syndicalists like Ferdinand Marais. Thus, the *Cape Socialist* mixed commentary and notices with lengthy Kropotkin pieces, translated from the French by Henry Glasse.⁸⁰

A remarkable feature of the often anarchist-dominated SDF was its commitment to uniting Cape Town’s multiracial working class, its opposition to racial prejudice and discrimination, and its ongoing efforts to influence the African and Coloured, and not just the white, sections of the working class. This has been left out of ‘Communist school’ texts, which insist that the SDF ‘ignored’ race or saw it as a ‘side issue,’ and never ‘in practice’ took ‘steps to organize the non-white worker or to openly propagate racial equality.’⁸¹

The SDF’s founders were skilled white workers, mainly immigrants, but this makes especially noteworthy their explicit rejection of the racial prejudices common among local skilled white workers, and their conscious efforts to build a multiracial movement. Like Henry Glasse, Harrison and the militant SDF anarchist wing viewed racial prejudice as morally objectionable, as well as antithetical to working class interests.⁸² Alone on the Cape labor/left scene, the SDF condemned the draft Act of the Union of South Africa in 1909, with its color bar clauses, as ‘contrary to all Democratic principles, and an insult to the coloured races of South Africa,’ and called on the British Labour Party to have the Act amended.⁸³ This aligned it with the APO, then mounting a vigorous campaign against what that group called an ‘un-British,’ ‘retrogressive’ bill.⁸⁴ The SDF also withdrew from the founding congress of the SA Labour Party over two issues: the party’s reformist *and* segregationist policies.⁸⁵ These were hardly signs of a group that refused to ‘openly propagate racial equality.’ (Meanwhile, the SDF’s unstinting critique of the British Empire garnered praise from *De Burger*, D.F. Malan’s Afrikaner nationalist paper, then nominally favorable towards Coloured rights.)⁸⁶

Rather than fail to take ‘steps to organize the non-white worker,’ the SDF set up a propaganda commission to reach Africans, gave talks in Afrikaans, English and Xhosa (the main Bantu language in the Cape), drew people of color into its committees, reached out to the APO, and even

communists. There was a split around 1910 as moderates left over anarchist influence: see Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 96; Thomas, ‘A History of the Labour Party,’ 25–6.

⁷⁸ *Contra* Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 96–7; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 76; Ticktin, ‘The Origins,’ 339; Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, 194.

⁷⁹ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 16, 118–9.

⁸⁰ To judge by the first issue, the only one that survives (July 1905): *The Cape Socialist Vanguard: official organ of the Social Democratic Federation – Cape District*. It is in the folder ‘The Cape Socialist Vanguard: organ of the Forward Labour Movement’ held in the serials collection of the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam. Not to be confused with the similarly named *Cape Workers Vanguard: Organ of the Forward Labour Movement* (hereafter CWV) published by the Cape unions, also in that folder.

⁸¹ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 139–40; van Duin, ‘South Africa,’ 649.

⁸² Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 105.

⁸³ Quoted in Ticktin, ‘The Origins,’ 340; *VOL*, 21 August 1909. The Transvaal Labour Party, a forerunner of the SA Labour Party, sent a secret counter-appeal to British Labour, opposing any amendments: Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 53.

⁸⁴ Abdurahman, ‘The 1909 Presidential Address, Cape Town, 13 April 1909,’ 48.

⁸⁵ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 112.

⁸⁶ Visser, ‘Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,’ 18. On Malan at the time, see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 122–8.

influenced Abdurrahman to employ socialist class rhetoric.⁸⁷ When British syndicalist Tom Mann visited South Africa in 1910, he was hosted by the SDF in Cape Town. There, Mann deeply impressed the APO with his 'vigorous appeal to all wage-earners to organize and present a united front,' a message of great importance 'throughout the coloured world.'⁸⁸ Good relations also saw the APO hire the SDF's Socialist Hall (see below on the Socialist Hall) for its 1909 conference, and back an SDF candidate in the 1910 municipal elections.⁸⁹

SDF activists like Harrison and J. Dibble of the Carpenters union fought to remove union color bars, unionize Coloureds, and secure equal pay.⁹⁰ A SDF delegation met the Cape's Minister for Railways to secure reduced fares for workers in relief works and the unemployed, regardless of color at a time that state aid was directed at whites. Through the unions, SDF'ers like Harrison and Percy McKillop (from the Typographical Union) served on the Cape Trades and Labour Council.

In 1905, the SDF launched the General Workers Union with Trades and Labour Council backing, 'open to all branches of labour who have not a specific Union to join,' 'every wage-earner, male or female,' regardless of race.⁹¹ Founded by Erasmus and Harrison, it drew in tramway workers, Coloured and white bricklayers and painters, Jewish tailors and boot makers, and Greek and Jewish cigarette rollers, becoming a major force in Cape Town unionism.⁹² Two SDF tobacco workers were also key figures in the Union: J. Oshman, chair of the Cape branch of the Society of the Friends of Russian Freedom (hereafter 'The Friends'; see below) was a spokesperson; the anarchist Levinson was also prominent.⁹³

In January 1906, the Union's cigarette rollers went on strike, meeting in the SDF's Socialist Hall every afternoon, eventually winning their demands.⁹⁴ A second strike that year included a mass demonstration of 4000, addressed by the SDF and APO. 300 were locked out: undaunted, they set up a 'Knock Out'/'Lock Out' cigarette cooperative on SDF premises, with the Friends' aid.⁹⁵ SDF enthusiasts had previously set up short-lived cooperatives by bakers and boot makers.⁹⁶

The APO, SDF, Coloured unionists and members of the local Jewish Bund also worked together to unionize the cabinet makers, painters, printers, and paperhangers. SDF members and Jewish

⁸⁷ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 143; Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, 23; Forman, *Chapters in the History*, 35, 42–4; Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 29–30; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 13; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 54–5, 78–9, 98; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 76–7, 122, 125–8; van Duin, 'Artisans and Trade Unions,' 104–5. Some of this material is from 'Communist school' texts, showing that these texts often make claims quite at odds with their data.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Forman, *Chapters in the History*, 43; also see Philips, 'The South African Wobblies,' 123.

⁸⁹ See A.W. Noon, 'Cape Notes,' *VOL*, 22 April 1910; also see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 54–5; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 113.

⁹⁰ Forman, *Chapters in the History*, 42–4; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 17–8, 22–6; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 139.

⁹¹ CWV, 27 October 1905, p. 2; also Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 174.

⁹² Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, 174; CWV, 'Tramway Guards and Motormen,' March 1906; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 32–9; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 74; Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' 10.

⁹³ Mantzaris, 'From the History of Bundist,' 2–3; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 53.

⁹⁴ CWV, February 1906, 3–4, and 'A Strike Speech,' 6; also see Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 10, and Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 53–5.

⁹⁵ CWV, June 1906, 'Men versus Money: the Lock Out'; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 10; Mantzaris, 'From the History of Bundist,' p. 3; also see Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 56–61; Walker and Weinbren, *2,000 Casualties*, 18–9.

⁹⁶ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 36–7.

workers initiated a tailors' union, aiming at the unity of 'all nationalities under umbrella unions,' and 'representing all trades,' although it had only limited success among Coloureds.⁹⁷

Driving the strikes and unionism was the onset of depression from 1903, as the boost provided by the Anglo-Boer War ended.⁹⁸ The Cape government set up some frankly unpopular relief works, while the Salvation Army provided charity. Some SDF members ran soup kitchens in District Six, a measure Harrison viewed as charity rather than real struggle.⁹⁹

The SDF then took the lead in organized mass meetings of the unemployed, starting on Saturday 28 July 1906. There were fiery addresses, as Levinson stressed direct action, arguing it was 'no crime' for the poor to steal from the rich.¹⁰⁰ A young German radical Otto Meyer harangued the crowd to 'Bring arms, and plenty of ammunition and a black flag,'¹⁰¹ that is, the anarchist emblem.

