

Anarchism and syndicalism in an African port city: Cape Town, the IWW and the ICU, 1904-1924

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This paper examines the development of anarchism and syndicalism in Cape Town, the main port city in South Africa, and its connections with regional and transnational labour and radical networks. The history of the early left in this key centre, and the overlaps between socialist radicalism, labour and African and Coloured nationalism have not previously been adequately analysed. As a port, Cape Town was a key link in the chains of transnational connections between South Africa and the larger world; as a growing manufacturing and commercial centre, Cape Town was an important site of activism and class and race struggles; as the sole major city in South Africa with an African minority and a unmatched degree of racial integration between white and Coloured, Cape Town is also interesting for its unique dynamics, dynamics that gave to its labour and left a very different character to that of the better known Witwatersrand, the traditional focus of South African left and labour studies,

Emerging in the early twentieth-century in the context of rapid White immigration, the movement was pioneered in 1904 by the anarchist Wilfred Harrison of the local Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and General Workers Union. The Industrial Socialist League, established in 1918 as an SDF breakaway, adopted the IWW platform, was active in union work across the colour line, and formed in 1920 with groups on the Witwatersrand, a Communist Party on a syndicalist platform – the first Party in Africa. Also important in the Cape libertarian milieu was the Industrial Workers of Africa, and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) –the latter would spread across southern Africa as a transnational union from 1920 onwards. Cape syndicalists also influenced the nationalists of the South African Native National Congress. The paper suggests the importance of situating Cape Town within a global labour history, rather than simply viewing the city as one part of a national narrative of South African working class history, and underlines the existence of an interracial local left tradition well before the formation of the official Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921.

The peculiarities of Cape Town

Cape Town dates back to the founding of a way-station by the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) in 1652, and is located at Table Bay in the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. The first major urban centre in the region, it was from 1806 a hub of British imperial power, and the capital of the Cape Colony. The first recorded strikes in southern Africa took place in Cape Town from the eighteenth century onwards, later spreading to its rival, Port Elizabeth, set in Algoa Bay in the Eastern Cape.¹ Both ports were involved in agricultural exports from their pre-industrial

¹ See N. Worden, "Artisan Conflicts in a Colonial Context: the Cape Town blacksmith strike of 1752," *Labour History* 46 no. 2 (2005)., and A. Mabin, "The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth, 1850-1900," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 19 no. 2 (1986)., p. 282

hinterlands for many years, but were hampered by primitive facilities and infrastructure; from the 1860s, there were also serious problems from high quality Australian wool and adverse weather.²

The opening of diamond fields at Kimberley on the borderlands of the northern Cape and the Afrikaner republic of the Orange Free State from 1867, followed by the discovery of spectacular gold reserves on the Witwatersrand in 1886 in the independent Afrikaner republic of the Transvaal changed the whole region. By the late 1870s, diamond exports exceeded the value of wool exports from the Cape Colony.³ Cape Town's elite was able to secure the funding needed to modernise its harbour, and establish the fastest railway route to Kimberley by 1885, with a railway to Johannesburg seven years later.⁴ Replaced as the main urban centre by first Kimberley and then Johannesburg, Cape Town nonetheless prospered from the new mining economy.

Port Elizabeth entered into a permanent decline; Cape Town's real rival became Durban on the East Coast in the British colony of Natal, which overtook it in time. In the meantime, ongoing wars against African societies in the eastern Cape led to an increased labour supply and new trading opportunities.⁵ Both Cape Town and Durban developed significant local manufacturing and service sectors, partly based on access to cheap imported ingredients for products like paint and soap.⁶ Both cities also grew rapidly, and experienced substantial White immigration. When in 1910 Britain amalgamated the Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal (as provinces), along with a number of African territories (as reserves) into the self-governing Union of South Africa, Cape Town became the seat of parliament.

Race and labour in Cape Town

Cape Town was a major point of entry for the tens of thousands of European immigrants who poured into South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries⁷: many went inland to the mines; thousands stayed in the thriving port city. Trade boomed, getting a further boost from the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, which provided a brisk business with both the imperial military, and a growing refugee population.⁸ The financial sector, tramways and urban rail, building and construction all grew rapidly, while industrial employment doubled from 5,612 persons in 1887

² Mabin, "The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth, 1850-1900." pp. 281-183

³ Ibid., p. 290: Table 2, p. 295: Table 3

⁴ V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Johannesburg, 1995), pp. 11-13, 16-17, 43-6, 129-130; Mabin, "The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth, 1850-1900." pp. 288-289, 295-8

⁵ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, p. 44; A. Mabin, "Waiting for Something to Turn Up? The Cape Colony in the eighteen eighties," in *Organisation and Economic Change*, ed. A. Mabin, Southern African Studies series (Johannesburg, 1989), pp. 27-31

⁶ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, p. 130; Freund, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 29-31; also see M. Nicol, "A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-1939" (PhD, University of Cape Town, 1984), pp. 70-71

⁷ Perhaps 114,000 immigrants arrived within two years of the end of the Anglo-Boer War, including many demobilised soldiers: Visser, 2001a, *op cit.*, pp. 2-3

⁸ Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 130-132

establishments, to 11,474 in 611 plants from 1891 to 1904.⁹ By 1904, Cape Town had 170,000 inhabitants (up from 79,000 in 1891, and eclipsing Port Elizabeth's 33,000),¹⁰ boosted by 70,000 immigrants, with 34,000 from Europe (mainly British), but also including 9,000 Jews, 2,000 Afrikaners, 9,000 Africans, 2,000 Indians and 21,000 Coloureds.¹¹

Cape Town's Coloured and White workers had a venerable long tradition of class struggle, and working class traditions were bolstered by the large influx of British immigrants, who included many domestic servants and skilled workers.¹² The immigrants brought new traditions of trade unionism, and also of radicalism. "In the eighties and nineties a number of British unions opened branches in Durban, Kimberley ... Johannesburg ... [and] ... Cape Town", and perhaps the first was the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners in Cape Town in 1881.¹³ Unions were something new in South Africa, and the first unions were set up by skilled white immigrants.

Across South Africa, organised labour was increasingly dominated by segregationist traditions like White Labourism and Afrikaner nationalism – but Cape Town was a key exception, for several reasons. The western and northern Cape were, in the first instance, unique in South Africa in that the Coloureds, a mixed-race descended from the slaves of the old Cape, Africans and whites, and mainly speaking Afrikaans, were the majority. Coloureds had a different legal and social status to Africans, and a distinct Coloured identity was evident by the late nineteenth century across southern Africa.¹⁴ Furthermore, African numbers in these areas of the Cape were decisively overshadowed by the combined Coloured and White population. Across in the region, coercive labour controls were applied to Africans, a large and growing majority of the working class; in Cape Town and Kimberley, by contrast, such labour controls therefore applied only to a minority.

The fact that the majority of the labour force was free, rather than coerced, gave a decisively different cast to local class formation and politics. The African minority, it should be stressed, was harshly oppressed. It was concentrated in the roughest work, and increasingly confined to segregated locations, such as Ndabeni: established around 1901 for 700 people, it was home to 3,500 by 1918, with "no streets ... no lights ... the huts were scorchingly hot in summer and too cold in winter";¹⁵ it was moreover surrounded by a six-foot-high barbed wire fence, patrolled by guards, and sited next to

⁹ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, p. 130; also see Nicol, "A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-1939". pp. 70-71

¹⁰ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, p. 11, table 1

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4, 147-8

¹³ W.H. Andrews, 1941, *Class Struggles in South Africa*, Stewart Printing, Cape Town, pp. 12-13. The union was later renamed the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. It only obtained its own governing council in 1926. See Gitsham and Trembath, 1926, *op cit.*, pp. 70-71

¹⁴ See, *inter alia*, Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*..., pp. 186-209; Ian Goldin, 1987, "The Reconstitution of Coloured Identity in the Western Cape", in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, editors, *op cit.*, and James Muzondidya, 2002, "Towards a Historical Understanding of the Making of the Coloured Community in Zimbabwe, 1890-1920", *Identity, Culture and Politics*, vol.3, no. 2, pp. 77, 81-3

¹⁵ Figures and contemporary quotation from Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 46-8

a sewerage dump.¹⁶ Ndabeni was meant for married men: the equally grim Docks Location housed single male African migrants.

Moreover, in Cape Town, Coloureds formed a significant component of the skilled workers.¹⁷ The proportion of Coloureds in commercial and industrial occupations in the western Cape rose from 9 percent in 1891 to 20 percent in 1904, with the number of clerks, storekeepers and hawkers tripling, and the number of masons doubling, in this period.¹⁸ Pragmatic considerations alone would have pointed to the development of a somewhat different union tradition in the Cape. Further impetus came from the “Cape tradition” of relatively high levels of interracial contact and relationships between Coloureds and whites, and large areas of central Cape Town –Districts One and Six, and Woodstock – were remained racially mixed despite growing official efforts segregate public facilities and residential areas from the late nineteenth century.¹⁹

In the northern provinces, it was, above all, competition for jobs between free, skilled, organised and urbanised white workers, on the one side, and unfree, nominally unskilled and largely migrant African workers in a context of overt white supremacy that that divided the working class. In the northern and western Cape, however, the working class was largely urban, had traditions of interracialism and integration, and the threat of mass replacement by bonded African labour did not loom large. Moreover, the franchise system was different: in the Cape, it was possible for a person of colour to be elected to municipal and provincial government, and a significant number of Coloureds (and a small but notable African group) had the vote. This system was retained until the late 1930s. Thus, Doctor Abdullah Abdurrahman, who headed the Coloured nationalist African Peoples’ Organisation (formed in 1902, renamed the African People’s Organisation in 1919), was regularly elected to the Cape Town Council from 1904 to 1940 (and to the Cape Provincial Council from 1914 to 1940), with the help of the “District Six Ratepayers’ Association”.²⁰

The Cape trade union movement that developed in this context was rather unique in its interracialism. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Cape unions were typically organised on a craft basis, were usually fragile, often very cautious, and in many cases very short-lived.²¹ If the craft unions based amongst printers, engineers and carpenters were fairly durable, many more were not: from 1900 to 1925, for instance, at least five unions of clothing workers emerged and disappeared.²² Cape unions tended to be weaker, while class struggle had a “low level of intensity” compared to the turbulent Witwatersrand.²³

¹⁶ Maylam, 1986, *op cit.*, p. 149

¹⁷ Nicol, "A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-1939"., pp. 19-21

¹⁸ Goldin, 1987, *op cit.*, p. 159

¹⁹ Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town.*, pp. 91-125, 137-163, 160-163, 210-217

²⁰ E. Rosenthal, "Abdurrahman, Dr. Abdullah," in *Southern African Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. E. Rosenthal (London, New York, 1966)., p. 1

²¹ Nicol, "A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-1939". pp. 93-4

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 93-4

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9

In 1913, a Cape Federation of Labour Unions was formed: predominantly comprised of craft unions, it had Coloured members.²⁴ It remained resolutely independent of the segregationist South African Industrial Federation that was formed the following year, and which organised the other provinces, as well as of its successors; the breach between the northern and southern unions was not healed until the 1940s. By 1919, it had sixteen affiliates with its largest union, the Cabinet Makers', barely over 400 members,²⁵ so the entire federation could probably not have been more than about 6,000 members. The interracial tradition of the Cape unions should not be unduly romanticised: White Labourism was a powerful influence amongst many of Cape Town's White workers, the nationalism of the African Political Organisation had a real influence amongst Coloured workers, and the craft union structure left most workers of colour outside the labour movement.

