

Andrews, William Henry “Bill” (1870–1950)

Lucien van der Walt

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Born in Suffolk, England, in 1870, Andrews became a prominent South African union leader, syndicalist, and communist. He was trained as a fitter and joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) in 1890. In 1893 he arrived in South Africa. In appearance the epitome of the respectable English craftsman, and a charismatic figure, Andrews worked in the mines and formed a branch of the ASE union in 1894, also serving as vice-president of the Johannesburg Trades and Labor Council. After a brief stint in imperial forces during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), he helped reorganize his union in 1902 and served as vice-president, then president, of the Witwatersrand Trades and Labor Council until 1905. Subsequently Andrews became full-time organizer for the ASE, helped form the Natal Federation of Trades, chaired the founding meeting of the South African Labor Party (SALP) in 1909, was active in the Transvaal Federation of Trades formed in 1911, and served as leader of the SALP parliamentary caucus from 1912.

Radicalized by the general strikes of 1913 and 1914, Andrews broke with the segregationist policies of the SALP, joined its anti-war faction in 1914, and left in September 1915 to help form the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League with SALP radicals and veteran syndicalists like Andrew Dunbar. He played a prominent part in the organization, serving as delegate to the abortive socialist peace conference in Stockholm of 1917, and as full-time organizer from 1918, and he actively supported the organization’s interracial policies. Impressed by the Workers’ Committee and Shop Stewards’ Movement in Britain, he aimed to form a Witwatersrand Shop Stewards’ Council as a step toward the One Big Union.

A founder member and the first secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) formed in 1921, Andrews was elected to the executive of the Communist International, and was involved with the Council of Action during the 1922 Rand Revolt. Elected secretary of the South African Trades Union Congress when it was formed in 1925 (reorganized as the South African Trades and Labor Council from 1930), Andrews held the post until 1932.

He was, however, expelled from the CPSA in 1931 during the purges of the “New Line” period. Reinstated in 1938, he was subsequently heavily honored by the CPSA. Serving as chairman of the Central Committee throughout the 1940s, Andrews was arrested along with other CPSA leaders in the wake of the African mine workers’ strike of 1946, and passed away in 1950.

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