The meetings built up to two marches on the Cape parliament, led by figures like Harrison and John Tobin – the latter a Coloured businessman, trade unionist, and SDF sympathizer, expelled from the APO the year before. The marches were supported by the APO and the Cape Trades and Labour Council. The first was peaceful, but the second, on Monday 6 August with a 600-strong and mainly African and Coloured crowd, spiraled into three days of looting and clashes with police.¹⁰² One youthful Coloured participant, Jimmy La Guma, would later recall how 'desperate workers took direct action and invaded shops in the centre of the city,' 'hurling armloads of bread out ... into the scrambling, clutching hands of cheering workers.'¹⁰³ La Guma was radicalized by the experience, later founding the South West African ICU, and then serving a long tenure as a senior CPSA leader.

Nearly fifty people were arrested and charged, while 'jostling, shouting and yelling humanity' swirled around the police and the court.¹⁰⁴ Levinson and *Cape Socialist* editor Abraham Needham were arrested for inflammatory speeches. For 'the first time,' 'South African socialists found themselves jailed for their beliefs.'¹⁰⁵ Their arrests were condemned by SDF-linked unionists, some of whom, police reported, were now in favor of 'nothing short of a general upheaval.'¹⁰⁶ At a meeting in District Six, Erasmus hinted darkly at a general strike.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, Levinson,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 32–40, quote from p. 38; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 74; also see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 19.

⁹⁸ Beinart, 'Jamani,' 168.

⁹⁹ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 8–9; *Cape Times*, 7 August 1906, '[Editorial] Hooligans and Unemployed'; *Cape Times*, 8 August 1906, '[Editorial] Leaders and Led.'

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Hallet, 'The Hooligan Riots,' 15.

¹⁰² Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 8–9; also see *Cape Times*, 7 August 1906, 'Hooligans and Unemployed: Disgraceful Scenes.' Also see Hallet, 'The Hooligan Riots,' 15–27.

¹⁰³ La Guma, *Jimmy La Guma*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Cape Times*, 7 August 1906, see note 102; *Cape Times*, 8 August 1906, 'Mob and Police'; *South African Times*, 7 August 1906, 'Unemployed Raids in City'; *South African Times*, 8 August 1907, 'Hooligans Renew Raids.'

¹⁰⁵ Forman, *Chapters in the History*, 42–4.

¹⁰⁶ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 8–9; John Tobin, 13 August 1906, letter to LS. Jameson, Prime Minister of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, in folder 'Unemployed in Cape Town. 1906–1908,' Prime Minister's Office (PMO), volume 222, reference 1239, part 6, Cape Archives, Cape Town; CWV, September 1906, 3; R. Herschel, 30 August 1906, report on meeting of Painters and Cigarette Makers Union, in folder 'Rex versus Woollends, G. Reduction of bail. Cape Town,' Attorney General (AG), volume 1709, reference 5418, part 6, Cape Archives, Cape Town.

¹⁰⁷ R. Herschel, 23 September 1906, report on meeting at the Stone, in folder 'Rex versus Woollends, G. Reduction of bail. Cape Town,' Attorney General (AG), volume 1709, reference 5418, part 6, Cape Archives, Cape Town.

Meyer and a colorful local character called George Woollends received, respectively, an acquittal, 12 months hard labor, and six months imprisonment.¹⁰⁸

By 1910, the SDF could reflect proudly on its record of efforts to organize across the color line.¹⁰⁹ It is unclear whether the SDF – despite its undeniable connections to the African and Coloured working class, its propaganda and organizing work, and its ongoing attempts to draw people of color into its structures – was able to develop a significant African and Coloured membership, but there were undoubtedly some recruits, not to mention a real influence and following. One result of its credibility among Coloured voters was that Harrison won 212 votes against Abdurahman's 543 in the 1916 municipal election in District Six.¹¹⁰ What is thus clear is that the SDF was by no means the group of marginal 'evangelical socialists' the 'Communist school' portrayed, nor 'exclusively' the 'propaganda group' that a recent work has asserted.¹¹¹

The SDF, anarchism and proletarian counterculture

The SDF also 'developed into an intense cultural-political centre.'¹¹² It ran a bookshop, reading room, refreshment bar, the Socialist Hall which was a large, 'light and airy' space for meetings and rallies,¹¹³ and reading circles, at its offices in Cosay's Buildings, corner of Adderley and Riebeeck Streets; it held Sunday talks at the foot of the van Riebeeck statue on the Cape Parade, the central public space in the city centre; there were also many events in District Six, mainly at the 'Stone' landmark in Clifton Street.¹¹⁴

The Statue and the Stone provided speakers' corners akin to that of Hyde Park in London; the former was frequented mainly by Coloureds and whites, the latter mainly by Coloureds and Africans. The Statue then stood where the Dock Road crossed Adderley Street. Stone activities were usually organized via Tobin.

As the organization grew, it relocated to larger offices at Plein and Barrack Streets, where it sublet space to the Cape unions,¹¹⁵ kept a printing press,¹¹⁶ and set up a bigger Socialist Hall. A debate at the Hall in 1906 got 600 people.¹¹⁷ Bigger evening events required even larger venues: in 1905, the SDF held a meeting at the City Hall in sympathy with the 1905 Russian Revolu-

¹⁰⁸ Hallet, 'The Hooligan Riots,' 27–31.

¹⁰⁹ A.W. Noon, 22 April 1910, 'Cape Notes,' VOL.

¹¹⁰ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 24; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 21, 98. Harrison's use of elections was obviously idiosyncratic for an anarchist: he argued it provided a propaganda platform, and insisted he would not take office if elected.

¹¹¹ Hirson, *Frank Glass*, 18.

¹¹² Kreel, 'Reminiscences of a Socialist.'

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Erasmus, 'Social Democratic Federation,' see note 62; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 13. On the 'Stone' and on Tobin, see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 18–9, 26–7, 45, 56–7.

¹¹⁵ Union resentment of SDF rates (and noise from SDF events) eventually led to the rooms being provided free, a generous subsidy to the unions: CWV, May 1906, 'Trades and Labour Council: Friday, April 27.'

¹¹⁶ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 6.

¹¹⁷ 'Socialism and Humanity: debate between Messrs. Needham and Main,' 1906 press clipping, no source given, Max Nettlau Collection, folder 471, International Institute of Social History.

tion, attracting 1500 people.¹¹⁸ From around this time, the SDF worked with the Friends to assist workers and Jews in the 'distressed land' of Russia.¹¹⁹

The SDF provided an active social life to its members, including visits to the beach, a choir, and even socialist christenings.¹²⁰ Here, we encounter one of the limitations of the SDF's multiracial project: its internal life, as opposed to its public activities, more closely reflected the segmentation of Cape Town's diverse working class. From what is known of these events, in practice they mainly involved the SDF's English-speaking white members.

This was not simply an issue of race, though; it reflected language and culture. For instance, the SDF's growing membership among Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants led to the emergence of a Yiddish-speaking Section, which 'grew from strength to strength.'¹²¹ The radical Jews' ranks included overlapping groups of anarchists, syndicalists, and Bundists: for instance, Israel Israelstam, local ideologue of Daniel De Leon's brand of syndicalism, was also linked to the SDF, the Bund, and the Friends.¹²² The Yiddish-speaking Section also held cultural activities, but these were reflective of the traditions of East European Jewry, and not easily accessible to other whites, or people of color; they were separate to the aforementioned SDF cultural activities.