Starting a radical left-wing tradition: Harrison, anarchism and socialism

Today, Cape Town enjoys something of a reputation for a lively left. The foundations were laid in 1904 when the first socialist group in twentieth century South Africa was formed in that city in 1904: this was the SDF, which was the most important socialist organisation in the country before 1910, and remained active continuously until 1921, when it merged into the CPSA. However, the SDF has been almost entirely ignored in the literature, and there is, to date, no serious study of the organisation. A politically diverse group, with some early affiliations to classical Marxism in Britain, the SDF always had a substantial anarchist section – a section whose influence tended to grow over time. Founded on May Day, 1904,²⁶ its core base was amongst skilled workers, mainly white. In 1905, the SDF co-operated with the local Trades and Labour Council – formed in 1899, revived after the end of the Anglo-Boer War, and the immediate predecessor of the Cape Federation of Labour – to organise Cape Town's first May Day.²⁷

The leading SDF figure, and its leading anarchist, was Wilfred Harrison. Born in London in 1871, Harrison served on the British side in the Anglo-Boer War, came into conflict with his comrades as a result of his growing antipathy to the war and to military discipline, and finally lost his post as a military artificer for fraternising with Afrikaner prisoners.²⁸ He resigned in 1903 from the Coldstream Guards a "convinced pacifist", settled in Cape Town, where he worked at his trade as a carpenter,²⁹ and joined the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. Soon afterwards he linked

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 93-5

²⁵ See Giffard, 1984, *op cit.*, p. 10

²⁶ Jack Erasmus, 8 June 1905, "Social Democratic Federation: annual report", *South African News*, press clipping in Max Nettlau Collection, International Institute of Social History

²⁷ Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 330

²⁸ Gitsham and Trembath, 1926, *A First Account of Labour Organisation in South Africa*, E.P. and Commercial Printing, Durban pp. 167-8; Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 123-126, 133-140; Walker and Weinbren, 1961, *op cit.*, p. 57

²⁹ On Harrison generally, see Boydell, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. vii-xiv, 123-126, 133-142; Gitsham and Trembath, 1926, *op cit.*, pp. 167-8.

up with others of a radical bent, like J.L. Page³⁰ and Jack Erasmus,³¹ formed a short-lived General Workers' Union, and then the SDF.

The early SDF was decidedly moderate, Statist besides, and its initial platform did not mention socialism.³² It described at the time as a branch of the Marxian Social Democratic Federation in Britain.³³ In 1905, the SDF co-operated with the Trades and Labour Council in the municipal elections, and also ran an unsuccessful candidate, SDF member Arthur Ridout, in 1907 with backing from the Labour Representation Committee set up by the unions.³⁴ Matters began to change around 1905 and 1906: Erasmus resigned following a dispute over the SDF's erratically produced (now tragically lost) paper, the *Cape Socialist*; other early members left for different reasons; Harrison became undisputed leader.³⁵ By 1908, the SDF was running candidates in the Cape general elections against the new Cape Labour Party formed by the Trades and Labour Council, the Labour Representation Committee and others.³⁶

It is simply not true, as is sometimes claimed, that the SDF "claimed to follow Hyndman in England, and to be true Marxists".³⁷ Its membership included some Marxists, but also "anarchists, reform socialists, [and] guild socialists",³⁸ all agreed on the elastic goal of the "abolition of Capitalism and Landlordism, the socialisation of all the means of production, distribution and exchange, i.e., the ownership and control of all the means by the people for the people".³⁹ Such a goal was, it seems, sufficiently elastic for all members. Different currents "worked without serious conflict", claimed Harrison, "and each was allowed to express its differences of opinion".⁴⁰

The SDF was a very varied body. On one side, it could include a figure like Robert "Bob" Stuart: a Scottish-born stonemason by trade who was associated with the SDF from around 1904 to 1914, he was the authoritarian full-time secretary of the Cape Federation of Labour from 1915 to 1941, and opposed all attempts to form a single national union centre.⁴¹ Stuart was a moderate, who left the SDF for being unduly influenced by "young Communists".⁴² On the other end of the spectrum, the SDF had a vocal and lively "anarchist section", prominent members of which included "Levinson,

³⁰ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 3

³¹ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 4

³² Social Democratic Federation, [1904] 1973, "The Cape Town Social Democratic Federation's Fighting Platform, 1904", available as appendix B, I, 2 in Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 497

³³ See Erasmus, 1905, *op cit.*: "Special Correspondent", 6 February 1905, "Capetown's Meeting of Sympathy", *Cape Daily Telegraph*, press clipping in Max Nettlau Collection, International Institute of Social History; James Kier Hardie, 5 May 1908, "In Cape Colony", *The Labour Leader*; James Kier Hardie, 22 May 1908, "South Africa: Conclusions", *The Labour Leader*

³⁴ Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 330-1, 333-4; Visser, 2001a, *op cit.*, p. 18. The 1905 manifesto may be found in Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 498 appendix B, I, 4

³⁵ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 9-10, also see pp.5-6

³⁶ Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 334-5. The 1907 SDF manifesto that seems to have been a key factor in the breakdown of relations, may be found in Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 501-2 appendix B, I, 7

³⁷ Cope, [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 96. For similar claims, see Drew, 2002, *op cit.*, p. 8; Hyslop, 2004, *op cit.*, p. 194; Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 339; Visser, 2001a, *op cit.* p. 17 follows Cope uncritically on this point.

³⁸ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 31

³⁹ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 5

⁴⁰ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 118- 119

⁴¹ Nicol, "A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-1939"., pp. 21-2, 95-7

⁴² Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 23, 52-3; *Ibid.* p. 96; Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 415

Strauss, Hahne, Ahrens and others ... all of European origin”:⁴³ “the Jewish apostles of socialism” who “preached human equality and the coming Social Revolution”⁴⁴ were, in Cape Town, concentrated in District Six.⁴⁵

Harrison was one of the anarchists,⁴⁶ and his new role as the SDF’s public face doubtless strengthened the “anarchist section”. Exactly when or why became an anarchist is difficult to determine, but he made the shift by 1910.⁴⁷ A great admirer of Piotr Kropotkin, he met the *Freedom* group in London in 1911,⁴⁸ and seems to have made the very first written South African reference to the term “communism” during a discussion of anarchist-communism.⁴⁹ An “inveterate soap-box orator” who “could breathe hell fire and brimstone at capitalism” and deploy a “fluent tongue”,⁵⁰ Harrison would declare, to racially mixed audiences on the Cape Town Parade, that “Capitalism was on its last legs ... Fields, factories and workshops were to be owned and controlled by those who worked in them ... Kropotkin had proved that the problem of production had been solved. It now remained only a question of ownership and distribution”, and “laws – as we know them – will be quite unnecessary”.⁵¹

The “forceful and appealing way” in which Harrison “presented his case might almost have convinced many that the Social and Economic Revolution was about to take place next day, or at the very latest by the end of that week”.⁵² The SDF’s platforms were also open to a wide range of speakers, and included on occasion Mohandas Gandhi, who (at the time) “declared himself a Socialist and spoke from our platforms”.⁵³ It was also in contact with Olive Schreiner, the South African author, socialist and pioneer of women’s rights, who in turn sent the SDF letters of encouragement.⁵⁴ Harrison was an anarchist, but not a sectarian. He believed radical education as the main route to the anarchist society: the task, he claimed, was to deal “with the cause of the evil and not the effects of it”, and to avoid focussing on reforms that would “obscure” the socialist project “by attempting to improve a system that ... Socialism will ...destroy”.⁵⁵ He was no advocate of “armed revolt”,⁵⁶ but, rather, a champion of cooperation, interracialism, and anarchist-communism. There “wouldn’t be a Capitalist class”, he reasoned, “if the working class didn’t labour to make it – hence the only people to

⁴³ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 16, 118- 119

⁴⁴ Mantzaris, 1988, *op cit.*, p. 163

⁴⁵ Milton Shain, 1994, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, pp. 51-2

⁴⁶ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 119

⁴⁷ For example, Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 38; Wilfred Harrison, 1 July 1910, “Anarchy”, *Voice of Labour*

⁴⁸ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 32, 38, 119-120

⁴⁹ Visser, 2001a, *op cit.*, p. 217; Visser, 2004, *op cit.*, p. 2

⁵⁰ Boydell, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 41

⁵¹ Boydell, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. viii, ix

⁵² Boydell, [? 1947] n.d. *op cit.*, p. viii

⁵³ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 36, 143

⁵⁴ Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 13-14, 327-8

⁵⁵ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d. *op cit.*, pp. 9, 38, 118-9, 144; Wilfred Harrison, 21 June 1912, “What’s up With the Movement?”, *Voice of Labour*

⁵⁶ *Contra*. Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 139

blame are the workers themselves, who ought not to declare to war on a people who are the products of their own deeds”.⁵⁷

There is more than some truth in later CPSA characterisations of the SDF as “evangelical socialists,”⁵⁸ not to mention the CPSA descriptions of Harrison as a “staunch and unwavering class fighter”.⁵⁹ It would be a mistake, however, to treat the SDF as merely a propaganda group. The SDF set up a bookshop, reading room, refreshment bar, a “Socialist Hall” and reading circle at its offices in Cosay’s Buildings at the corner of Adderley and Riebeeck streets, held public debates and talks in District Six and at the foot of the Riebeeck statue, and even public talks at the City Hall.⁶⁰

A meeting at the Good Hope Hall in sympathy with the 1905 Russian Revolution attracted 1,500 people.⁶¹ A debate at the Socialist Hall in 1906 on whether “socialism can regenerate humanity” reportedly attracted 600 people.⁶² In line with the SDF ethos, Morris Alexander of the SDF (a left-wing Jewish lawyer) closed this meeting with a speech that stressed “once the masses realised that they would have to fight the battle for themselves, then they would be doing far better for social betterment than relying on philanthropic sops”. As the organisation grew, it relocated to larger offices at Plein and Barrack streets, where it sublet space to unions, ran a refreshment bar, and kept a printing press.⁶³ Members led an active social life through the organisation, including visits to the beach, and a choir was established.⁶⁴

The SDF, direct action, and struggles across the colour line

These were enormous numbers for public meetings by a left political organisation in South Africa, and would not often be matched in later years. Part of the reason lay in the appeal of SDF politics to a large and mixed working class. The SDF has been unfairly charged with having “ignored” racial prejudices, treating South Africa’s national question as a “side issue”, and treating Coloured concerns insensitively.⁶⁵ There is certainly no evidence at all for charges that the SDF “in practice never took steps to organise the non-white worker or to openly propagate racial equality”.⁶⁶ The SDF adopted what later writers would call “an enlightened policy towards the Coloured peoples”,⁶⁷ and Harrison opposed “racial prejudices or Colour discrimination”, fought union colour bars, and tried to link national oppression to capitalism, the “system that is the cause of Coloured and racial prejudices

⁵⁷ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d. *op cit.*, pp. xix, 144-145, also 115-6

⁵⁸ Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 139-140, 142-143

⁵⁹ Cope, n.d. [? 1943], *op cit.*, pp. 96-7

⁶⁰ Erasmus, 1905, *op cit.*; Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 13

⁶¹ Erasmus, 1905, *op cit.*; “Special Correspondent”, 1905, *op cit.*

⁶² “Socialism and Humanity: debate between Messrs. Needham and Main”, 1906 press clipping, no source given, Max Nettlau Collection, folder 471, International Institute of Social History

⁶³ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 6

⁶⁴ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 16

⁶⁵ Notably by Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 139-140

⁶⁶ Van Duin, 1990, *op cit.*, p. 649

⁶⁷ Cope, n.d. [? 1943], *op cit.*, pp. 96-8, 111, 113

and general exploitation”.⁶⁸ SDF activists like Harrison and J. Dibble, active in the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, also sought to have union colour bar clauses removed.⁶⁹ SDF members argued that Coloured workers needed to organise unions in order to raise their wages and end wage discrimination on racial grounds.⁷⁰

