

T.W. Thibedi: The life of a South African revolutionary syndicalist

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The son of a Wesleyan minister, Thibedi William Thibedi was one of the most important black African revolutionary syndicalists in South African history. Thibedi was a leading figure in the International Socialist League (ISL) and in the Industrial Workers of Africa syndicalist union. Later he played an important role in the early Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), particularly its union work. He was active in all of the key black unions from the 1910s to the 1940s.

According to Eddie Roux of the CPSA, Thibedi was a “genius at getting people together, whether workers in a particular industry, women, location residents, or whatever was needed at the moment”.

The ISL

Hailing from the small town of Vereeniging, T.W. Thibedi trained as a school teacher and worked at a church school in Johannesburg. Around 1916, he joined the ISL as its first major African leader. In September 1917, Thibedi was involved in organizing an ISL-sponsored conference that led to the formation of a “Solidarity Committee” intended to reform the orthodox trade unions on syndicalist lines. These existing unions generally excluded people of colour (except in Cape Town), tended to craft unionism, and were prone to binding no-strike agreements. Thibedi served on the Committee, which was not, however, a success.

Union Militant

From 1918, Thibedi was involved in the Industrial Workers of Africa’s Johannesburg section, arguing for One Big Union united on class lines across the races, and mass action. This union was an ISL initiative, and had well over a 1000 members countrywide. The first Industrial Workers of Africa leaflet, written by committee, and issued in IsiZulu and Sesotho, proclaimed:

Workers of the Bantu race:

Why do you live in slavery? Why are you not free as other men are free? Why are you kicked and spat upon by your masters? Why must you carry a pass before you can move anywhere? And if you are found without one, why are you thrown into prison? Why do you toil hard for little money? And again thrown into prison if you refuse to work? Why do they herd you like cattle into compounds? WHY?

Because you are the toilers of the earth. Because the masters want you to labour for their profit. Because they pay the Government and Police to keep you as slaves to toil for them... There is only one way of deliverance for you Bantu workers. Unite as workers. Unite: forget the things which divide you...

The sun has arisen, the day is breaking, for a long time you were asleep while the mill of the rich man was grinding and breaking the sweat of your work for nothing.

The ISL advocated struggle against the pass and indenture laws, and against the compound system, through mass action centred on the One Big Union. The Industrial Workers of Africa was just one of several syndicalist unions it formed and led.

Inside the ANC

Along with other Industrial Workers of Africa militants, Thibedi promoted syndicalism as part of the syndicalist current in the leftwing of the late 1910s South African Native National Congress (SANNC, now the African National Congress, or ANC). When a failed joint, general strike in July 1918 led to a crackdown on the ISL, the Industrial Workers of Africa and the SANNC leftwing in the Transvaal, it fell to Thibedi to revive the union in Johannesburg. A leaflet by Thibedi in 1919 argued:

...Black African open your eyes, the time has come for you all who call themselves Country Workers that you should join and become members of your own Council. It is not to say that we workers stop you from joining any other Councils, but you must know what you are in the Country for (rich or poor). All workers are poor therefore they should have their own Council... Why are you afraid to become members of the Industrial Workers of Africa whilst you call yourself Workers?

The union in Johannesburg drew its members from across the African working class, and was actually more of a general union than the industrial union on IWW lines, to which it aspired (its Cape Town section, by contrast, was mainly based on the docks).

The CPSA and After

The key African in the early CPSA, Thibedi put his syndicalist background to work when he ran the Party's night school in Johannesburg; he became a full-time CPSA organiser and unionist. He worked inside the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), and when the ICU broke with the CPSA, and the CPSA set up "red" unions, he led the CPSA's Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU). The CPSA was wracked with purges at the time, and expelled Thibedi in 1929. He rejected the two-stage approach (which still remains Communist Party policy, and is the basis of the alliance with the ANC). However, FNETU rebelled, and forced Thibedi's reinstatement; he was finally expelled in 1931.

Later Thibedi flirted with Trotskyism, especially the Workers' International League: this ran an opposition caucus in the CPSA-led Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) in the 1940s.

Legacy

Thibedi repeatedly rejected requests to rejoin the CPSA, and, tired of militant work, faded from public life from the late 1940s. Living in Eersterus, he died in 1960 (Eersterus was a freehold township in Pretoria from which Africans were evicted from 1959, a bitter experience for the aged man). Thibedi's years of union and left activism – spanning syndicalism, Communism and Trotskyism – and his absolutely pivotal role in this period, have not received their due recognition. However, in 2006 the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), with close Party links, resolved to memorialise him and other "worker heroes". The status of his monument is unclear.

Sources:

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