Overall, however, despite such enclave activities, the SDF was united by common public actions and by a common identity as rebels, fostered by the organization's political persona as a radical group. The anarchist Harrison, the towering figure in the organization, provided a heroic martyr, being repeatedly prosecuted. In mid-1913, for instance, there was a violent general strike by white workers on the Witwatersrand, followed by a countrywide general strike in early 1914 that spread to the Cape. Hundreds were arrested, among them Harrison, who had advised 400 workers at the Salt River railway workshops to sabotage the lines.¹²³

Initially, the SDF avoided an overt statement on the First World War, an issue certain to divide its broad membership. A breakaway by the pro-war minority soon allowed a strong anti-war line. Harrison had always associated himself with the radical War on War League, formed 1914 by radicals and syndicalists, and centered on the Witwatersrand. Because of the war controversy, SDF meetings at the Parade grew to enormous proportions, packing the Dock Road from the Flat Iron Building to the Carlton Hotel.¹²⁴ The war – in which the Union supported the British Empire, as a loyal dominion – was an explosive issue locally. It divided, then split, not just the SDF but the SA Labour Party; it sparked an armed Afrikaner revolt and army mutinies; it led to anti-German riots in Johannesburg.¹²⁵

The SDF speakers' platform at this time had to be protected by bodyguards, and Harrison received numerous death threats.¹²⁶ He was also jailed for a leaflet calling war heroes 'maddened

¹¹⁸ Erasmus, 'Social Democratic Federation,' see note 62; Special Correspondent, 'Capetown's Meeting,' see note 66.

¹¹⁹ CWV, 1 December 1905, 3. The body was linked to the Bund: Mantzaris, 'From the History of Bundist,' 1.

¹²⁰ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 16.

¹²¹ Kreel, 'Reminiscences of a Socialist.'

¹²² Mantzaris, 'From the History of Bundist'; Mantzaris, 'Radical Community: The Yiddish-speaking Branch of the International Socialist League, 1918–20,' 161, 163; Grobler, 'Die Invloed van Geskoolde Blanke Arbeid,' 51, 57, 60; Ticktin, 'The Origins,' 182–3, 185, 229, also 518, Appendix B, IV, 6; Visser, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van Persorgane,' 15–6; cf. also Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 31; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 102.

¹²³ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 40–3; Walker and Weinbren, *2,000 Casualties*, 56–7.

¹²⁴ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 50–62.

¹²⁵ See Nasson, 'A Great Divide.'

¹²⁶ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 53–5.

and excited' brutes, and urging the working class to rather fight 'unemployment, high rents,' 'dear goods,' 'bad housing and disease,' 'squalor and filth in home and factory,' 'poverty and starvation.'¹²⁷

All controversy was grist to the SDF mill, an opportunity to promote its ideals – and, more precisely, the ideals of its anarchist wing. When James Keir Hardie of Britain's Independent Labour Party visited South Africa in 1908, for instance, his meetings were disrupted by hostile whites because of his outspoken defense of African and Indian claims.¹²⁸ After the Cape Trades and Labour Council fearfully cancelled its Hardie reception, the SDF defiantly hosted him in an event he recalled as 'far and away the most enthusiastic I had.'¹²⁹

In identifying overtly with Hardie, the SDF was not just true to its principles, but strengthened its already fine reputation among Coloureds. In the same spirit, the SDF kept its platform open to a range of controversial speakers, like the young Mohandas Gandhi, making his name as champion of the local Indians, and who publicly 'declared himself a Socialist.'¹³⁰

The rise of IWW-style syndicalism; the union upsurge

The General Workers Union launched by the SDF was not a syndicalist union. The core syndicalist idea was that unions – not a political party, or a revolutionary state – should capture the means of production, placing them under workers' self-management. Although an integral part of the anarchist tradition, this strategy was not accepted by all anarchists, even in South Africa: Harrison, for instance, believed political education was the key to the future, and doubted syndicalist unions achieved much in this regard.¹³¹

Internationally, however, syndicalism was growing explosively, and had it certainly had growing appeal locally in South Africa. Launched in 1908, the Johannesburg-based radical weekly the *Voice of Labour* carried regular syndicalist entries, including the *International Bulletin of the Syndicalist Movement* and IWW materials.¹³² Mann's 1910 visit to South Africa galvanized the move to embrace 'the doctrines of the revolutionary Syndicalists.'¹³³ An IWW was formed in Johannesburg, soon spreading to Durban and Pretoria; so was a Socialist Labour Party, through which Israelstam and others propagated the De Leonist variety of syndicalism.

The *Voice* networked 'the leading Socialists of Durban, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg.'¹³⁴ It effectively replaced the *Cape Socialist*, carrying regular Cape columns, and benefited from editorial assistance by Harrison and Cape distribution via the SDF. For much of 1910–1911, moreover, the *Voice* was edited from Cape Town by the syndicalist

¹²⁷ Wilfred Harrison, 1914, 'WAR!', issued by War on War League in Cape Town, Simons Papers, African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town.

¹²⁸ See James Kier Hardie, 'South Africa: in Natal,' *The Labour Leader*, 17 April 1908, 17 April 1908; Hyslop, 'The World Voyage of James Keir Hardie.'

¹²⁹ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 19–22; Hardie, 'South Africa: Conclusions,' see note 66.

¹³⁰ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 36, 143.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 38, 118–9, 144; Wilfred Harrison, 21 June 1912, 'What's up With the Movement?'

¹³² On the *Bulletin*, see Nettleau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, 234–6, 375; Thorpe, 'The Workers Themselves', 31–2; for a representative IWW piece, see Vincent St John, 'History of the Industrial Workers of the World,' *VOL*, 27 October 1911.

¹³³ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 108–10, also 99–100.

¹³⁴ *VOL*, 14 August 1909, 'A Socialist Party' (editorial); Archie Crawford, 'From the Watch Tower,' *VOL*, 26 January 1912; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 33–6.

writer 'Proletarian' – most likely SDF syndicalist ideologue, Marais.¹³⁵ 'Proletarian' denounced the APO's Abdurrahman as a 'small capitalist,' but even more sharply condemned the racial prejudices of the whites, advocating 'an organization of wage-workers, black and white, male and female, young and old' to organize 'a universal general strike' for 'seizing and running ... South Africa, for the benefit of *workers* to the exclusion of *parasites*.'¹³⁶

Some sources mistakenly claim the SDF collapsed in 1910 over the 'issue' of anarchism.¹³⁷ In fact, it maintained a continuous presence until its merger into the CPSA in 1921, always with a strong libertarian bent. In May 1911, for instance, the SDF joined the IWW, Socialist Labour Party and others in a short-lived syndicalist Industrial Freedom League for 'united advocacy of Industrial Unionism.'¹³⁸ A 1912 attempt to unite these groups and others in a 'class war' United Socialist Party, 'without discrimination as to race, sex, colour or creed' also failed.¹³⁹

The dramatic general strikes of 1913 and 1914, and the repression that took place, radicalized new activists, many drawing syndicalist conclusions, and it reenergized the anarchist and syndicalist veterans across the country. F. Murray of Cape Town, a *Voice* correspondent, insisted 'the most important lesson' 'is that workers of every colour and of all trades' must 'combine in one all embracing union ready to take revolutionary action when the time comes.'¹⁴⁰ Marais added: 'You must join together in one great union of workers,' 'seize the land and the factories and starve out the robbers and their hired liars and murderers.'¹⁴¹

Mann, meanwhile, returned to Cape Town in March 1914, heading for the Witwatersrand, where he told 10,000: 'My mission is to overthrow the whole capitalist system generally.'¹⁴² The next year a syndicalist International Socialist League (not to be confused with the *Industrial* Socialist League, of which see below) was launched in Johannesburg by members of the War on War League and veterans of the IWW and Socialist Labour Party. It spread rapidly across the country, except into the Western Cape, where it instead worked closely with the SDF, which distributed its impressive weekly, the *International*.