The SDF had meanwhile set up a propaganda commission for Africans, and found a “good deal of interest” in socialism “among the Malays” (a section of the Coloureds, concentrated in skilled work, usually Muslim), and Harrison made specific efforts to propagandise in District Six and enrol Coloured members.⁷¹ By 1910 the SDF could report significant progress,⁷² and clearly had a number of Coloured members.⁷³ It held public meetings on the Parade and in District Six in four languages (“Dutch, Malay, Kafir and English”), involved Coloured socialists in committee discussions, and addressed African Political Organisation meetings on “Socialism and the Native Question”.⁷⁴ Abdurrahman even claimed at the time that he was also a socialist,⁷⁵ and his writings sometimes showed some SDF influence in appeals for working class solidarity across the colour line.⁷⁶ The African Political Organisation hired the SDF’s Socialist Hall for its 1909 conference.⁷⁷

The organisation also opposed British imperialism, even winning praise from the *De Burger*, an organ of the Afrikaner nationalists, for its stance.⁷⁸ In 1902 the Cape government introduced an Immigration Bill that made knowledge of a European language a requirement for immigrants: this was designed to exclude Indians and East European (so-called “Peruvian”) Jews, who spoke Yiddish. Alexander managed to get the government to accept Yiddish as meeting this qualification.⁷⁹ In 1904, he was elected to the Cape Town council with the help of the District Six Ratepayers’ Association, where he co-operated with Abdurrahman in trying to keep public facilities open to all races.⁸⁰ The SDF, alone of all Cape labour and left organisations, publicly condemned the draft Act of the Union of South Africa as “contrary to all Democratic principles, and an insult to the coloured races of South Africa” for its colour bars,⁸¹ and wrote to the British Labour Party asking for the removal of the phrase “of European descent” from the Act.⁸²

⁶⁸ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 105

⁶⁹ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 42-4; Harrison, [? 1947] n.d. *op cit.*, pp. 17-18, 22-26; Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 139

⁷⁰ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 23

⁷¹ Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 76-77

⁷² A.W. Noon, 22 April 1910, “Cape Notes”, *The Voice of Labour*; Visser, 2001a, *op cit.*, pp. 17-18

⁷³ Drew, 2002, *op cit.*, p. 23

⁷⁴ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 42-4

⁷⁵ Lewis, 1987, *op cit.*, p. 98

⁷⁶ See, for example, Cope, n.d. [? 1943], *op cit.*, p. 143; Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 35, 43-4; Harmel, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 29-30; Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 122, 125-128

⁷⁷ Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 113

⁷⁸ Visser, 2001, *op cit.*, p. 18

⁷⁹ Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 146

⁸⁰ Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 213. Morris later repudiated socialism, became a member of parliament, and spent much of his public life trying to show that Jews were not subversives, but rather respectable White patriots: Shain, 1994, *op cit.*, pp. 82-4, 105, 127

⁸¹ Quoted in Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 340

⁸² *The Voice of Labour*, 21 August 1909

Notwithstanding its emphasis on education, the SDF also organised campaigns that allowed it to mobilise a wide section of the Cape Town working class. In 1904, it met with the Minister for Railways to secure reduced fares for workers employed in public works relief projects, and the unemployed.⁸³ The SDF was also involved in interracial trade union work and unemployed mobilisation, and ran for election in District Six.⁸⁴ In 1906 the SDF launched a second General Workers' Union in 1906, which aimed to organise all workers, and drew in both Coloured and White bricklayers and painters.⁸⁵ It was not a syndicalist union, but denounced racial prejudice, with "membership was open to every wage-earner, male or female".⁸⁶ Its leadership was drawn mainly from Whites of various nationalities, with Jews linked to the SDF and the *Bund* particularly prominent.⁸⁷

Immigrant Jews formed a Tailors' Union that affiliated to the General Workers Union:⁸⁸ it "tried hard" but apparently "without success", to "enrol the large numbers of Muslims in the trade".⁸⁹ Gillitz of the SDF and H. Alexander of the Tailors' Union advocated the unity of "all nationalities under umbrella unions representing all trades"⁹⁰ Jewish boot makers also organised, and joined the General Workers Union.⁹¹ SDF and *Bund* also organised Jewish cabinetmakers, printers and paperhangers. An interracial union for painters and paperhangers was formed, with the help of Coloured unionists and the African Political Organisation.⁹²

The SDF also favoured cooperatives. It was linked to short-lived co-operatives by bakers and boot makers,⁹³ and in 1906 striking cigarette rollers organised by the General Workers' Union did likewise. A strike early in the year over piecework, held together by daily meetings at the Socialist Hall, had resulted in victory for the mainly Greek and Jewish workers.⁹⁴ A more serious strike later that year included a mass demonstration of 4,000 addressed by SDF speakers, and support by the African Political Organisation.⁹⁵ When employers locked out approximately 300 strikers, the workers set up the "Knock Out" and "Lock Out" cigarette cooperative on SDF premises.⁹⁶ The strike eventually petered out, and the co-operative was liquidated the next year.

In 1906, the SDF was involved in organising a series of mass meetings amongst the jobless.⁹⁷ This was against the backdrop of the onset of a local depression from the end of 1903: unemployment

⁸³ Erasmus, 1905, *op cit.*

⁸⁴ The Simons concede this elsewhere: Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 74-6, 139-140

⁸⁵ Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 174; also see Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 38-9; Visser, 2001, *op cit.*, pp. 10

⁸⁶ Quoted in Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 174

⁸⁷ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 53

⁸⁸ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 32-6

⁸⁹ Jack and Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 74

⁹⁰ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 35-6, 38-9; the quote is from p. 38

⁹¹ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 37

⁹² Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 39-40

⁹³ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 36-37

⁹⁴ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 53; also see Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 10

⁹⁵ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 53-5

⁹⁶ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 10; Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 56-61; Walker and Weinbren, 1961, *op cit.*, pp. 18-19

⁹⁷ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 8-9

rose as commerce declined, and falling government revenue led to job losses in public works.⁹⁸ Many whites left for Australia and the United States,⁹⁹ Africans who could returned to the rural areas, and other Africans and Coloureds went to the farms, mines and railways of German South West Africa.¹⁰⁰ Those who remained out of work provided a ready constituency for the SDF, which held public rallies, and a large march on parliament by the SDF and the local unions, with the Coloured trade unionist J. Tobin playing a key role. The campaign consistently drew an interracial crowd, perhaps tapping into a sporadic tradition of interracial demonstrations in Cape Town that could be traced back to the 1880s,¹⁰¹ and in 1906 “jobless workers were rallying in meetings, airing their grievances ... listening and learning about the labour movement which was still in its infancy”.¹⁰²

Several of the meetings developed into rioting and looting, a development Harrison deplored, and blamed on irresponsible speakers and a hooligan element.¹⁰³ What happened was that “desperate workers took direct action and invaded shops in the centre of the city ... hurling armloads of bread out through the smashed windows of bakery shops into the scrambling, clutching hands of cheering workers”.¹⁰⁴ Abraham Needham and Mr Levinson of the SDF were arrested and refused bail.¹⁰⁵ This was apparently “the first time ... South African socialists found themselves jailed for their beliefs”.¹⁰⁶ In 1908, Keir Hardie of the Independent Labour Party and a radical British member of parliament arrived in South Africa as part of a world tour. His meetings in the northern provinces were accompanied by clashes – largely because of his outspoken views on racial equality.¹⁰⁷ In Cape Town, there were no violent incidents surrounding his arrival, but a planned reception by the Trades and Labour Council was cancelled.¹⁰⁸ He was hosted instead by the SDF in a meeting he recalled as “far and away the most enthusiastic I had in South Africa”.¹⁰⁹

The SDF’s links to Hardie won it favourable publicity amongst Coloureds.¹¹⁰ In October 1909, an inter-colonial conference was held to form a South African Labour Party, ahead of South Africa’s first general elections: the SDF was present,¹¹¹ but withdrew over the new party’s embrace of

⁹⁸ Beinart, 1987, *op cit.*, p. 168

⁹⁹ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 8-9

¹⁰⁰ See William Beinart, 1981, “Cape Workers in German South-West Africa: patterns of migrancy and the closing of options on the southern African labour market”, *The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, vol.27, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London; Beinart, 1987, *op cit.*, especially pp. 167-170; Moorsom, 1978, *op cit.*

¹⁰¹ For example, there were mixed demonstrations of the unemployed in 1884 and 1886, much to the alarm of the ruling class in Cape Town: see Bickford-Smith, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 108-111

¹⁰² La Guma, [1964] 1997, *op cit.*, p. 18

¹⁰³ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 8-9

¹⁰⁴ La Guma, [1964] 1997, *op cit.*, p. 18

¹⁰⁵ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 8-9

¹⁰⁶ Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, pp. 42-4

¹⁰⁷ See Hardie’s account: Kier Hardie, [1908] 1996, “Stoned in South Africa”, in Drew, editor, 1996a, *op cit.*, pp. 42-3. Also see Frederick Hale, 1992, “Socialist Agitator, Traitor to the British Empire, or Angel of Peace? James Kier Hardie’s visit to Natal in 1908”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, no. 14, pp. 10-11; on the tour, also see Cope, [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 98-9p Hyslop, 2004, *op cit.*, pp. 172-174 and Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 295-6

¹⁰⁸ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 19-22

¹⁰⁹ Hardie, 22 May 1908, *op cit.*

¹¹⁰ Ticktin, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 337-8

¹¹¹ Cope [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 112

White Labourism and lukewarm views on socialism. It ran a candidate, Arthur Noon, in the 1910 elections, with abysmal results. The SDF had by this time developed links to radicals elsewhere in the country, and SDF members wrote regularly for the *Voice of Labour: a weekly journal of socialism, trade unionism and politics*. Produced in Johannesburg, it provided a forum for socialists and labour supporters from across South Africa, reaching "the leading Socialists of Durban, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg".¹¹²

In May 1911, there was an attempt to link the SDF to other small socialist groups elsewhere in the country on a syndicalist platform of "united advocacy of Industrial Unionism":¹¹³ the "Industrial Freedom League" collapsed within a month, partly due to infighting on the Witwatersrand.¹¹⁴ There was a subsequent attempt to form a United Socialist Party on the 7 April 1912, Easter Sunday, in Johannesburg: represented were the Socialist Party (Johannesburg), the Socialist Party (Pietermaritzburg), a group from Premier Mine, the Pretoria Socialist Society, the Social Democratic Party (Durban), "unattached comrades", and the SDF.¹¹⁵ The Socialist Labour Party subsequently decided to join.¹¹⁶ The draft constitution advocated "class war", with membership open to all socialists "without discrimination as to race, sex, colour or creed".¹¹⁷ The various existing groups were meant to become party locals, the local Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, the Wobblies) the union wing, and the *Voice of Labour* the official organ.¹¹⁸ The SDF soon seceded,¹¹⁹ however, and the party did not last out the year.

