

“Fight for Africa, which you deserve”

The Industrial Workers of Africa in South Africa, 1917–1921

Lucien van der Walt

2000

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa. May 1918. A group of African workers, and a handful of white radicals, meet in a small room behind a general store on the corner of Fox and McLaren streets, as they have done on a weekly basis for over a year. Several new faces are present, so Rueben Cetiwe, a key African militant, outlines the purpose of the gathering:

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

This is a gathering of the Industrial Workers of Africa, a revolutionary syndicalist union that aims to organise the black workers who bear the brunt of capitalist exploitation in South Africa.

Since the country’s industrial revolution began in the wake of diamond and gold discoveries in the 1860s and 1880s, hundreds of thousands of workers from Australia, America, Europe and southern Africa have been drawn to the mines and surrounding industries that spring up almost overnight.

For the white workers drawn to the mines and cities of the vast new Witwatersrand complex from across the world, it is worth risking endemic silicosis for unmatched wages for skilled men. For poor white Afrikaners, the mines offer employment as share-cropping and family farming disintegrate in the wake of war and landlordism.

For Africans, the mines offer the wages needed to pay the tax collectors in the British and Portuguese colonies. These workers enter the cities as a conquered people, their lands under imperial authority, their chiefs colluding in labour recruitment to the mines. Weighed down with indentures, forbidden to organise unions, locked in all-male compounds on the mines, or segregated in grim ghettos in the interstices of the towns, their movement controlled by the internal passport, or “pass law” system that affects every black working man, their families forced to stay in the countryside: these men are the bed rock of South African capitalism.

By 1913, there are nearly 40,000 white workers, and around 240,000 African workers on the Witwatersrand. And ruling them all: the “Randlords,” the millionaire mine owners, and their allies, the rural landlords.

There is resistance, however. In 1907, the white miners strike, but are driven back to work after scabs are brought in. In 1913, a general strike by white miners (joined by sections of the African labour force) succeeds in forcing the Randlords to the negotiating table (but not before imperial

dragoons gun down 30 workers in downtown Johannesburg outside the Randlord's "Rand Club"). A second general strike in 1914 is suppressed through martial law.

The African workers also rise. In 1902, as the Anglo-Boer war ends, there is a labour shortage as Africans refuse to come to the mines. There are also a series of strikes, but these are suppressed. In 1913, African workers on the mines strike in the wake of the white miners' strike — but their strike is put down by troops.

Then, in mid-1917, a notice appears in Johannesburg, calling a meeting on the 19 July 1917 to "discuss matters of common interest between white and native workers". It is issued by the International Socialist League, a revolutionary syndicalist organisation influenced by the IWW and formed in 1915 in opposition to the First World War, and the racist and conservative policies of the all-white South African Labour Party and the craft unions supporting it.

Initially rooted amongst white labour militants, the International Socialist League is orientated from the start towards black workers. The League argues in its weekly paper, the *International*, for a "new movement" to found One Big Union that would overcome the "bounds of Craft and race and sex," "recognise no bounds of craft, no exclusions of colour," and destroy capitalism through a "lockout of the capitalist class."

From 1917 onwards, the International Socialist League begins to organise amongst workers of colour. In March 1917, it founds an Indian Workers Industrial Union in the port city of Durban; in 1918, it founds a Clothing Workers Industrial Union (later spreading to Johannesburg) and horse drivers' union in the diamond mining town of Kimberly; in Cape Town, a sister organisation, the Industrial Socialist League, founds the Sweet and Jam Workers Industrial Union that same year.

The meeting of 19 July 1917 is a success, and forms the basis for weekly study group meetings: led by International Socialists (notably Andrew Dunbar, founder of the IWW in South Africa in 1910), these meetings discuss capitalism, class struggle and the need for African workers to unionise in order to win higher wages and remove the pass system.

On the 27 September 1917, the study groups are transformed into a union, the Industrial Workers of Africa, modelled on the IWW and organised by an all-African committee. The new general union's demands are simple, uncompromising, summed up in the its slogan- "Sifuna Zonke!" ("We want everything!").

It is the first trade union for African workers ever formed in South Africa. The influence of the new union is widespread, although it numbers under two hundred people at this point.

After meeting the Industrial Workers, Talbot Williams of the nationalist African Peoples Organisation makes a speech (reissued as a pamphlet complete with the IWW preamble) calling for "the organisation of black labour, upon which the whole commercial and mining industry rests today."

In May 1918, Industrial Workers like T.W. Thibedi speak at an International Socialist League May Day rally, the first May day directed primarily towards workers of colour.

Within the main nationalist body on the Witwatersrand, the petty bourgeois-dominated Transvaal Native Congress, key Industrial Worker militants such as Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai form part of a left, pro-labour, bloc that helps shift this sleepy organisation to the left in 1918 as an unprecedented wave of strikes by black and white workers begins to engulf the country.

After a Judge McFie — "a bear on the bench," in the words of the *International*- jails 152 striking African municipal workers in June 1918, the Transvaal Native Congress calls a mass rally of African workers in Johannesburg on the 10 June. Industrial Workers present call for a general

strike, and an organising committee of International Socialists, Industrial Workers and Congressmen is established to take the process forward.

A week later the committee reports back: “the capitalists and workers are at war everywhere in every country,” so workers should “strike and get what they should.” On the 2 July, there will be general strike by African workers: for a 1 shilling a day pay raise and “for Africa which they deserved.”

But weak organisation – and perhaps nerves and inexperience – lead the committee to call off the strike (although several thousand miners do not get the message and come out anyway).

Government does not forget, though, and arrests and charges seven activists – three from the International Socialists, three from the Industrial Workers, and two from Congress – for “incitement to public violence.” The trial is a forerunner of the Treason Trials of the 1950s: it is the first time white and black activists are jointly charged for political activities in South Africa.

The case falls through for lack of evidence but Kraai and Cetiwe are among those who lose their jobs as a result of the trial. Both are central to a Native Congress-sponsored campaign against the pass laws, launched in March 1919.

When the conservatives in Congress call this struggle off in July, the two comrades move to Cape Town to establish an Industrial Workers branch, leaving Thibedi in charge of the Industrial Workers in Johannesburg. Organising amongst dockworkers, the syndicalist militants helped organise a joint strike by the Industrial Workers of Africa and two local unions, the Industrial and Commercial Union and the (white) National Union of Railways and Harbour Servants.

Supported by the Industrial Socialist League, the strike by more than 2000 workers demands better wages and opposes food exports, which many workers believe is contributing to the country’s high post-war inflation rate.

Although the strike does not win, it helps lay a basis for cooperation on the docks, and some years later, the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Union and several other black unions merge to form the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, or ICU.

Not a syndicalist union – the ICU is influenced more by nationalist and traditionalist ideologies than anti-capitalism, and is run from above by a parasitic layer of petty bourgeois officials- the ICU still retains some syndicalist colouring during its dramatic rise and fall in the 1920s. This colouring includes the goal of One Big Union, and a constitution calling for “workers through their industrial organisations [to] take from the capitalist class the means of production, to be owned and controlled by the workers for the benefit of all, instead of for the profit of a few.”

This must be reckoned part of the legacy of the Industrial Workers of Africa, a revolutionary syndicalist union fighting capitalism and racism in the heart of capitalist South Africa, at the height of colonialism in Africa.

In its “glorious period,” between the 1880s and 1930s, revolutionary syndicalism was not just an international movement- it was also internationalist and anti-racist.

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Retrieved on 10th November 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in the *Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 24

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