These developments took place in heady times, marked by a massive wave of colonial and proletarian revolt internationally, of which the Russian Revolution was but one component. The South African economy boomed during the First World War, leading to a rapid expansion and concentration of the working class. Postwar inflation and poverty mixed with the tangible atmosphere of radical possibility to generate explosions of strikes across all southern Africa from 1917

¹³⁵ Judging, at least, by style and argument: cf. Marais, 'Labour's Battle in South Africa'; Anon., 'The Value of the Strike'; Marais, 'Workers Arise and Seize the Earth!'

¹³⁶ 'Proletarian,' 27 October 1911, 'The Problem of Coloured Labour,' *VOL*, emphasis in original; 'Our Special Representative,' 1 December 1911, 'Sundry Jottings from the Cape: A Rebel's Review.'

¹³⁷ *Contra*. Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 96; Thomas, 'A History of the Labour Party,' 25–6.

¹³⁸ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 108–110; Visser, 'Suid-Afrikaanse Koerantberriggewing,' 247–8; for an examination of the syndicalists on the Witwatersrand, see van der Walt, 'The Industrial Union'; van der Walt, 'Bakunin's Heirs in South Africa.'

¹³⁹ Crawford, 'Socialist Party Progress'; 12 April 1912, 'Easter Conference of the United Socialist Party of South Africa'; *VOL*, 26 April 1912, 'The United S.P.'; *VOL*, 10 May 1912, 'U.S.P. Notes'; *VOL*, 17 May 1912, 'U.S.P. Notes'; *VOL*, 31 May 1912, 'U.S.P. Notes'; *VOL*, 13 September 1912, 'U.S.P. Notes'

¹⁴⁰ Murray, 'Capitalist Development'; also see Marais, 'Labour's Battle in South Africa,' 588, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴¹ Marais, 'Workers Arise and Seize the Earth!,' 219, emphasis in the original; also see Marais, 'Labour's Battle in South Africa,' 588.

¹⁴² Quoted in Tsuzuki, *Tom Mann, 1856–1941*, 170.

to 1925, plus huge union growth.¹⁴³ In Cape Town, bread prices went up 50%, and potatoes and clothing rose 80–100%.¹⁴⁴ Of 199 officially recorded strikes in South Africa from 1906 to 1920, 168 were in the period 1916–1920;¹⁴⁵ the 205 recorded strikes from 1916 to 1922 involved 175,664 workers.¹⁴⁶ Government-recorded unionization figures show an amazing increase, from 9178 in 1914, to 40,000 in 1917, to 135,140 in 1920 – that is, nearly a 14-fold growth.¹⁴⁷

The new unions included the first unions among Africans and Indians from 1917, almost all of which were launched by the syndicalists. The syndicalist wing of the union movement included the IWA, the SJWIU, the Durban Indian Workers Industrial Union (formed 1917), and the Clothing Workers Industrial Union and the Horse Drivers' Union (both formed in 1919).

While the unions grew quickly, and syndicalism surged forward, the SDF was in serious trouble. Harrison was instructed by his doctor to 'slow down or ... die a martyr.'¹⁴⁸ Other members lapsed into inactivity, or, in May 1918, joined most of the younger radicals in the SDF to form a breakaway Industrial Socialist League (not to be confused with the *International Socialist League*). The founders felt the SDF had become 'too academic,' 'not sufficiently in touch' with industry and the working class.¹⁴⁹ It had become, some said, a 'mutual admiration society' at the very time that revolutionary hopes surged.¹⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the APO became increasingly hostile to rivals like the SDF, the Industrial Socialist League, the Cape Federation of Labour Unions and the Democratic Labour Party (the DLP, formed in 1915, left the SA Labour Party to form a multiracial social democratic party).¹⁵¹ It maintained some links with the SDF and Industrial Socialist League, and even invited International Socialist League leader S.P. Bunting to address it on the One Big Union.¹⁵² In 1919, however, it decided to launch an APO Federation of Labour to strengthen its position among Coloured workers, and its electoral showing. This failed dismally, as most Coloured unionists remained loyal to the Cape Federation.¹⁵³

The IWA in Cape Town: rethinking the ICU

The IWA, allied to the International Socialist League in Johannesburg, and the Industrial Socialist League in Cape Town, argued by contrast for working class unity in a revolutionary One Big Union that must serve as the vehicle of *both* national and class liberation. It should fight for equal rights and 'make the natives who are the working-class ... organized and have rights as a white man.' It should fight for revolution, in which 'all the workers black and white' would 'come

¹⁴³ On the regional strike wave, see van der Walt, 'The First Globalisation,' 229–31.

¹⁴⁴ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Pike, *A History of Communism*, 103–5.

¹⁴⁶ Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 333.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 333; also see Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 200; and van Duin, 'South Africa,' 640, n. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 62.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁰ Solomon Buirski, undated, *Fleeting Memories*, unpublished manuscript, in my possession, pp. 26–7. I would like to thank William Beinart for providing me with a copy.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 99–105; Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 7, n. 1 and 2, 8–12, and see 9, n. 1 for excerpts from the DLP programme; also see Johns, 'The Birth of Non-white,' 179.

¹⁵² Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 95.

¹⁵³ See Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 55–61; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 226–7.

together in a union ... fight against the capitalists and take them down from their ruling place.’¹⁵⁴ Like the International Socialist League, the IWA argued that syndicalist unions must play the leading role in the struggle against discriminatory laws: passes, indenture, and the compound system.¹⁵⁵ (‘Compounds’ were closed hostels, used by large employers to house and strictly control African migrant workers.) The IWA had little faith that the APO or SANNC would undertake such actions. Instead, leading members of the IWA (and of most of the other syndicalist unions) were members of the International Socialist League, although they also promoted syndicalism within the Transvaal SANNC.

Leading IWA and International Socialist League figure Fred Cetiwe advocated direct action to smash ‘the chains chaining us in our employers’ yards.’¹⁵⁶ The movement must ‘go to Compounds and preach our gospel’.¹⁵⁷

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

This remarkable African revolutionary, now largely forgotten, was a towering figure in the 1910s. Born and mission-educated at Qumbu, in the Xhosa territories of the Eastern Cape, he then worked in Johannesburg as a picture framer’s assistant.¹⁵⁸ Cetiwe worked closely in these years with Kraai, an African from Peddie in the Cape, then a foreman and deliveryman in Johannesburg.

The IWA played an important role on the Witwatersrand from 1917 to 1919 in African strike activity, pass law protests, and in the SANNC leftwing. In 1918, members of the IWA, the International Socialist League and the Transvaal SANNC were prosecuted after an attempted general strike. Both Cetiwe and Kraai lost their jobs, and after playing a key role in an SANNC anti-pass law campaign, moved to Cape Town where they launched the IWA. The syndicalist union quickly gained a large base at the docks and in Ndabeni, where the two men now resided. Ndabeni residents were restive in the face of poor conditions, and the proposed demolition of the slum.¹⁵⁹ Table Bay harbor, the largest employer in the city and with the largest concentration of African workers, also seethed with discontent.¹⁶⁰

The IWA’s first public meeting in Cape Town took place on 10 July 1919, with 200 Africans and Coloureds present.¹⁶¹ It was coorganized with the Industrial Socialist League, which had already

¹⁵⁴ Detective Wilfred Jali, report on IWA, Johannesburg, 26 July 1917, in Department of Justice, ‘The ISL and Coloured Workers,’ JD 3/527/17, National Archives, Pretoria.