For the rest of the decade, the SDF acted as an independent group that cooperated with radicals elsewhere. There is no evidence for the claim by some writers that it collapsed in 1910 over the issue of anarchism.¹²⁰ Cape Town was far away from the stormy struggles of the Witwatersrand, and SDF activities in the 1910s became, if anything, even more narrowly focussed on education; the marches, unions and cooperatives of the earlier period seem to have fallen away. Harrison ran in elections to the town council and the Cape Provincial Council, in District Six against Abdurrahman on at least three occasions.¹²¹ These electoral forays – peculiar indeed for any self-declared anarchist – were regarded by Harrison as ways of spreading socialist ideas; he had no platform of policies, and would doubtless have been surprised if he won a seat. Abdurrahman's perceived elitism, and his overt support for mainstream White politicians, seems to have been key to the decision to run a rival

¹¹² *The Voice of Labour*, 14 August 1909, "A Socialist Party" (editorial); Archie Crawford, 26 January 1912, "From the Watch Tower", *The Voice of Labour*; Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 33-36

¹¹³ Visser, 1987, *op cit.*, pp. 247-8

¹¹⁴ Cope, n.d. [? 1943], *op cit.*, pp. 108-110

¹¹⁵ Dora B. Montefiore, 12 April 1912, "Conference Influences", *The Voice of Labour*; also see *The Voice of Labour*, 12 April 1912, "Easter Conference of the United Socialist Party of South Africa"; Archibald Crawford, July 1912, "Socialist Party Progress in South Africa", *International Socialist Review*, vol.XIII

¹¹⁶ *The Voice of Labour*, 10 May 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"; *The Voice of Labour*, 31 May 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"

¹¹⁷ Drew, 2002, *op cit.*, p. 30

¹¹⁸ *The Voice of Labour*, 12 April 1912, "Easter Conference of the United Socialist Party of South Africa"; 26 April 1912, "The United S.P."; *The Voice of Labour*, 10 May 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"; *The Voice of Labour*, 17 May 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"

¹¹⁹ *The Voice of Labour*, 31 May 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"; 13 September 1912, "U.S.P. Notes"

¹²⁰ *Contra*. Cope, [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 96; Thomas, 1963, *op cit.*, pp. 25-26

¹²¹ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 24

candidate.¹²² Harrison never won, but the results were surprising: in the 1916 municipal elections, Harrison got 212 votes, against Abdurrahman's 543.¹²³ One result, however, was a growing estrangement between the African Political Organisation and the SDF.¹²⁴

The syndicalists : Wobblies in the Cape

Syndicalism was a growing influence amongst the left across the country by 1910, and the SDF was not unaffected. The Labour Party was not a great electoral success, and "In common with the Labour movement elsewhere in the world, South Africa passed through a period of vigorous reaction against [parliamentary] politics on the working class front."¹²⁵ There were, as indicated, syndicalist groups on the Witwatersrand, and the IWW set up branches in Durban and Pretoria. The *Voice of Labour* provided a key outlet for syndicalist writings from abroad by figures like Christiaan Cornelissen, Tom Mann and Vincent St. John, as well as innumerable reprints from the international IWW and left press; there were many local adherents of the movement too. The *Voice of Labour* was itself edited for more than a year by an unidentified Cape Town syndicalist called "Proletarian" (probably SDF member Ferdinand Marais) who attacked Abdurrahman as a "small capitalist", and also condemned the "grotesque" "attitude of superiority" of the white "'aristocrats' of labour".¹²⁶ He advocated "an organisation of wage-workers, black and white, male and female, young and old" which would proclaim "a universal general strike preparatory to seizing and running the interests of South Africa, for the benefit of *workers* to the exclusion of *parasites*".¹²⁷

In the middle of 1913 there was a dramatic and violent general strike by white workers on the Witwatersrand, which left downtown Johannesburg in the hands of the strikers for several days. This was followed by a second general strike at the start of 1914, which was put down by mass arrests, the mobilisation of the military, and deportations. Harrison was one of the hundreds arrested, after reportedly telling a crowd of 400 railwaymen at the Salt River government railway workshops, that the lines should be sabotaged.¹²⁸ This got him a six months' prison sentence, with the option of a £50 fine, which was paid against his wishes by supporters.¹²⁹ Both strikes radicalised a whole new layer of white militants, and more than a few – impressed by the growing power of the unions, and the challenge to State power they seemed to show – were drawn to syndicalism. For some this was a temporary shift, and coexisted uneasily with social democratic or White Labour politics.

On a very important group, though, syndicalism would leave lasting important imprint, and be linked to the radical race politics associated with groups like the IWW, SDF, the Socialist Labour

¹²² Lewis, 1987, *op cit.*, p. 98

¹²³ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 24

¹²⁴ Lewis, 1987, *op cit.*, p. 98

¹²⁵ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 24, see also p. 64, 104-5, 114

¹²⁶ "Proletarian", 27 October 1911, "The Problem of Coloured Labour", *The Voice of Labour*; "Our Special Representative", 1 December 1911, "Sundry Jottings from the Cape: a rebel's review"

¹²⁷ *The Voice of Labour*, 27 October 1911, "The Problem of Coloured Labour", emphasis in original

¹²⁸ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 40-43

¹²⁹ Walker and Weinbren, 1961, *op cit.*, pp. 56-7

Party and the United Socialist Party. An important analysis of the 1913 general strike by F. Murray of Cape Town argued “the most important lesson of ... is that workers of every colour and of all trades must sink their racial and sectional differences in order to combine in one all embracing union ready to take revolutionary action when the time comes”.¹³⁰ Around the same time, Marais called again for “one great union of workers” to “*seize* the land and the factories and starve out the robbers and their hired liars and murderers”.¹³¹ Tom Mann had previously visited South Africa in 1910, impressing the African Political Organisation with his “vigorous appeal to all wage-earners to organise and present a united front”, a message of great importance “throughout the Coloured world”.¹³²

In March 1914, Mann returned to help the unions rebuild, and was met by 10,000 at Park Station in Johannesburg, whom he told: “I am a revolutionary ... My mission is to overthrow the whole capitalist system generally”.¹³³ A further boost for syndicalism was the outbreak of the First World War in August. The war, of course, split socialism internationally: the Marxian Labour and Socialist International collapsed as its major affiliates aligned with their States, and as anti-war minorities seceded; the anarchists and syndicalists generally kept faith with internationalism and spearheaded anti-war activities.¹³⁴

Faraway South Africa, too, was divided by the war issue. The government committed the country, a British dominion, to the Allied effort, and troops were sent into German South West Africa and Tanganyika. Afrikaner nationalists like General Jacobus “Koos” de la Rey linked up with rebels in the South African Defence Force and the rural *commando* system, or militia, mobilising 12,000 men –mainly rural poor whites –in an unsuccessful armed rebellion.¹³⁵

The South African Labour Party, based at the time mainly amongst English-speaking white workers, and still firmly wedded to segregation, had enjoyed a spate of electoral successes as a result of the labour turmoil of 1913 to 1914. It initially declared its opposition to the war, but was soon swept up by jingoism, and the anti-war minority organised a War on War League, which drew in the far left of the party as well as syndicalists and other radicals. Besides the anti-war principle, it did not have a platform, and drew on perspectives ranging from radical Christianity to classical Marxism and anarchism. The group broke away in September 1915 to form the International Socialist League. This was a dynamic countrywide body with several hundred members, that adopted a syndicalist platform, replaced the SDF as the premier left group, and formed a series of syndicalist unions amongst workers

¹³⁰ F. Murray, October 1913, “Capitalist Development and Industrial Revolt in Africa”, *International Socialist Review*, vol.XIV, p. 209

¹³¹ Ferdinand Marais, October 1914, “Workers Arise and Seize the Earth!”, *International Socialist Review*, vol.XV, p. 219, emphasis in the original

¹³² Quoted in Forman, [1959] 1992, *op cit.*, p. 43; also see Philips, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 123

¹³³ Quoted Tsuzuki, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 170

¹³⁴ W. Thorpe, “El ferrol, Zimmerwald, and beyond: syndicalist internationalism, 1914 to 1918” (paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Amsterdam, 22-25 March 2006 2006).

¹³⁵ Sandra Swart, 2000, *op cit.*

of colour.¹³⁶ The most important of these was probably the Industrial Workers of Africa: modelled on the IWW, it was the first union for African workers in Britain's possessions.

The SDF, as might be expected of such an eclectic group, was also split on the war issue. A compromise left the matter to individual opinions, and the SDF "neutral on the war issue".¹³⁷ In September 1914, however, Harrison secured a resolution "That the Federation is opposed to all wars organised on Capitalist lines, and that we consider the present war the outcome of the Capitalist machinations in which all belligerent nations are equally responsible".¹³⁸ The pro-war group minority resigned.¹³⁹ The SDF now publicly identified with the War on War League, and held hugely controversial public meetings in Adderley Street that grew so large the crowd packed the area from Dock Road from the Flat Iron Building to the Carlton Hotel.¹⁴⁰ Many were hostile, and Harrison received anonymous death threats.¹⁴¹

As an ex-soldier and an Englishman, Harrison had some legitimacy that the SDF's Jewish members (for instance) quite lacked. Even so, it was necessary to station two "burly" bodyguards at the speaker's platform, and Harrison also took care to announce that he was a crack shot, a good boxer, and "quite prepared to use all I knew in self-defence if I was at any time attacked".¹⁴² He was arrested soon afterwards for a leaflet that described war heroes as brutes "maddened and excited ... bespattered in human blood", and appealing to the working class to rather stay at home to fight a war on "unemployment, high rents, and dear goods, ... bad housing and disease, ... squalor and filth in home and factory ... poverty and starvation".¹⁴³ Again he got six months' prison with the option of a £50 fine, but after public protests, the fine was reduced to 50 shillings and he was released after just two days.¹⁴⁴

The International Socialist League did not organise in the western Cape, out of respect for Harrison and the SDF. The two groups maintained close links and the SDF distributed International Socialist League materials, like its weekly *International* and pamphlets by Daniel de Leon, James Connolly and others. In May 1918, though, the SDF suffered another split, as young radicals broke away to form the Industrial Socialist League (not to be confused with the International Socialist League). They felt the SDF "too academic and not sufficiently in touch with the immediate ravages of

¹³⁶ See L.J.W. van der Walt, "'The Industrial Union is the Embryo of the Socialist Commonwealth': the International Socialist League and revolutionary syndicalism in South Africa, 1915-1919," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* volume XIX, number 1 (1999).

¹³⁷ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 51

¹³⁸ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 52. Harrison's autobiography gives the date of the meeting as "September 6th, 1916" but this appears to be an error, as his discussion of the SDF's subsequent anti-war activities refers mainly to events in 1914 and 1915. See Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 52-62

¹³⁹ Harrison, *op cit.*, pp. 50-52

¹⁴⁰ Harrison, *op cit.*, p. 54

¹⁴¹ Harrison, *op cit.*, pp. 53-55

¹⁴² Harrison, *op cit.*, p. 54

¹⁴³ W. Harrison, 1914, "WAR!", issued by War on War League in Cape Town, Simons Papers, Manuscript and Archives section, African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town, Fragile papers section. Also reproduced in Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 59-60

¹⁴⁴ Walker and Weinbren, 1961, *op cit.*, p. 57

industry, nor sufficiently in the vicinity of the proletariat".¹⁴⁵ The group soon overtook the propagandistic SDF, which was not particularly active in the latter 1910s, and played little role in the huge upsurge of strike and union activity that swept across the country from 1917.¹⁴⁶ One reason was that Harrison, the pivotal figure, was exhausted and instructed by his doctor to "slow down or ... die a martyr to the cause".¹⁴⁷

Syndicalist union activism in black, white and red

The new Industrial Socialist League adopted the 1908 IWW *Preamble* as its platform,¹⁴⁸ and rented a hall in Ayre Street, District Six, "the central residential area of the Coloured community",¹⁴⁹ that seated 600.¹⁵⁰ Offices were set up in District Six, where police reported "considerable numbers of coloured and native people have been attending meetings ... where the movement is reported to be growing in numbers and importance".¹⁵¹ The core members were mostly recent immigrants, many of them Jews, and not a few were professionals or self-employed. Leading light A.Z. Berman was a Russian-born Jew, educated in Russia and Germany, who worked as a school teacher and owned a forage depot.¹⁵² Tailors were rather prominent, including in their number a young C. Frank Glass: born in Birmingham, England, in 1901, he came to South Africa in 1911 with his family, was radicalised in the late 1910s, and joined the SDF and then the League.¹⁵³

With a hopeful (if ill-informed) eye on events Moscow, launched a monthly paper called the *Bolshevik* in May 1919: like the International Socialist League – and many anarchists and syndicalists elsewhere at the time – it projected its syndicalist aspirations and doctrines onto the Russian Revolution and Lenin. "Who is the working man who will not rejoice on the sixth of November?" it asked: "Is there one whose heart will not ring through with boundless happiness and enthusiasm on that historical day", the anniversary of the Russian Revolution which gave birth to the Socialist Workers' Republic?¹⁵⁴

For all that, it advocated unity on the "industrial field", where the workers would "take and hold what they produce by their labour, through an economic organisation of the working class, without affiliation to any political party".¹⁵⁵ Craft unions, colour bars and the exclusion of women¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁵ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 64

¹⁴⁶ Of 199 recorded strikes from 1906 to 1920, 168 took place between 1916 and 1920, and there were 205 strikes from 1916 to 1922, involving 175,664 workers. There were around 10,000 union members in 1914, but over a 135,000 in 1920. See Cope [? 1943] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 200; Pike, 1988, *op cit.*, pp. 103-5; Simons, 1984, *op cit.*, p. 333; Van Duin, 1990, *op cit.*, p. 640 note 39

¹⁴⁷ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 62

¹⁴⁸ *The Bolshevik*, February 1920, "What WE Stand For"

¹⁴⁹ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 64

¹⁵⁰ *The International*, 21 December 1918, "Cape Notes"

¹⁵¹ Cited in Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp.3-4

¹⁵² Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 64-70; Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 7-10

¹⁵³ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 56-7; Hirson, 1988b, *op cit.*; Hirson, 1993a, *op cit.*; Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 7-10

¹⁵⁴ *The Bolshevik*, November 1919, "All Hail the Workers' Republic!"

