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Bernard Sigamoney, Durban Indian revolutionary syndicalist

Lucien van der Walt

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A global movement, the anarchist and syndicalist tradition has influenced people from all walks of life. A notable figure was Bernard L.E. Sigamoney, born in 1888. The grandson of indentured Indian labourers, who arrived in South Africa in the 1870s, he became a school teacher with a working class outlook.

A hundred years ago saw the First World War (1914–1918) sear the globe: almost 40 million died. South Africa, as part of the British Empire, sent troops and workers to battles in Africa and Europe.

The country was hard hit by the war's economic disruptions. As food supplies ran short, Sigamoney began addressing protests in Durban. He met the local section of the International Socialist League (ISL) – an influential revolutionary syndicalist group that opposed the war as a conflict between European imperialists and capitalists, in which the working class did the dying.

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The ISL championed the rights of workers of colour and wanted workers' control of production through unions. In March 1917, it formed a syndicalist Indian Workers' Industrial Union (IWIU) in Durban, with members on the docks, in garment work and laundries, painting, hotels and catering and tobacco.

Sigamoney was one of the Durban Indians who joined the ISL; he was the new union's first secretary. A very well-known figure, he chaired a major left congress in October 1917 and addressed the 1918 ISL conference. Sigamoney, the ISL and the IWIU supported IWIU waiters on strike in 1919, the 1920 strike by the independent Tobacco Workers' Union and the Indian furniture workers' strike in 1921. Sigamoney was investigated by police for instigating the 1918 strikes by black African dockworkers, but was cleared.

In the 1920s, Sigamoney returned to his family's church, becoming a radical Anglican minister. He associated with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), a massive movement that was partly influenced by syndicalism. In his later years, he was active in anti-apartheid activities, especially around sports. He worked with figures like Albert Luthuli and led the 1962 campaign against apartheid South Africa's participation in the Olympics as chair of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC).

Sigamoney died in 1963, a life well spent.