¹⁵⁵ *Inter alia*, *The International* (hereafter *Int.*), 5 May 1916, ‘What’s Wrong with Ireland’; *Int.*, 5 May 1916, *Int.*, 4 August 1916, ‘Chopping off Heads’; *Int.*, 19 October 1917, ‘The Pass Laws: Organise for their Abolition’; *Int.*, 7 December 1917, ‘International Socialism and the Native: No Labour Movement without the Black Proletariat’; Detective William Mtembu, report on IWA, Johannesburg, 26 July 1917, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17; Detective R. Moroosi, report in meeting of 25 October 1917, in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17.

¹⁵⁶ Report on meeting of Transvaal Native Congress and Industrial Workers of Africa, 23 May 1918 by Wilfred Jali, in JD 3/527/17.

¹⁵⁷ Unlabelled report, May 1918 (full date illegible), in Department of Justice, JD 3/527/17.

¹⁵⁸ Skota, *The African Yearly Register*, 137, 167; *Int.*, 13 September 1918; Hirson, *Frank Glass*, 20–1.

¹⁵⁹ See Kinkead-Weekes, ‘Africans in Cape Town,’ 201–20.

¹⁶⁰ Hirson, *A History of the Left*, 15.

¹⁶¹ *Int.*, 25 July 1919; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 5; also Wickens, ‘The One Big Union Movement,’ 393.

tried to organize dock workers.¹⁶² Plans were made to get 'well-known native leaders' to address future meetings, and to set up close links with the Cape Native Congress,¹⁶³ connections that were soon made.

The IWA was soon the largest syndicalist body in Cape Town, eloquent proof of the movement's emerging mass African base and skilled core of African militants. It was also the main union among the docks' Africans. The waterfront workforce was a divided one, and unions reflected this situation. The NURHAS was formally open to all races, but it mainly organized skilled whites and Coloureds.¹⁶⁴ The ICU (formed in January 1919 with DLP backing) mainly represented Coloured and West Indian stevedores, and had a predominantly Coloured leadership.¹⁶⁵

The ICU's later fame has encouraged historians to exaggerate its early importance and influence. In the late 1910s, the ICU was merely one of several general unions in Cape Town. Its membership was slightly smaller than that of the IWA, which had enrolled 1000 by November 1919, and it had no real purchase among the Africans.¹⁶⁶ By contrast, the IWA had enrolled almost a tenth of the city's entire African population, besides being double the size of the largest Cape Federation of Labour Unions affiliate. Unlike the early ICU, the IWA had a clear ideology. It also had experienced and well-known South African activists at its head, men hardened in the 1917–1919 struggles on the Witwatersrand.

Labor historians have also relied unduly on the memoirs of Clements Kadalie, the main ICU personality, in reconstructing late 1910s Cape unionism.¹⁶⁷ Kadalie was a great union leader, but his memoirs exaggerated his role at every occasion, slighted or excised rivals, and were unreliable in key respects.

For instance, Kadalie made no mention of the IWA in Cape Town, despite the fact that the early IWA was larger, that the two unions worked together closely, and that the early ICU usually took its lead from the syndicalists. Kadalie was just beginning his labor career, and far from the famed leader he would be in the 1920s. Reliant on DLP aid, he was a relatively unknown immigrant from Nyasaland (now Malawi). Unable to speak any local African languages, he was often thought 'an American Negro' or a Coloured,¹⁶⁸ and resented on xenophobic grounds by many SANNC nationalists.

The early ICU is usually identified by scholars with as heading a major strike on the Cape Town by African and Coloured workers in December 1919. Again, this is not exactly accurate, and reflects undue reliance on Kadalie's autobiography. If Kadalie's account is to be believed, there simply was no other union among African and Coloured workers on the docks besides the ICU, and he alone mobilized the African and Coloured strikers.

A more accurate view of events must take the IWA seriously. The early ICU was dependent on the larger IWA to undertake actions, and it often took its lead from the syndicalists. This is clear from the December 1919 strike. 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

¹⁶² Hirson, *Frank Glass*, 20–1.

¹⁶³ Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 51, n. 3, 52.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 61, n. 1

¹⁶⁵ Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, 40.

¹⁶⁶ See Budlender, 'A History of Stevedores,' 18; on ICU membership, see Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 56–7.

¹⁶⁷ Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, chap. 2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 54–5. Kadalie mainly associated with Coloureds and West Indians in Cape Town, and both he and his brother, Robert Victor Kadalie, married Coloured women.

the public holiday of 16 December, next to the IWA stronghold of Ndabeni. It is not true that Kadalie had 'taken the initiative' in these events.¹⁶⁹

The 800-strong rally was chaired by Kraai, not Kadalie.¹⁷⁰ Nor was it Kadalie who pushed the meeting towards strike action. It was the IWA's Cetiwe who put forward the motion to back the demand for wage increases with a strike ultimatum.¹⁷¹ And it was the IWA, not the ICU, that wrote to the city council stating the terms: 10 shillings a day for unskilled workers, or strike action.

When the wage demand was not met, the strike started – again, it was not the ICU that 'organized' or 'launched' it,¹⁷² but an IWA/ICU coalition that brought out 3000 workers. The NURHAS and Cape Federation of Labour Unions also supported the strike, linking it to their own campaign to restrict food exports, which many workers thought a major cause of postwar inflation. A multi-racial joint strike committee met nightly at Plein Street, in the rooms the SDF had long provided the unions.¹⁷³

Once, however, government agreed to institute export regulations, the NURHAS withdrew; its members scabbed. The *International* slammed this 'shameful scabbing on Native and Coloured strikers by white workers.'¹⁷⁴ The IWA and ICU stayed out for 14 days, with daily morning mass assemblies on the Parade, followed by evening committee meetings. The Cape Federation of Labour Unions, the International Socialist League, the Industrial Socialist League and the DLP raised money and food: remarkably, even the SAIF and SA Labour Party provided some help. A paltry wage offer was rejected, but prospects to stay out were undermined when troops were mobilized in Cape Town, and when police started evicting strikers from the Docks Location, which was run by the Harbour Board for its employees.

The strike then collapsed amid acrimony between the ICU and IWA. Kadalie would later claim it ended because the ICU, lacking resources to continue, called it off.¹⁷⁵ In fact, it was the IWA and Cape Native Congress that unilaterally ended the strike on Saturday 27 December 1919, forcing the Plein Street strike committee and ICU to follow suit.¹⁷⁶

The year 1920 saw rapid realignments. The ICU and IWA were reconciled, and a joint meeting in March in Cape Town drew 300.¹⁷⁷ The ICU was meanwhile buoyed by La Guma's success in forming an ICU branch at Lüderitz, South West Africa.¹⁷⁸ The IWA, for its part, affiliated to the Cape Native Congress at the latter's first conference in 1920.¹⁷⁹ This enabled Cetiwe and Kraai to attend the national SANNC conference in Queenstown, where Kraai tried to get the organization to demand 10 shillings a day for African workers, enforced by a general strike.¹⁸⁰ The two IWA

¹⁶⁹ *Contra*. Hirson, *Frank Glass*, 21–2.

¹⁷⁰ Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 67.

¹⁷¹ Fred Cetiwe, 21 December 1919, 'To the Mayor of the City of Cape Town,' in 'Strike of Natives in Docks,' 3/CT, 4/1/4/286, F31/4, Cape Archives. This was more than double the minimum wage of 4 shillings established the previous year: Kinkead-Weekes, 'Africans in Cape Town,' 205.

¹⁷² Cf. Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 95, 101.

¹⁷³ On the details of the strike, see Budlender, 'A History of Stevedores,' 18–22; Johns, 'The Birth of Non-white,' 180; Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 60–85; Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, chap. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 155.

¹⁷⁵ Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, 44.