¹⁵⁵ *The Bolshevik*, February 1920, "What WE Stand For"

were all condemned as playing into the ruling class' policy of "divide and rule" that relied on prejudices like "patriotism, racial pride and nationalism".¹⁵⁷ Real socialism "claims for every man, women or child, white or coloured, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".¹⁵⁸ In place of the "spectre of racial warfare",¹⁵⁹ the League advocated the "solidarity of labour irrespective of colour or race".¹⁶⁰

The aim was "the establishment of a Socialist Commonwealth based on the principle of self-governing industries, in which the workers will work and control the instruments of production, distribution and exchange for the benefit of the entire community". "By solidifying the ranks of the workers, by building up that efficient organisation commonly known as the One Big Union, we hope to put an end to all class war, class rule, class distinctions and class hatred – in a word, to *abolish* classes".¹⁶¹ It was generally maintained, also, that the One Big Union could conquer peacefully in a "bloodless revolution".¹⁶² Elections were viewed as useless, even for propaganda purposes, with parliament was a "farce" that diverted struggles into harmless passivity.¹⁶³ In any case, it was argued, the "big masses of the proletariat, natives and a big section of coloured have no vote at all": "Labour can never gain a majority".¹⁶⁴

The Industrial Socialist League took the anti-parliamentary principle very seriously: two members who assisted candidates in elections were expelled.¹⁶⁵ Its policies were directly based on those of the mainstream IWW in the United States, sometimes called the Chicago IWW. The International Socialist League, for its part and following the doctrines of De Leon and Connolly, and the Detroit wing of the IWW, believed in a tactical use of elections – a policy that was opposed by a large dissident group in its ranks. The Industrial Socialist League established ties with the International Socialist League dissidents – a development that would, as we will see below, prove very important indeed.

The group also linked up with anarchist veteran Henry Glasse, who had been promoting Kropotkin in Port Elizabeth since the 1880s, and was joined by S.H Davidoff,¹⁶⁶ apparently an advocate of anarchist "propaganda by the deed" on the Witwatersrand.¹⁶⁷ It was in contact with anti-parliamentary left groups abroad, notably the Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers' Socialist Federation and

¹⁵⁶ "Searchlight", November 1919, "Trade Union Notes", *The Bolshevik*; *The Bolshevik*, November 1919, "The Bankruptcy of Trades' Unionism"; "Searchlight", January 1920, "Trade Union Notes", *The Bolshevik*; *The Bolshevik*, March 1920, "Trades Union Notes"; Manuel Lopes, April 1920, "Socialism and the Labour Party", *The Bolshevik*

¹⁵⁷ *The Bolshevik*, January 1920, "The Strongest Weapon of Capitalism I"; also see February 1920", The Strongest Weapon of Capitalism II"

¹⁵⁸ Isaac Vermont, March 1920, "Socialism and the Coloured Folk", *The Bolshevik*

¹⁵⁹ *The Bolshevik*, March 1920, "Trades Union Notes"

¹⁶⁰ *The Bolshevik*, March 1920, "Trades Union Notes"

¹⁶¹ *The Bolshevik*, April 1920, "The War of the Classes"

¹⁶² "Communist", January 1920, "Socialism v. Violence", *The Bolshevik*. See also *The Bolshevik*, December 1919, "Liberty of the Press"

¹⁶³ "Communist", January 1920, "On Political Action", *The Bolshevik*; *The Bolshevik*, March 1920, "Trades Union Notes"

¹⁶⁴ *The Bolshevik*, March 1920, "The Case Against Parliamentarism"

¹⁶⁵ *The Bolshevik*, May 1920, "A Year's Activity"

¹⁶⁶ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 10

¹⁶⁷ This is inferred from Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 38, although Harrison is somewhat unclear on the issue.

Workers' Dreadnought in Britain: members wrote for that paper,¹⁶⁸ and distributed it locally. In addition, direct contacts were made with Wobbly sailors linked to the IWW's international Marine Transport Workers' Industrial Union (MTWIU). The Industrial Socialist League held meetings with these "rebels' in the best sense of the term", who "taught the League to sing, and given us quite a repertoire of the songs of labour".¹⁶⁹ There are some reports that the MTWIU was trying to establish a hall at the Cape Town docks,¹⁷⁰ and aimed to "get a foothold in South Africa",¹⁷¹ but the further research is required into these matters.

The Industrial Socialist League set up a library of left-wing literature, printed leaflets, and provided an extensive book service. The literature sold by the Industrial Socialist League, or kept at the library, included "a wide range of books and pamphlets on Russia, economics, sociology, history, and all questions of interest to the working class".¹⁷² It remained convinced that it was "Bolshevik from A to Z".¹⁷³ It undertook a vigorous programme of educational work. In 1919, it organised regular classes on "'elementary Economics, Sociology, History etc.": a series of nine lectures, the classes were held on Thursday nights.¹⁷⁴ It also experimented with "Socialist Sunday Schools", and in 1919, pupils formed a "Young Socialist Society" on "their own initiative", something of a youth section of the League.¹⁷⁵

The organisation was amazingly active in organising outdoor meetings. In 1920, it was holding five outdoor propaganda meetings and one lecture a week.¹⁷⁶ Between May 1919 and May 1920, 135 outdoor meetings were held, as well as 32 lectures in the League's hall in Plein Street and six indoor meetings "such as socials, lectures etc".¹⁷⁷ In February 1920 alone, nineteen meetings were held, and "attendance was very good indeed" with "lots of literature sold" and the speakers receiving a "most sympathetic hearing".¹⁷⁸ The Industrial Socialist League also held a number of joint meetings with the SDF in Adderley Street.¹⁷⁹ It annually celebrated the anniversary of the Russian Revolution (November 6), often in co-operation with the SDF and the local left-Zionist group *Poalei Zion* ("The Workers of Zion", also known as the Jewish Socialist Society.)¹⁸⁰ League activists seem to have

¹⁶⁸ For example: M. Walt, 12 June 1920, "May Day in Cape Town", *The Workers' Dreadnought*; *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes

¹⁶⁹ Manuel Lopes, 24 January 1919, "Cape Notes", *The International*; also see Philips, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 127

¹⁷⁰ Hartmut Rubner, personal communication, 1 May 1998, in my possession.

¹⁷¹ Hartmut Rubner, *op cit.*

¹⁷² *The Bolshevik*, December 1919

¹⁷³ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 10

¹⁷⁴ *The Bolshevik*, November 1919

¹⁷⁵ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 13

¹⁷⁶ *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes

¹⁷⁷ *The Bolshevik*, February 1920, "League Notes"

¹⁷⁸ *The Bolshevik*, February 1920, "League Notes"

¹⁷⁹ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 68; Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p.4

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Manuel Lopes, 29 November 1918, "Cape Notes", *The International*; also Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 8

recruited most of the Cape Town members of *Poalei Zion* by late 1920.¹⁸¹ Efforts were also made to expand the influence of the organisation into the rural hinterland of Cape Town.¹⁸²

The new group soon faced trouble from the authorities. The first issue of the *Bolshevik* was seized by police, who arrested the editor Berman, as well as League members Manuel Lopes and Joe Pick – and the printers and several newspaper boys – in terms of a rarely invoked century-old ordinance.¹⁸³ The censor also banned an anti-war leaflet, *What British Soldiers are Dying for*.¹⁸⁴ The commercial press also mounted a campaign against the “seditious, poisonous and inflammatory utterances” being made “a mere stone’s throw” from parliament, and press and police made much of the prominent role of East European Jews in subversion.¹⁸⁵ The next issue of the *Bolshevik* only appeared in September, quickly reaching 2,500 copies per issue.¹⁸⁶

It moved to new offices at Plein Street in central Cape Town,¹⁸⁷ and the opening of the Socialist Hall on 12 January 1919 drew a crowd of “between 300 and 400 persons” that crowded the hall “to the doors” despite heavy rain.¹⁸⁸ This included a large number of “Cape Malays” and “coloured trade unionists”.¹⁸⁹ The platform had speakers from the SDF spoke, the South African Labour Party, the Coloured unionists Brown, B. Kies and M.A. Gamiet.¹⁹⁰ By 1920, the Industrial Socialist League claimed to have developed a constituency amongst Coloureds, presumably including members of the Sweets and Jam Workers’ Industrial Union, and activists like Brown, Gamiet and Kies (all three later associated with the CPSA).¹⁹¹ In August that year, Manuel Lopes wrote that “We are gaining ground slowly, especially among the coloured and native people, as the white workers are still obsessed with colour prejudice” and now had “the services of a few coloured and Malay comrades in our propaganda”: “propaganda amongst the coloured and native workers is the work that counts”.¹⁹²

The Industrial Socialist League managed to form a syndicalist union amongst the mainly Coloured workers in the confectionary factories in 1918,¹⁹³ neglected by the existing unions.¹⁹⁴ The first meeting was held on the evening of the 10 September at League’s Hall, and attended by 30 workers: the gathering deemed it “necessary to form an Industrial Union,” and do “everything in its

¹⁸¹ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 8; Johns gives a later date, January 1920: Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 115; also Johns, 1976, *op cit.*, p. 388 note 52

¹⁸² *The Bolshevik*, May 1920

¹⁸³ Manuel Lopes, 23 May 1919, “Cape Notes”, *The International*; Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 221; also see A.Z. Berman, 27 June 1919, “Cape Notes”, *The International*

¹⁸⁴ A.Z. Berman, 27 June 1919, “Cape Notes”, *The International*

¹⁸⁵ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 7-10; Shain, 1994, *op cit.*, pp. 83-91. The quote is from Shain, 1994, *op cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁸⁶ The number seems to have fallen to 1,000 by mid-1920: Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 9

¹⁸⁷ Harrison, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 68

¹⁸⁸ Manuel Lopes, 24 January 1919, “Cape Notes”, *The International*

¹⁸⁹ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 4

¹⁹⁰ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 4. Gamiet, formerly president of the Cape Malay Association, headed a Tailors’ and Tailoress’ Union: based mainly amongst Coloured workers, and affiliated to the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, it organised a large strike later that year, which was the first major strike by a union largely made up of Coloured workers in Cape Town. See Nicol, 1984, *op cit.*, pp. 55-61.

