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Kadalie, Clements (ca. 1896–1951)

Lucien van der Walt

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Born in or just before 1896 at Chifira village near the Bandawe mission station in Nyasaland (now Malawi) to a chiefly lineage, Clements Kadalie was educated by Presbyterian missionaries at the Livingston Missionary Institution and qualified as a teacher in 1912. Dissatisfied with his opportunities, Kadalie left teaching in 1915, moving to Mozambique and then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where he worked as a clerk in various jobs from 1916 to 1917. During this time, he was radicalized by white prejudice and the color bar.

In 1918 he arrived in South Africa and went to Cape Town, where he met sympathetic white trade unionists like Alfred F. Batty, head of a left-wing breakaway from the segregationist South African Labor Party. He also encountered the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Socialist League (not to be confused with the syndicalist International Socialist League). Unable to speak any of the local African languages, he was often assumed to be an African-American and was associated with the local Colored community in his personal life.

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In January 1919 Kadalie formed the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), initially a union for Colored dockworkers, holding the post of secretary. The union attended the 1919 congress of the Cape Federation of Labor Unions but did not affiliate. Kadalie's charisma and oratory skills played a key role in ICU fortunes, and Kadalie became a full-time official from 1920 onwards. In December 1919 the ICU cooperated with the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of Africa in organizing an unsuccessful strike by African and Colored dockworkers in Cape Town.

In 1920 the ICU merged with other African general unions and the Cape section of the Industrial Workers of Africa at a conference in Bloemfontein, which aimed to form One Big Union. The union expanded rapidly from the mid-1920s onwards, achieving immense success among African farm workers and tenant farmers, despite ongoing official harassment. In 1927 it claimed a membership of 100,000 and was represented by Kadalie at the International Labor Conference in Geneva. The ICU also established sections in South West Africa (now Namibia) in 1920, Southern Rhodesia in 1927, and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1931.

However, weak structures, substantial corruption, infighting, and repression saw the ICU decline rapidly in the years that followed. The 1926 expulsion of Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) members like Johnny Gomas and T. W. Thibedi was another blow. ICU ideology – a mixture of the ideas of Marcus Garvey, revolutionary syndicalism, and other currents – was unstable and the union lacked a clear strategy. Kadalie's attempts to reform the union, with the aid of liberals and British labor, failed. From 1928 onwards the ICU splintered, with Kadalie leading the Independent ICU faction. The ICU faded away in the early 1930s, although it was later revived in Southern Rhodesia. Kadalie moved to East London and became a provincial organizer for the nationalist group, the African National Congress (ANC).

Visiting Nyasaland in 1951, he contracted an infection and died soon after his return to South Africa.

References and Suggested Readings

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