¹⁷⁶ Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 79–80.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷⁸ La Guma, *Jimmy La Guma*, 21–3.

¹⁷⁹ Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 52, n. 1.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

leaders made a similar intervention at the August 1918 SANNC convention in Bloemfontein, via the Transvaal SANNC.¹⁸¹

Although the SANNC's national leadership (again) blocked the confrontational course the syndicalists suggested, it did agree that a general conference of African unions should be held. The 'Conference of non-European workers' took place from 12 July 1920 in Bloemfontein, drawing in the IWA and ICU, and African and Coloured general unions from Bloemfontein, Kimberley, and Port Elizabeth. The SANNC did not attend. Cetiwe, Kraai and Kadalie were all prominent, and syndicalist influences were evident in the conference resolution: 'one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi [*sic*].'¹⁸²

The unions present decided to merge under the ICU banner, a process that dragged out for many months.¹⁸³ A mass IWA/ICU rally in Cape Town on 25 July reported the call for a 'non-European Workers' Federation, to include Indians, Malays, Coloured and natives ... to work and manage its own affairs independently of the whites' Federation of Trades.'¹⁸⁴ Efforts were soon made to expand beyond the docks, where both unions were centered, and an IWA propagandist indentified by the police as 'Templin Mehlomakula' was jailed after agitating among the African railway workers at Worcester, northeast of Cape Town.¹⁸⁵

Kraai remained an active speaker in the expanded ICU;¹⁸⁶ he was not 'sidelined,' nor did the 'socialist movement' fade out in the ICU.¹⁸⁷ On the contrary, Kadalie himself was clearly influenced by IWA and IWW syndicalism, insisting in 1923 that 'we had the "One Big Union Movement" in view' from the start.¹⁸⁸ Mann, now a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain/CPGB, addressed the 1923 ICU congress. Significantly, he noted its vision was that of 'One big union movement for African Workers,' to fight for social liberation and the dignity of the oppressed races.¹⁸⁹

In 1925, the ICU revised its constitution, basing it directly on the IWW's 1908 platform.¹⁹⁰ Kadalie's speeches were regularly peppered with calls for 'one big union' of all workers to 'assist in abolishing the capitalist class, who were in reality only a small body but owned practically everything.'¹⁹¹ A.W.G. Champion, the Natal ICU leader, stated that the ICU aimed at 'industrial and political democracy by and through the emancipation ... of the African worker,' and the creation of a 'cooperative commonwealth.'¹⁹² White politicians noted in alarm that 'the natives'

¹⁸¹ Sol Plaatje, [3 August 1918], 1988, 'Letter to the President, Kimberley Chamber of Commerce, 18 November 1918,' in Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 237.

¹⁸² As quoted in Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 97, also see 145–6.

¹⁸³ The key study is Wickens, 'The One Big Union Movement.' Also see Johns, 'The Birth of Non-white.'

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 153.

¹⁸⁵ Commissioner of Police, 30 November 1920, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' JUS 267 3/1064/18, National Archives, Pretoria, 32–3.

¹⁸⁶ Wickens, 'The One Big Union Movement,' 406.

¹⁸⁷ *Contra*. Hirson, *Frank Glass*, 23.

¹⁸⁸ As quoted in Wickens, 'The Industrial and Commercial,' 97, also see 145–6.

¹⁸⁹ Tom Mann, 'S. African Natives and Coloured Men,' *All Power*, March 1923.

¹⁹⁰ See Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa, 1925, *Revised Constitution*.

¹⁹¹ 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.

¹⁹² Champion, *The Truth about the ICU*, 5–7, copy held in folder 'Industrial and Commercial Workers Union,' IWW Collection, Archives of Labour and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

had 'adopted as their model ... the syndicalist union ... the IWW type.'¹⁹³ ICU leaders wrote to the IWW in the USA, requesting financial aid.¹⁹⁴ The CPSA, meanwhile, lambasted the ICU's 'pronounced anarcho-syndicalist tendencies' well into the 1930s.¹⁹⁵

It is *not* being argued, here, that the ICU was a fully syndicalist union: it is well-established that its politics always included large doses of Garveyism, African Christianity, and liberalism, and that its practice usually fell drastically short of the radically democratic yet tightly organized IWW model.

What *is* being claimed, however, is that ICU politics cannot be understood *unless* the impact of IWW syndicalism on the ICU is taken seriously – an aspect almost entirely ignored in the literature.¹⁹⁶ This influence, in turn, cannot be understood unless the role of the IWA – and of its allies, the International Socialist League and the Industrial Socialist League, and the earlier SDF – among African and Coloured workers is *also* taken seriously. Thus, the IWW's global impact, mediated via groups like the IWA and the League, emerged in the ICU, and through the ICU, spread from South Africa into South West Africa, and Southern and Northern Rhodesia.

Syndicalist union activism, black, white and red

The Industrial Socialist League's platform was also based on the 1908 IWW position. The organization was deeply inspired by the Russian Revolution, and, convinced that it was 'Bolshevik from A to Z,' named its monthly paper the *Bolshevik*,¹⁹⁷ but its doctrines show otherwise.

It aimed at the 'abolition of the wage system and the establishment of a Socialist Commonwealth based on the principle of self-governing industries, in which the workers will work and control the instruments of production, distribution and exchange for the benefit of the entire community.'¹⁹⁸ This required 'industrial organization' to 'eventually take over complete control.'¹⁹⁹ It saw the means as 'that efficient organization commonly known as the One Big Union' to 'put an end to all class war, class rule, class distinctions and class hatred – in a word, to *abolish* classes' via a hopefully 'bloodless revolution.'²⁰⁰

The Industrial Socialist League has, as indicated earlier, received almost no attention in the literature. However, it played a very large role in the history of the pre-CPSA left, and in the politics of the Coloured working class, and in the late 1910s, it supplanted the SDF as the main socialist political organization in Cape Town. Its doctrine of boycotting all state structures and elections anticipated the principled 'non-collaboration' positions long identified with Cape Trotskyism by nearly two decades.²⁰¹

¹⁹³ H.W. Sampson, House of Assembly, cited in Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour*, 235–6, n. 52.

¹⁹⁴ See the 'Industrial and Commercial Workers Union,' IWW Collection.

¹⁹⁵ Alfred Nzula, [1935] 1979, 'The Struggles of the Negro Toilers in South Africa,' Appendix to Nzula et al., *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, 206.

¹⁹⁶ For the main exception, see Bonner, 'Home Truths,' who calls its doctrines 'millenarian syndicalism.'

¹⁹⁷ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 10.

¹⁹⁸ *The Bolshevik*, February 1920, 'What WE Stand For,' hereafter *Bols*, emphasis in original. Also see 'Industrial Socialist League of South Africa, Methods and Principles, Rules – Cape Town, 1919,' in S.A. Rochlin Collection of South African Political and Trade Union Organisations, Concordia University Library Special Collection.

¹⁹⁹ *Bols*, February 1920, 'What WE Stand For.'

²⁰⁰ 'Communist,' January 1920, 'Socialism v. Violence,' *Bols*; 'The War of the Classes,' *Bols*, April 1920, emphasis in original; also see 'Liberty of the Press,' *Bols*, December 1919.

²⁰¹ On the Trotskyists, see Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, chap. 7; Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, chaps 7, 9.