¹⁹¹ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 4

¹⁹² *The Workers’ Dreadnought*, 7 August 1920, letter from Manuel Lopes

¹⁹³ Manuel Lopes, 27 September 1918, “Cape Notes”, *The International*, also see Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 13

¹⁹⁴ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 89

power to assure its success".¹⁹⁵ Berman was appointed organising secretary for the interim, and Kies was the chair. The union was usually called the Sweets and Jam Workers' Industrial Union,¹⁹⁶ and was partly financed by the League.¹⁹⁷ The union focussed on Hills factory and Buchanan's.¹⁹⁸ It managed to attract a number of African workers, as well by its second meeting on the 17th, with a "Com. Mpanpeni" acting as interpreter, and a "Com. Nodzandza" elected to largely Coloured executive.¹⁹⁹ Efforts continued during 1919, the union recruiting several dozen workers. At one point, a meeting in the factory district was closed when police "surrounded the workers", and stopped the speakers.²⁰⁰ Little support was forthcoming from the African Political Organisation, which had no determined on forming Coloureds-only unions, and had become hostile to the far left.

Unlike most IWW-linked groups, the Industrial Socialist League did not make a principle of dual unionism, and was active in the Cape Federation of Labour. Berman was elected Federation treasurer, and F. Lopes became President of its Tramway Workers' Union.²⁰¹ At the annual conference of the Federation in 1920, League members managed to pass resolutions for the emancipation of the working class, the socialisation of the economy, the "formation of Industrial Unions out of the existing Trade Unions" and sympathy strikes.²⁰² At the 1921 congress, Berman even got a resolution passed for affiliation to the Communist International (and abstention from elections).²⁰³ The Industrial Socialist League had no illusions these apparent gains, doubting the union leaders would act on them.²⁰⁴ This prognosis proved to be correct,²⁰⁵ as Stuart set out to win credibility for the Federation with employers as a force for moderation and stability.²⁰⁶ The League was also visibly present at the 1920 May Day rally (organised by the Cape Federation of Labour), along with the Young Socialist Society, spoke from the platform, and had more radical resolutions passed.²⁰⁷

The Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICU in Cape Town

The Industrial Workers of Africa had been fairly active in Johannesburg. In mid-1918, it was involved in an abortive general strike, along with the International Socialist League and the nationalist

¹⁹⁵ First meeting, 10 September 1918, in Minutes of the First, Second and Third Meetings of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers, held in the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection of South African Political and Trade Union Organizations, Concordia University Library Special Collection, B3A F12 I4

¹⁹⁶ *The International*, 21 December 1918, "Cape Notes"

¹⁹⁷ Manuel Lopes, 27 September 1918, "Cape Notes", *The International*, also see Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 13

¹⁹⁸ Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers Union of the Cape Peninsula, held at the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 3 December 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection of South African Political and Trade Union Organizations, Concordia University Library Special Collection, B3A F12 I5

¹⁹⁹ Second meeting, 17 September 1918, in Minutes of the First, Second and Third Meetings of the Industrial Union of the Combined Sweet and Jam Workers, held in the Industrial Socialist League Hall, 1918, S.A. Rochlin Collection of South African Political and Trade Union Organizations, Concordia University Library Special Collection, B3A F12 I4

²⁰⁰ L. Turok, 24 January 1919, "Cape Notes", *The International*. Obviously this 1919 meeting was not the organisation's "first attempt" to organise a union, as the Simons suggest: Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, p. 215

²⁰¹ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 13

²⁰² *The Bolshevik*, May 1920, "Trade Union Notes"; Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 12

²⁰³ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 25, note 106.

²⁰⁴ Nicol, 1984, *op cit.*, p. 98

²⁰⁵ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 12

²⁰⁶ Nicol, 1984, *op cit.*, pp. 98-9

²⁰⁷ M. Walt, 12 June 1920, "May Day in Cape Town", *The Workers' Dreadnought*; also Nicol, 1984, *op cit.*, p. 98

Transvaal Native Congress. This was followed by the unsuccessful prosecution of leading members of all three organisations for inciting public violence, the “first time in South Africa [that], members of the European and Native races, in common cause united, were arrested and charged together for their political activities”.²⁰⁸ In March 1919, members of the Industrial Workers of Africa played a key role in a campaign against the pass laws (the internal passport system applied to common African men). The campaign started with a meeting in the Vrededorp slum in western Johannesburg on Sunday 30 March 1919;²⁰⁹ within the week it had spread across the Witwatersrand, with groups collecting passes in bags and handing them in at the Pass Offices.²¹⁰ There were a number of racial clashes in the slums and in downtown Johannesburg,²¹¹ and mass arrests. By the time the pass law campaign died out in May, over 700 Africans had been arrested, receiving sentences ranging from two months in jail with the option of a £10 fine, to four months hard labour and eight lashes.²¹²

The syndicalist union remained active in Johannesburg for at least another year – headed by the able T.W. Thibedi, an African teacher and member of the International Socialist League – but mainly as an African discussion group.²¹³ In the meantime there was an initiative by African syndicalists to establish a branch of the union in Cape Town, This was led by Reuben Alfred Cetiwe, a picture framer’s assistant from the eastern Cape who had moved to Johannesburg,²¹⁴ and Hamilton Kraai, who came from Peddie in the Cape and worked in Johannesburg as a foreman and a deliveryman.²¹⁵ Both had been arrested in 1918, and now relocated in the wake of the collapse of the anti-pass campaign. As members of the International Socialist League, Cetiwe and Kraai had worked with white activists, and soon sought made contact with the Industrial Socialist League.²¹⁶

The docks employed the largest single workforce in the city, including the majority of Africans, with employment divided between stevedoring companies and the parastatal South African Railways and Harbours.²¹⁷ – and were the obvious starting point: the first union meeting was held there on the 10 July 1919.²¹⁸ This seems to have been organised with the help of the Industrial Socialist League.²¹⁹ Cetiwe and Kraai set up a base in Ndabeni location, and by the end of the months, a number of "fresh members" had enrolled in the union.²²⁰ In Johannesburg, there had been a significant overlap between members of the Industrial Workers of Africa and the Transvaal Native Congress: Cetiwe, Kraai and Thibedi formed the extreme, syndicalist, left of the heterogeneous

²⁰⁸ T.D. Mwelu Skota, editor and compiler, [? 1930] n.d., *The African Yearly Register: being an illustrated biographical dictionary (who's who) of black folks in Africa*, R.I. Esson, Johannesburg, p. 171.

²⁰⁹ This account of events is based on Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 300-303; Hirson with Williams, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 182-3

²¹⁰ *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 10 January 1920, “The Colour Bar”

²¹¹ *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 12 April 1919, “Blacks and Whites in Johannesburg”

²¹² Walshe, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 83

²¹³ Wickens, 1974a, ‘*op cit.*’, p. 395, note 27

²¹⁴ Skota, editor and compiler, [? 1930] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 137; *The International*, 13 September 1918

²¹⁵ Skota, editor and compiler, [? 1930] n.d., *op cit.*, p. 167; *The International*, 13 September 1918

²¹⁶ There is no evidence they were “hostile to Europeans”, *contra* Wickens, 1974a, *op cit.*, pp. 394-5; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.* p. 27; also see Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 54; also *contra* Musson, 1989, *op cit.*, p. 27, who follows Wickens on this point.

²¹⁷ B. Hirson, *A History of the Left in South Africa: writings of Baruch Hirson* (London, 2005). p. 15

²¹⁸ *The International*, 25 July 1919

²¹⁹ *The International*, 25 July 1919; also Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 5

²²⁰ *The International*, 25 July 1919. Also see Wickens, 1974a, *op cit.*, p. 393

African nationalist grouping. This pattern was repeated in Cape Town. Plans were made to get “well-known native leaders” to address meetings,²²¹ and close links were established with the Cape Native Congress. This was a fairly loose body, and only formally constituted in 1919 –although it had existed for several years as a channel for African grievances.²²²

The role of the Industrial Workers of Africa on the docks and in the African townships of Cape Town has been consistently underrated, and largely ignored, as it has been overshadowed in the historiography by its longer-lived and ultimately more successful rival, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). This was formed in the middle of January 1919, with twenty-four members, mainly “Coloured men engaged at the docks”.²²³ This union was set up with the help of Alfred F. Batty, a white trade unionist who led a breakaway from the South African SA Labour Party, called the Democratic Labour Party. Formed in late 1915 or early 1916,²²⁴ this body was confined to Cape Town, had some influence in the Cape Federation of Labour, and favoured an interracial labour movement and an expanded African and Coloured franchise.²²⁵

Until the early 1920s, the ICU was mainly a western Cape union. It was also a predominantly Coloured union: Kadalie himself was unable speak local African languages,²²⁶ lived amongst the local Coloured (and West Indian) community, and most early ICU office-bearers were Coloureds.²²⁷ Following a series of mergers and the establishment of a rural network, the ICU later exploded across South Africa, becoming the largest African union until the 1940s; it also spread into neighbouring South West Africa (under South African mandate from 1918, now called Namibia), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The dramatic rise and fall of the ICU, its transnational dimension, and its significance across the region are a matter that I discuss elsewhere.²²⁸

The key point is that the subsequent rise of the ICU has rather obscured the fact that it was in its early years only one of several unions for workers of colour in Cape Town, by no means the largest or most important, nor was it obviously destined for glory. The problem of projecting the ICU’s greatness onto its early years has been compounded by the common, but undue, reliance on the flawed autobiography of ICU leader Clements Kadalie.²²⁹ Kadalie – an educated immigrant from the

²²¹ *The International*, 25 July 1919

²²² Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 51 note 3, 52

²²³ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 40; Trapido, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 12-13

²²⁴ Darcy Du Toit, 1981, *Capital and Labour in South Africa: class struggle in the 1970s*, Kegan Paul International, London, Boston, p. 102; Sheridan W. Johns, 1967, ‘The Birth of Non-white Trade Unionism in South Africa’, *Race*, vol.11 no. 2, p. 179. There are several versions of how Batty and Kadalie met, and of their respective roles in the organising the ICU: see Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 2-5

²²⁵ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 7 notes 1 and 2; pp. 8-12, and see p. 9 note 1 for excerpts from its programme

²²⁶ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 54-5

²²⁷ Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 39-40, note 35

²²⁸ L.J.W. van der Walt, “The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW and the ICU, 1904-1934,” *African Studies* 66 no. 2/3 (2007).

²²⁹ C. Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, Stanley Trapido ed. (London, 1970).

Nyasaland protectorate who had worked as a clerk across the region – ²³⁰ identified the history of the ICU with his own achievements, and continually magnified and exaggerated his role in his memoirs; rivals make few appearances, and then always appear poorly. There is no mention at all of rival unions in the early years of the ICU in Cape Town – yet, as we shall see, the ICU and Industrial Workers of Africa would jointly run one of the most significant strikes in Cape history.

The ICU was represented at the 1919 congress of the Cape Federation of Labour,²³¹ but did not affiliate. Kadalie, like Harrison, was a charismatic orator, and a charming man,²³² and quickly made connections across the Cape left and labour scene. Before the arrival of the Industrial Workers of Africa, the ICU received aid from Industrial Socialist League,²³³ leading alarmed detectives to worry that he was becoming a “Bolshevik”, “in constant negotiations and communications, and conducting propaganda with them, identifying ... with the revolutionary movement”.²³⁴ With the arrival of Cetiwe and Kraai, the Industrial Socialist League encouraged dockworkers to join the Industrial Workers of Africa in preference to the ICU.²³⁵ Relations between the Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICU became “evidently somewhat cool”,²³⁶ and the two unions competed for members.²³⁷ Another factor may have been that many in the Cape Native Congress distrusted Kadalie as newcomer, an unknown quality, and a foreigner.²³⁸ There were initial moves to merge the two unions, but the Industrial Workers of Africa refused to have links with the Democratic Labour Party and the Cape Federation of Labour.

