

Social Organisation and Black Workers in South Africa: 1914–1921

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This chapter discusses the debate that took place in the labour movement at the beginning of this century and the way it affected worker organisations in South Africa. At this time, it was mainly white workers who had built political parties and trade unions in the country. The major issues which dominated the development of these organisations between 1914 and 1921 was their participation in the First World War, and their relationship to black workers. It was out of these debates that the first socialist organisation in South Africa, the *International Socialist League (ISL)*, began to organise black workers.¹

The struggle against participation in the war

World War I broke out in Europe on August 14 1914. This war brought many problems to the socialist and labour parties in Europe and South Africa. Before the war, most socialist parties have been organised into an international organisation called the *Second International*. In 1912, at its congress in Basle, the second international adopted a resolution on the coming world war. This resolution said that all socialist and labour parties should oppose any participation by workers in the war. The resolution said that the world war was a war to enrich capitalists. It said that workers should refuse to take up arms against other workers. When the war actually came, many of the parties of the Second international supported their own governments. The strongest party in the Second International, the German Socialist Democratic party, also supported the German government. It encouraged German workers to take up arms against other workers. This led to splits within the German party. In South Africa too, the question of participation in the war led to many debates. The *South African Labour Party (SALP)* was formed in 1909 and adopted some of the policies of the Second International. The debates over the war led to divisions within the SALP. Those socialist who were against participation formed a group called the War on War League. When it became clear that the divisions could not be healed, this group split from the SALP and formed the International Socialist League (ISL). The League published the paper called '*The International*'.²

The ISL turns to black workers

Until about 1915, the socialist movement in South Africa addressed itself only to white workers.³ Most of the socialist activists at that time had come from Europe. They brought with them a tradition of trade unionism and socialist politics. When the SALP was formed in 1909, it took a position which said that the black workers had no role to play in the struggle for socialism in South Africa. The SALP viewed all black workers as a threat to the interests of white workers. Under the leadership of Cresswell, who had been a Major in the Defence Force in South West Africa, the SALP said that Indian workers must be sent back to India. The SALP allowed 'coloured'

¹ The claim that the International Socialist League (ISL) was the "first socialist organisation in South Africa". Socialist groups dated back to at least the 1890s, such as the Social Democratic Federation in Cape Town formed in 1904 by the anarchist Wilfred Harrison.

² The over-emphasis on the "Second International", and serious underestimation of the global anarchist and syndicalist influence and struggles.

³ The notion that before "until about 1915, the socialist movement in South Africa addressed itself only to white workers" is not accurate. The SDF, for example, organised interracial unions and unemployed demonstrations, and campaigned in mixed neighbourhoods like District Six.

workers to join the party. This was because in the Cape a number of 'coloured' workers were skilled workers who belonged to craft unions affiliated to the SALP. Since some 'coloureds' in the Cape had the vote, the SALP also wanted their support.

The SALP said that African workers were uncivilised and savages and should go back to being peasant farmers. The SALP propagated a policy of segregation and did not approve of social mixing between whites and blacks. It also did not approve of 'mixed marriages'. The SALP argued that because black labour was cheap it would be used by the capitalists to replace white workers. It therefore called for segregation and 'equal pay for equal work'. For the SALP, black workers were only temporary and would soon go back to the countryside.

Although a number of members of the ISL also held these views, towards the end of the First World War, a number of factors forced some socialists within the ISL to change their views. This was mainly because:

- White workers strongly supported the war. The ISL members lost many elections to municipal councils because of their stand on the war. They tried, without success, to convince white workers that the war was a capitalist war which did not benefit workers.
- During the war black workers went on militant strikes in defence of their living standards. The prices of goods had gone up during the war and black workers started organising strikes to demand higher wages. For example, in June 1919 sanitary workers went on strike demanding higher wages.

Under the influence of these two factors, leading members of the ISL, like SP Bunting and Bill Andrews started changing their attitudes to black workers. *They argued that only solidarity between white and black workers could overthrow the capitalist system in South Africa.* For the first time in history of socialism in South Africa, the ISL started calling for the organisation of black workers into industrial unions.

This call was supported by the syndicalists within the ISL.⁴ The syndicalists believed that only when workers were organised into strong industrial unions could they overthrow capitalism. They said that workers' strongest weapon was the general strike. Unlike the SALP, which believed in craft unions, the ISL strongly believed in non-racial industrial unions.

This turn towards the black workers was not without its problems for the ISL. Many of its members still believed in the old SALP position. The majority of the ISL still saw the need to organise black workers to protect whites. They argued that black workers must be organised so that they could not be scabs when white workers went on strike. After much delay, the ISL started a night school for black workers in 1917. In that same year the *Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA)*, a general union for black workers, was formed. Some of the workers who played a major part in the IWA came from the ISL night schools.

In its first pamphlet distributed in 1917 the IWA called on the workers to unite, irrespective of colour. The pamphlet ended with the words:

⁴ The tendency to speak of "the syndicalists within the ISL". The ISL's official platform was syndicalist; syndicalism was not one current amongst many, but ISL policy.

Workers of the World Unite!
You have Nothing to Lose but your Chains!
You have a World to Win!
Workers of the World Unite!

The IWA played an important role in a boycott of mine stores in 1918 and most of the campaigns conducted by black workers between 1918 and 1920 were led by members of IWA.

The ISL's attitude to black and white nationalist organisations

The *syndicalism* of the ISL was also reflected in the attitude of the ISL towards the nationalist organisations.

Throughout its existence (i.e. until 1921) when the ISL together with other organisations formed the *Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)*, the ISL took a very hostile attitude towards the nationalist organisations. The ISL believed that the conflict in South Africa was between the capitalists and the workers and not between black and white. It called on black workers not to follow the lead of the nationalist leaders in the *South African Native National Congress (SANNC which later became the ANC)*. It also called on the Afrikaner workers not to follow the lead of the Nationalist Party under Hertzog's leadership.

The ISL said that the black middle class which led the SANNC and the Afrikaner nationalists were opposed to trade unionism. Although the ISL was opposed to the nationalist parties it did not oppose the fight for democratic rights. It argued that the struggle for democratic rights had to be based on industrial unions. The ISL was correct in its hostility to the nationalism of the SANNC and NP as solutions for the working class. The ISL proposed that the industrial trade unions were sufficient basis for the struggle for democracy. This position highlighted its own syndicalist weaknesses.

Despite its limitations, the ISL made an important contribution towards the struggle for socialism. Its struggle against participation in the war showed a spirit of working class internationalism. It was also the first organisation to take the organisation of the black workers seriously.

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