From the start, this League focused on the 'big masses of the proletariat,' for (as Manuel Lopes, son of Portuguese immigrants, stated) the 'propaganda amongst the coloured and native workers is the work that counts.'²⁰² It advocated One Big Union against 'patriotism, racial pride and nationalism,'²⁰³ campaigned against the SA Labour Party,²⁰⁴ and aimed to secure 'for every man, women or child, white or coloured, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'²⁰⁵

Police reported the organization 'paid special attention to the native and coloured communities,' attracting 'considerable numbers' to events.²⁰⁶ Also alarming was the Industrial Socialist League setting up headquarters in Ayre Street, District Six, with a venue seating 600.²⁰⁷ It was 'growing in numbers and importance,' with 'definite efforts' to 'influence the coloured classes' regularly 'extended to include the native section, principally by the aid of street speeches, etc.'²⁰⁸ Initial relations with the APO were also warm.²⁰⁹

In 1918, the Industrial Socialist League formed a syndicalist union among the Coloured and African workers of the food processing factories of downtown Cape Town.²¹⁰ The first meeting took place on 10 September 1918 at the League's offices. It was attended by 30 workers from the factories of Hill's, and Buchanan, who resolved to 'form an Industrial Union' and do 'everything in its power to assure its success.'²¹¹

Coloured militant and Industrial Socialist B. Kies (previously associated with the APO) was elected chair of the new SJWIU; A.Z. Berman, Russian-born editor of the *Bolshevik*, was organizing secretary; the League provided funds.²¹² The union's membership and executive was largely Coloured, although an influx of African members saw 'com.[rade] Mpanpeni' acting as interpreter, and 'com.[rade] Nodzandza' elected.²¹³

By August 1920, Manuel Lopes reported, the Industrial Socialist League was steadily 'gaining ground ... among the coloured and native people,' and now had 'the services of a few coloured and

²⁰² WD, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes.

²⁰³ 'The Strongest Weapon of Capitalism I,' *Bols*, January 1920. Also see in *Bols*: 'Searchlight,' and 'The Bankruptcy of Trade Unionism,' November 1919, 'Searchlight,' January 1920, 'Trade Union Notes'; February 1920, 'The Strongest Weapon of Capitalism II'; Manuel Lopes, April 1920, 'Socialism and the Labour Party.'

²⁰⁴ 'The South African Labour Party Exposed! To the Native and Coloured Workers of the Cape Province,' ISL Press: Johannesburg, in S.A. Rochlin Collection.

²⁰⁵ Isaac Vermont, 'Socialism and the Coloured Folk,' *Bols*, March 1920.

²⁰⁶ Commissioner of Police, 29 July 1920, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 82; also Commissioner of Police, 30 September 1920, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 69; Commissioner of Police, 27 August 1920, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 74.

²⁰⁷ *Int.*, 21 December 1918, 'Cape Notes.'

²⁰⁸ Commissioner of Police, 1 June 1920, 'Report on Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 102.

²⁰⁹ Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, 98–9.

²¹⁰ Manuel Lopes, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 27 September 1918; Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers Union of the Cape Peninsula, held at the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 3 December 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection; also see Johns, *Raising the Red Flag*, 89; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 13.

²¹¹ First meeting, 10 September 1918, in Minutes of the First, Second and Third Meetings of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers, held in the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection.

²¹² Manuel Lopes, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 27 September 1918; *Int.*, 21 December 1918, 'Cape Notes'; also see Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 7–10, 13.

²¹³ Second meeting, 17 September 1918, in Minutes of the First, Second and Third Meetings of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers, held in the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection.

Malay comrades.²¹⁴ Besides Kies, notable Coloured ‘comrades’ of the League included A. Brown, a League member prominent in leftwing circles for many years, and M.A. Gamiet, a sympathetic unionist but not, it seems, a member.²¹⁵ Gamiet organized the mainly Coloured, Tailors’ and Tailoress’ Union, responsible in 1919 for the city’s first major strike by workers of color.²¹⁶

When the Industrial Socialist League moved to better offices in Plein Street, and opened its new Socialist Hall on 12 January 1919, speakers included Brown, Gamiet, Harrison, the anarchist S.H. Davidoff (a League member), and Tommy Boydell, a SA Labour Party leader friendly to Harrison.²¹⁷ The meeting drew a large crowd of ‘between 300 and 400 persons,’ despite heavy rain,²¹⁸ chiefly ‘Russian Jews and coloured.’²¹⁹

Not only, in short, did the Industrial Socialist League advocate equal rights for all races, but it had a substantial popular base among Coloureds and some influence among Africans – and recruited important Coloured activists, who worked alongside its founders, typically white immigrants like Berman (Jewish), C.F. Glass (English), and others (like the brothers Manuel and Frances Lopes).²²⁰

The Industrial Socialist League was incredibly active. Between May 1919 and May 1920, it held 135 outdoor meetings, 32 lectures at the hall, plus six other indoor events, ‘socials, lectures etc,’ with ‘lots of literature sold.’²²¹ For an activist, the weekly round could include three public events on Sundays, internal meetings on Monday, Friday and Saturday nights, cultural events on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, a lecture on Thursday nights, regular lunch hour talks at the rail and tram yards in the week, and ongoing union and strike work.²²²

The *Bolshevik* ran as a monthly, with a circulation of around 1000.²²³ The Industrial Socialist League also set up a library, with ‘a wide range of books and pamphlets on Russia, economics, sociology, history, and all questions of interest to the working class.’²²⁴ In 1919, it organized regular classes on ‘elementary Economics, Sociology, History, etc.’²²⁵ It experimented with ‘Socialist Sunday Schools,’ and in 1919, the pupils formed a Young Socialist Society.²²⁶ Solomon Buirski, a traveling salesman, made a habit of ‘preaching the socialistic gospel and distributing socialistic

²¹⁴ WD, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes. The Cape ‘Malays,’ largely of Muslim slave descent, were then often regarded as separate to Coloureds, a situation that later changed.

²¹⁵ No membership lists survive, but see Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 4.

²¹⁶ Nicol, ‘A History of Garment and Tailoring,’ 55–60; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 226–7.

²¹⁷ ‘Secret: Bolshevism,’ January 1919, in Justice Department, ‘Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,’ 207. Davidoff, a League member, seems to have been a former advocate of anarchist ‘propaganda by the deed’: Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 38.

²¹⁸ Manuel Lopes, ‘Cape Notes,’ *Int.*, 24 January 1919; also see Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 68 and Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 4.

²¹⁹ ‘Secret: Bolshevism,’ January 1919, in Justice Department, ‘Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,’ 207.

²²⁰ Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, 52; Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 52, 56–7, 64–70; Hirson, ‘Death of a Revolutionary’; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 7–10.

²²¹ ‘League Notes,’ *Bols*, February 1920.

²²² Buirski, undated, *Fleeting Memories*, 27–8 (see note 150).

²²³ See Commissioner of Police, 27 August 1920, letter to Secretary of Justice, in Justice Department, ‘Bolshevism in SA, Reports on,’ 75 and Commissioner of Police, 29 July 1919, letter to Secretary of Justice, in Justice Department, ‘Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,’ 86.