The respective size of the two unions is hard to judge: the ICU claimed around a thousand members in October 1919,²³⁹ almost certainly a great exaggeration, while the Industrial Workers claimed a similar number in November.²⁴⁰ What does seem clear is that while the ICU was largely based amongst the Coloureds, the Industrial Workers of Africa drew on the Africans of Ndabeni and the Docks Location; whites on the docks were concentrated in the National Union of Railway and Harbour Servants (NURHAS), which was a national union and independent of both the Cape Federation of Labour and the South African Industrial Federation.

In December 1919, the Cape Federation of Labour called for a campaign against food exports, which it blamed for the spiralling inflation of the post-war years. Stuart contacted the Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICU,²⁴¹ as well as NURHAS, all of which agreed to support the campaign, which developed into a strike on the 17 December. The sectionalism of the workforce and the unions

²³⁰ Skota, editor and compiler, n.d. [1966], *op cit.*, pp. 60-61; Roth, 1999, *op cit.*, pp. 477-480; also see Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 33-7; Ranger, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 150; van Onselen, 1976, *op cit.*, pp. 118-121, 206-7; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 13

²³¹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 54-5

²³² Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 17

²³³ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 4; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 89-90

²³⁴ Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 4

²³⁵ *The International*, 25 July 1919; also see Mantzaris, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 5

²³⁶ Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 27; cf. Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 95, and Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 53

²³⁷ Du Toit, 1981, *op cit.*, p. 102; Johns, 1967, *op cit.*, p. 179; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 53

²³⁸ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 53

²³⁹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 56-7

²⁴⁰ Hirson, *A History of the Left in South Africa: writings of Baruch Hirson.*, p. 16

²⁴¹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 63-5; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 29

dictated close cooperation between the three unions, and the formation of a strike committee,²⁴² based at the Cape Federation of Labour offices at Darling and Plein streets,²⁴³ and over the next two weeks, around 3,000 workers came out.²⁴⁴ The Industrial Workers of Africa and ICU also used the occasion to demand a substantial pay rise for labourers; the NURHAS and the strike committee do not seem to have endorsed this.

The role of the Industrial Workers of Africa in the events has been almost entirely ignored in the literature, with the Industrial Workers of Africa viewed as transient,²⁴⁵ or entirely absent.²⁴⁶ Yet the Industrial Workers of Africa was pivotal to bringing out the African workers, and keeping the strike solid, and was the subject of numerous hostile press reports into 1920.²⁴⁷ It was, indeed, at a joint meeting of the Industrial Workers of Africa, the ICU and the Cape Native Congress on the public holiday of 16 December that the wage demand was adopted. This meeting was held in Ndabeni, the Industrial Workers of Africa stronghold, attended by 800 people, and chaired by Kraai.²⁴⁸ It was, moreover, Cetiwe that put forward the proposal to demand wage increases for Africans and Coloureds.

The NURHAS stayed outside the wage issue, and once the government announced that it would stop exports of foodstuffs, it withdrew. Many of its members had stayed out of the strike, and the remainder now also returned to work.²⁴⁹ The African and Coloured strikers stayed out for the wage increase, and it was the Industrial Workers of Africa and ICU who mobilised²⁵⁰ in the face of NURHAS' withdrawal and large-scale scabbing.²⁵¹ Private companies offered a wage increase of between one and two shillings a day, but this was rejected.²⁵² Government officials were sent to the Docks Location to meet strikers, but did not resolve the issue.²⁵³ The two unions held daily mass assemblies on the Grand Parade in the mornings to keep up morale, followed by evening meetings on Adderley Street.²⁵⁴ The International Socialist League, the Industrial Socialist League and the Democratic Labour Party helped raise money and food, as did the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, and, rather surprisingly, the South African Industrial Federation, and some South African Labour Party parliamentarians.²⁵⁵ Troops were sent from the army base at Wynberg, and with police began to evictions at the Docks Location on Christmas Eve, to a temporary camp at Milnerton.²⁵⁶

²⁴² Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 60; also see Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 43

²⁴³ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 42

²⁴⁴ Du Toit, 1981, *op cit.*, p. 105; Johns, 1967, *op cit.*, p. 180; Eddie Roux, [1964] 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 132, 154

²⁴⁵ Eddie Roux [1964] 1978, *op cit.*, p. 154

²⁴⁶ Bradford, 1987, *op cit.*, p.5

²⁴⁷ This is quite clear from, for example, the press reports cited in Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 50-129

²⁴⁸ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 67; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 30

²⁴⁹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 70-2; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 31-2

²⁵⁰ Du Toit, 1981, *op cit.*, p. 105; Johns, 1967, *op cit.*, p. 180; Eddie Roux, [1964] 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 132, 154.

²⁵¹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 70

²⁵² Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 30

²⁵³ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 43

²⁵⁴ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 42; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 69-74; Wickens 1978, *op cit.*, p. 31

²⁵⁵ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 42; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 33, 80

²⁵⁶ Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 43; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 73-79, 82-3

The strike began to break down after Christmas. Kadalie claimed later that the strike was called off “three weeks” after it began, mainly because the ICU lacked the funds and solidarity to continue.²⁵⁷ This is not quite accurate. The strike was, in fact, called off on Saturday, 27 December 1919, and Kadalie nor the ICU nor the strike committee made the decision. What actually happened was that the Industrial Workers of Africa and the Cape Native Congress, claiming to be “the real leaders of the people”, made a separate deal with the authorities in the morning.²⁵⁸ Faced with this action, and citing the scabbing of the NURHAS and the “half-hearted support of the Federation of Trades”, the strike committee called off the strike in the evening.²⁵⁹ The decision “encountered considerable credulity and opposition” in Ndabeni,²⁶⁰ but, despite some resistance, most of the strikers were back at work by Tuesday.²⁶¹

The Industrial Workers of Africa lost face, but the ICU got stronger. Its January 1920 annual conference had 400 in attendance, and set in motion processes that managed –1 with the help of Jimmy La Guma, a Cape Coloured working in South West Africa – to set up a branch in that colony.²⁶² In December, the ICU had a functioning branch at Lüderitz.²⁶³ In the meantime, Kadalie was able to fight off an effort to have him deported as an undesirable immigrant, with the help of the Democratic Labour Party, the African Peoples Organisation and part of the Cape Federation of Labour.²⁶⁴ Efforts were made to reconcile with the Industrial Workers of Africa, and in March 1920, a joint meeting on the Grand Parade drew 300.²⁶⁵

“One great union of all skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi”

The *International* blamed the failure of the 1919 dockers’ strike on the Cape Federation of Labour and NURHAS, and condemned the “shameful scabbing on Native and Coloured strikers by white workers”.²⁶⁶ It was rather more silent about the role of the Industrial Workers of Africa, which now focused on strengthening links with the Cape Native Congress, and became “a branch of Congress” at its first annual conference in 1920.²⁶⁷ Cetiwe and Kraai aimed to use this as a means of attending the national conference of the larger South African Native National Congress in Queenstown.

In August 1918, the two comrades had been part of a syndicalist-linked group in the Transvaal Native Congress, which made a big impression at the South African Native National Congress’ executive meeting at Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State. These “black Bolsheviks of

²⁵⁷ Kadalie, 1980, *op cit.*, p. 44

²⁵⁸ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 79-80; Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 33

²⁵⁹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 79

²⁶⁰ Wickens, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 33

²⁶¹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 79-80

²⁶² Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 83-4, 107

²⁶³ La Guma, [1964] 1997, *op cit.*, pp. 21-3

²⁶⁴ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 90-93; for Kadalie’s version of events, see Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 45-7

²⁶⁵ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 84

²⁶⁶ Eddie Roux [1964] 1978, *op cit.*, p. 155

²⁶⁷ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 52 note 1

Johannesburg”, complained a Congress moderate, showed the “spread among our people of the Johannesburg Socialists’ propaganda”, and “spoke almost in unison, in short sentences, nearly every one of which began and ended with the word ‘strike’”.²⁶⁸ Their programme of direct action and general strikes was narrowly defeated; now they intended to have a second try. At the May 1920 annual conference in Queenstown, Kraai tabled a resolution for a minimum wage of 10-shillings-a-day for all African workers, to be enforced by a general strike on July 31 if necessary.²⁶⁹ This was defeated, but the meeting did agree to hold a general labour conference in Bloemfontein, where the possibility (or advisability) of a general strike could be discussed.²⁷⁰

The "Conference of non-European workers" took place in July 1920, and drew together a number of newly formed African unions, among them a Bloemfontein union, the Native and Coloured Workers’ Association headed by H. Selby Msimang, and one from Port Elizabeth, headed by Samuel Masabalala (then treasurer of the Cape Native Congress).²⁷¹ From Cape Town came seven delegates, representing the Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICU, including Cetiwe, Kraai and Kadalie.²⁷² There were also delegates from Kimberley, who had joined Msimang’s organisation, and around thirty delegates in total, two-thirds linked to Msimang.²⁷³ There were no union delegates from Natal or the Transvaal, and no other syndicalist unions present. The South African Native National Congress did not send a delegation, nor did its provincial sections.

Yet, for all that, syndicalism was a remarkable influence on the meeting. Looking back in 1923, for example, Kadalie recalled that “we had the ‘One Big Union Movement’ in view”.²⁷⁴ Indeed, the first item on the agenda was the formation of a single union for “all the non-European workers of Africa south of the Sahara”, and a lengthy discussion led to a resolution to “form one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi”, “bring together all classes of labour, skilled and unskilled, in every sphere of life whatsoever ... to obtain and maintain for them equitable rates of wages, and reasonable conditions of labour”: grievances were, however, to be settled by “amicable and conciliatory means”.²⁷⁵ The unions present – including the Industrial Workers of Africa –were amalgamated as the Industrial and Commercial Workers Coloured and Native Workers Union of Africa, later replaced by the old ICU name.

²⁶⁸ Plaatje, [3 August 1918] 1996, *op cit.*, p. 237

²⁶⁹ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 109; Wickens, 1974a, *op cit.*, p. 394

²⁷⁰ Bonner, n.d., (2), *op cit.*, p. 6; Trapido, 1970, *op cit.*, p. 13; Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 108

²⁷¹ On the events in Port Elizabeth, see G. F. Baines, 1991, “From Populism to Unionism: the emergence and nature of Port Elizabeth’s Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union, 1918-1920”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol.17, no. 4, and N. Nieftagodien, 1994 “Popular Organisation’s in Port Elizabeth, 1926-1932”, Honours dissertation, History, University of the Witwatersrand.

²⁷² Wickens, 1974a, *op cit.*, p. 395

²⁷³ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 145

²⁷⁴ Kadalie in 1923, as quoted in Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 97

²⁷⁵ Quoted in Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 145-146. Also see Webster, 1974, *op cit.*, pp. 8-9.