²²⁴ See advert in *Bols*, December 1919.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 13.

literature at places visited,' like the remote Nieuwoudtville village on the Bokkeveld,²²⁷ as did the traveler Percy Thomas, 'an active propagandist among the coloured community.'²²⁸ These achievements were remarkable, given ongoing arrests of League members, official action against its publications, and a nasty press campaign against the 'Jew Bolsheviks' just down the road from Parliament.²²⁹

The group linked up with Henry Glasse, and with anti-parliamentary left groups abroad, distributing the *Workers' Dreadnought*, mouthpiece of Sylvia Pankhurst's semi-syndicalist Workers' Socialist Federation, Britain.²³⁰ The *Dreadnought* was 'eagerly awaited and read.'²³¹ Visiting IWW sailors, 'lately from off sailing vessels,' often visited and met at the League's offices. These "'rebels" in the best sense of the term ... taught the League to sing' the IWW's songs.²³² The Jewish socialist society, *Poalei Zion*, had a branch in Cape Town. Most members were quickly recruited to the League.²³³

While scathing of the orthodox unions, the Industrial Socialist League did not set up rival unions, like the American and British IWWs. It worked in the orthodox unions, rather more like the Australian and New Zealand IWWs. The unions' 1920 May Day rally included League speakers.²³⁴ Berman was elected treasurer of the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, and Frances Lopes, President of its Tramway Workers' Union.²³⁵ At the Cape Federation's 1920 and 1921 congresses, League members also secured radical resolutions like a campaign against the color bar, replacement of craft unions by 'Industrial Unions,' affiliation to the Communist International (Comintern), and abstention from elections.²³⁶ These were never implemented, however, because the Cape Federation, under Stuart's firm control, charted a course of moderation.²³⁷

Conclusion: from syndicalism to the CPSA, and beyond

The Russian Revolution was hailed by anarchists and syndicalists across the world, and it is no surprise that the anti-authoritarians in South Africa initially viewed it as a *vindication* of their position. The Industrial Socialist League thought its syndicalist positions exemplified Bolshevism,

²²⁷ Commissioner of Police, 30 September 1920, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 69.

²²⁸ Commissioner of Police, 21 January 1921, 'Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 1.

²²⁹ L. Turok, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 24 January 1919; Manuel Lopes, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 23 May 1919; A.Z. Berman, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 27 June 1919; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 7–10; Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 83–91; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 215.

²³⁰ For example: Morris Walt, 'May Day in Cape Town,' *WD*, 12 June 1920; letter from Manuel Lopes, *WD*, 7 August 1920.

²³¹ Kreel, 'Reminiscences of a Socialist.'

²³² Manuel Lopes, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 24 January 1919.

²³³ 'The Workers of Zion,' a left Zionist group. See Buirski, undated, *Fleeting Memories*, 26–7 (see Note 150); Manuel Lopes, 'Cape Notes,' *Int.*, 29 November 1918; also see Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, 52; Johns, *Raising the Red Flag*, 115; Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 8.

²³⁴ Morris Walt, 'May Day in Cape Town,' *WD*, 12 June 1920; also Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 98.

²³⁵ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 13.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25, n. 106; 'Trade Union Notes,' *Bols*, May 1920; Commissioner of Police, 1 June 1920, 'Report on Bolshevism in the Union of South Africa,' to Secretary for Justice, in Justice Department, 'Bolshevism in South Africa, Reports on,' 103; 'Cape Federation of Labour Unions Third Annual Congress, Resolutions, March 1921,' in S.A. Rochlin Collection.

²³⁷ Mantzaris, *Labour Struggles in South Africa*, 12; Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring,' 98–9.

while the *International* insisted that the *soviets* were simply ‘the Russian form of the Industrial Union’; Lenin and Trotsky were not heads of a centralized and authoritarian revolutionary dictatorship, but merely ‘delegates of the Russian Federation of Labour.’²³⁸

It is therefore understandable that it was the Industrial Socialist League, joined by a dissident section of the International Socialist League centered on Andrew Dunbar (former general secretary of the Johannesburg IWW), which formed the first Communist Party in Africa in October 1920 – this was on a syndicalist anti-parliamentary platform. This initiative was part of a larger ‘shake-out of Socialists’ over ‘the question of principles and tactics,’²³⁹ in which the Communist Party/Industrial Socialist League jostled with the International Socialist League/SDF, as rival visions of anarchism and syndicalism were debated in polemics couched in the language of the Bolshevism none had yet grasped.

Eventually, under Comintern pressure, the core members of the 1920 Communist Party, plus a Cape-based syndicalist Communist Propaganda Group, compromising Brown, C.F. Glass and others, joined the SDF, the International Socialist League, *Poalei Zion*, and others to form the official CPSA at a Cape Town summit.²⁴⁰ Harrison represented the Cape on the CPSA executive, and C.F. Glass was Cape Town branch secretary; both were speakers at the July launch at the Cape Town City Hall, applauded by a racially mixed crowd of 2000.²⁴¹ Most members of the new party came from the older anarchist/syndicalist milieu.

This was not the end of the story. Even the official CPSA/SACP history admits that ‘syndicalist concepts remained within the Communist Party for many years.’²⁴² Many advocates of such ‘concepts’ were veterans of the 1920 Communist Party, the Communist Propaganda Group, or one of the two Leagues. The early CPSA was a very loose body, before 1928 quite autonomous of the Comintern, and this enabled syndicalist veterans like Cape Town’s Isaac Vermont to openly dissent from official positions and promote electoral boycotts and an ‘All-Workers Industrial Union,’ organized ‘irrespective of colour and creed’ as the road to ‘communism.’²⁴³

These CPSA dissidents found a voice in the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, whose publishers had been condemned by Lenin, then expelled from the CPGB in 1921. Linked into the emerging Council Communist current, the *Dreadnought* group promoted revolution via an All-Workers Revolutionary Union of Workshop Committees, rejecting the Leninist vanguard and the Soviet Union.²⁴⁴ The South African party dissidents sold the *Workers’ Dreadnought* at CPSA events, ‘Sunday after Sunday’ at the Parade in Cape Town, and elsewhere, until at least mid 1923.²⁴⁵ They also maintained links with the ICU, and seem to have played a role in drafting the 1925 ICU constitution.²⁴⁶

²³⁸ ‘Russian Workmen Vindicate Marx,’ *Int.*, 18 May 1917; ‘The Call of the Bolsheviks – League Manifesto,’ *Int.*, 1 March 1918.

²³⁹ Cope, *Comrade Bill*, 206.

²⁴⁰ Frank Glass, ‘South African Communist Party,’ *WD*, 27 August 1921.

²⁴¹ Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist*, 71–2, 79, 102; Hirson, ‘Death of a Revolutionary,’ 29–30.

²⁴² Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 40.

²⁴³ Isaac Vermont, ‘Execution of Rand Strikers,’ *WD*, 25 November 1922; Isaac Vermont, ‘South African News,’ *WD*, 31 March 1923; Isaac Vermont, ‘South African News,’ *WD*, 5 May 1923.

²⁴⁴ Sylvia Pankhurst, ‘Freedom of Discussion,’ *WD*, 17 September 1921; Sylvia Pankhurst, ‘Our View,’ *WD*, 17 February 1923; ‘Draft Constitution for the All-Workers Revolutionary Union of Workshop Committees,’ *WD*, 23 September 1922. Also see Shipway, *Anti-Parliamentary Communism*, 13–8, 92–9.

²⁴⁵ Isaac Vermont, ‘Correspondence,’ *WD*, 23 May 1923; Isaac Vermont, ‘South African News,’ *WD*, 5 May 1923.

²⁴⁶ Eddie Roux, CPSA activist, stated that a ‘Cape Marxist’ inserted the IWW clauses. From what we now know, it seems certain this ‘Marxist’ was a *Dreadnought* supporter. See Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 400.

A discussion of the reasons for the decline of syndicalism and anarchism in South Africa, and their replacement by Marxist communism, falls outside this paper. The key point is that syndicalism remained an important influence through the 1920s, notably within the CPSA and ICU. The aim of this paper, an investigation into the specificities and details of early radicalism and activism in Cape Town, has simply been to argue that there was an important and continuous anarchist and syndicalist current in South Africa's second city. It had its counterparts elsewhere in the country and the subcontinent, and was notable for its relative success in forming a left and labor movement that crossed the color line, and that operated both in white working class Cape Town, and in the white, Coloured and African slums. This was the movement from which arose the first generation of African and Coloured anti-capitalist radicals in the country. An important chapter in South African labor and left history, the anarchist and syndicalist movement in early twentieth century Cape Town deserves far more recognition than it has received so far.

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