Into the 1920s: the ICU, the CPSA and Council Communism

The immediate aftermath was “euphoria”,²⁷⁶ and the Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICU held a mass meeting in Cape Town on July 25, which resolved to set up a “non-European Workers’ Federation, to include Indians, Malays, Coloured and natives ... to work and manage its own affairs independently of the whites’ Federation of Trades”.²⁷⁷ A newspaper was also established, the *Black Man*, which was edited by S.M Bennet Ncwana, a “rather strange figure”,²⁷⁸ which was praised by the *International* for its emphasis on the role of industrial organisation in freeing Africans from “semi-serf” conditions.²⁷⁹

Kraai was active in the amalgamated ICU, and may, for example, be found addressing an ICU meeting in February 1921.²⁸⁰ When the Cape ICU again raised a wage demand on the docks, nervous employers quickly conceded.²⁸¹ Meanwhile, the British South Africa Company nervously considered the possibility of the “one big Union” emerging in Southern Rhodesia.²⁸² This eventually came to pass, as the ICU was established in Southern Rhodesia in 1927, and Northern Rhodesia in 1931. Cape Town, a site linking various radical traditions across South Africa, the British Empire and the United States, was now a key link in a chain of syndicalist influence across Anglophone southern Africa. Before 1924, however, the ICU remained confined to the Cape, with 29 of 30 delegates at its January 1923 conference from that province.²⁸³

The great legacy of the Industrial Workers of Africa for the ICU after the merger was less the personnel it provided, than the syndicalist ideas it infused. ICU politics were very mixed, and included a large admixture of the pan-Africanism or Marcus Garvey and the traditional liberalism of the African elite. But ICU politics also cannot be understood unless the influence of the IWW, flowing via the International Socialist League, and then the Industrial Workers of Africa, is given its proper due – and this has been all too rare. The preamble of the 1925 ICU constitution was modeled on the 1908 IWW *Preamble*,²⁸⁴ and Kadalie regularly called for “one big union” of the workers of all races to “assist in abolishing the capitalist class, who were in reality only a small body but owned

²⁷⁶ Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, pp. 152-3

²⁷⁷ Quoted in Wickens, 1973, *op cit.*, p. 153

²⁷⁸ Emmett, 1986, *op cit.*, pp. 32-3, 47 note 136

²⁷⁹ *The International*, 5 November 1920, “The ‘Black Man’”

²⁸⁰ Wickens, 1974a, *op cit.*, p. 406

²⁸¹ Jack and Ray Simons, [1969] 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 228-9; Walker and Weinbren, 1961, *op cit.*, p. 279; for Kadalie’s version of events, see Kadalie, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 45-6

²⁸² As quoted in Phimister, 1988, *op cit.*, p. 189; also see Ian Phimister and Charles van Onselen, 1997, “The Labour Movement in Zimbabwe: 1900-1945”, in Raftopolous and Phimister, editors, *op cit.*, p. 39

²⁸³ Peter Wickens, 1974b, “The Organisation and Composition of the ICU”, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol.1, no. 6/7, double issue, p. 28

²⁸⁴ Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, [1925] 1972, “Revised Constitution of the ICU”, in Karis and Carter, 1972, *op cit.*, pp. 325-326

practically everything”.²⁸⁵ The ICU was still being condemned for its “pronounced anarcho-syndicalist tendencies” by CPSA ideologues in the mid-1930s.²⁸⁶

The ICU, then, provided one important expression of syndicalism in Cape Town in the 1920s. The other important survival in the Cape was within the CPSA itself. As noted above, the Russian Revolution fascinated local radicals, and the International Socialist League was just as keen as its Cape counterpart to identify the Bolsheviks with its basically syndicalist positions. At the same time, as we have seen, the two Leagues had different positions on participation in electoral politics. As a mood of revolutionary enthusiasm swept the left in the late 1910s, spurred by revolt around the world and the upsurge in local class struggle, and the idea of forming a single Communist Party took hold, the electoral issue came to seem very important indeed. It had long been “a sore point with many comrades”.²⁸⁷

Two factions emerged: the Industrial Socialist League, joined by a large breakaway group from the International Socialist League led by local IWW veteran Andrew Dunbar, maintained the Chicago IWW position; the International Socialist League, with its De Leonist outlook, and the SDF, with its tradition of standing candidates, argued for a tactical use of elections. Neither side could convince the other, the previously cordial relations between the two Leagues grew embittered at a shocking rate, with each side firmly convinced its version of syndicalism was the more authentically “Bolshevik”. The Management Committee of the International Socialist League forbade dual membership, and Dunbar and R. MacLean were expelled for being divisive.²⁸⁸ The Industrial Socialist League set up a Johannesburg group, renamed itself the “Communist League”, and then declared itself the Communist Party in October 1920. Ironically, perhaps, but paralleling developments in Brazil, Egypt, Mexico and elsewhere, the first Communist Party in the country (indeed, in Africa) was basically anarcho-syndicalist in orientation. And contrary to the later histories written by the CPSA, the International Socialist League was by no means a “Communist nucleus” of “true socialists”,²⁸⁹ bathed in the “light of Marxist-Leninist science”,²⁹⁰ at this time.

The Comintern, as a result of the split among the syndicalists, received two rival applications for affiliation from South Africa. By this stage, though, the “21 Conditions of Admission” were developed, which stressed one Party per country, based on Leninist vanguardism and centralism.²⁹¹ Pressure from the Comintern for unity, and growing clarity over Bolshevism, saw moves towards

²⁸⁵ Divisional Criminal Investigations Officer, Witwatersrand Division, 1 May 1926, Confidential Report to Deputy Commissioner, South African Police, Witwatersrand Division, Johannesburg, in Department of Justice file, JUS 915 1/18/26 part 2. Pretoria: National Archives.

²⁸⁶ A. Nzula, [1935] 1979, “The Struggles of the Negro Toilers in South Africa”, appendix to A. Nzula, I.I. Potekhin and A. Zusmanovich, [1933] 1979, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, Zed Books, London, edited and introduced by Robin Cohen, p. 206.

²⁸⁷ *The International*, 26 July 1918, “League Notes”, reporting on a public meeting on the topic “As to Politics”

²⁸⁸ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 106

²⁸⁹ Dadoo, 1981, *op cit.*, p. xv

²⁹⁰ Dedication on frontispiece of Harmel, 1971, *op cit.*

²⁹¹ “The Twenty-One Points- Conditions of Admission to the Communist International”, as adopted at the Second Comintern congress in 1920 and appended to the constitution of the Communist Party of South Africa by its founding conference in 1921, reproduced in Brian Bunting, editor, 1981, *op cit.*, pp. 58-62. All quotes are from this document.

reunification towards the end of 1920, but even then the *International* could run the “21 Conditions”²⁹² alongside articles advocating an “Industrial Republic of Labour” through revolutionary unions,²⁹³ and “full control of industry by the workers” through shop committees.²⁹⁴

The International Socialist League took the initiative, and despite a shaky start, and several rebuffs from its rivals, managed to pull the SDF, the Johannesburg section of the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Communist Party and several other small groups like the Constitutional Socialist League (a Guild Socialist formation) together. There was a fairly successful unity congress in March 1921, and finally the official CPSA (known for a time as the United Communist Party) was launched in Cape Town at the end of July. There was a short-lived, last minute Cape-based breakaway, the Communist Propaganda Group, centred on Frank Glass, Pick and Davidoff,²⁹⁵ and continued to oppose elections, a “hangover from the strong syndicalist tendency of the pre-war days”,²⁹⁶ and linked up with Dunbar and others in Johannesburg.²⁹⁷ However, it joined the CPSA at the last minute.

With the CPSA, for the first time, the revolutionary conquest of State power was defined as the main goal of a radical left group in South Africa: “the working class must organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local in order that this machinery, including those [armed] forces”.²⁹⁸ The new Party probably numbered around three hundred members,²⁹⁹ heavily drawn from the old anarchist and syndicalist milieu, with Harrison the Cape representative on the executive,³⁰⁰ and Frank Glass became secretary of the Cape Town branch, and later business manager.³⁰¹ Despite misgivings,³⁰² Dunbar joined the CPSA and spoke on its platforms until the end of the 1920s.³⁰³

Yet Dunbar, like many veterans of the Industrial Socialist League and the 1920 syndicalist Communist party never really managed to reconcile with Bolshevism, even after the CPSA was

²⁹² *The International*, 15 October 1920, “Conditions for Admission to the Third International”

²⁹³ Clarence Hotson, 22 October 1920, “Socialism vs. Freakishness”, *The International*

²⁹⁴ *The International*, 12 November 1920, “City Deep Strike: an ultimatum”; *The International*, 19 November 1920, “Unauthorised Strikes Condemned: an ultimatum”; *The International*, 17 December 1920, “Workers’ Shop Committees vs. Bosses’ Committees”

²⁹⁵ Johns, 1976, *op cit.*, p. 389 note 56. In his research on the group in the 1960s, Johns was able to make use of a record book kept by the group, which he located in a collection held by Abraham Samuel Rochlin in Johannesburg: this included many of the papers of Frank Glass. While the Rochlin collection has subsequently been relocated to the special collections section of Concordia University, in Montréal, and digitised, the irreplaceable records of the Communist Propaganda Group have disappeared: Sheridan Johns, personal communication, 29 July 2006. See also Sheridan Johns, 2004, “The Rochlin Collection: out of South Africa into Quebec – and to your desktop soon?”, paper presented at “Archives: a key to African history in the 20th century” conference, Moscow, September 15-17

²⁹⁶ Hirson, 1988b, *op cit.*, p. 29

²⁹⁷ Johns, 1976, *op cit.*, p. 392 note 63. According to Johns, the Dunbar group sometimes called itself the Communist Party: Johns, 1976, “The Birth of the Communist Party of South Africa”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol.9, no. 3, p. 376 pp. 392, 398 note 75

²⁹⁸ Quoted in Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 116

²⁹⁹ Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, p. 126

³⁰⁰ Harrison, [? 1947] n.d., *op cit.*, pp. 79, 102

³⁰¹ Hirson, 1988b, *op cit.*, pp. 29-30

³⁰² Johns, 1976, *op cit.*, p. 393

³⁰³ See, for example, *The International*, 24 November 1922, “The Eleventh Hour: monster protest meeting”; T.G. Truter, Commissioner of Police, 25 October 1924, “Re: Communism in the Union of South Africa”, letter to the Secretary for Justice, Pretoria, in Department of Justice file, JUS 268 1/387/13, National Archives, Pretoria; Deputy Commissioner, Divisional C.I. Officer, Witwatersrand Division, Criminal Investigation Department, Marshall Square, confidential report dated 12 February 1929, in Department of Justice file, JUS 3/1064/ 18 part 5, National Archives, Pretoria

launched. They continued to propagate their views, within and outside the Party, and Cape Town was their stronghold. Contact was maintained with the *Workers' Dreadnought*, which opposed the Comintern in favour of a quasi-syndicalist anti-parliamentary doctrine later codified as Council Communism. Dunbar stated he would never compromise "his version of communism",³⁰⁴ and soon donated money to the Dreadnought Development Fund,³⁰⁵ and identified himself with the "Fourth International" of the Council Communists.³⁰⁶ He continued to condemn parliamentary activity, calling the mainstream unions "Capitalist machines pure and simple", and arguing that the "Capitalist State must die out before we have Communism".³⁰⁷

Cape militant Isaac Vermont and B. Kreel on the eastern Witwatersrand wrote for the *Workers' Dreadnought*, advocating a syndicalist platform, and distributed the paper locally; it was even sold at CPSA events. Vermont advocated the formation on the Witwatersrand of an "All-Workers Industrial Union, not led by selected or appointed leaders from the top, but based on workshop councils, which shall secure control in industry and transport",³⁰⁸ "based on the Workers Committees, irrespective of colour and creed".³⁰⁹ It was necessary to leave behind the "bourgeois Parliamentary and municipal elections, the Labour Party, and the Trade Unions."³¹⁰ "Shop committees, job control, and organisation along the lines of Industrial Unionism are the stepping-stones to the Communist Republic". Kreel favoured "a new type of organisation formed of workers' committees in every industry and acting on their direct initiative",³¹¹ "One Revolutionary Industrial Union", with "All-Workers' Union of South Africa and Rhodesia, organised on industrial lines",³¹² "one big union of all workers, regardless of colour or race",³¹³ "employed and unemployed alike".³¹⁴ Other articles by South Africans painted a picture of the sufferings of African and White workers, and specifically condemned segregation and other forms of official racial discrimination.³¹⁵

In May 1923, Vermont was prosecuted for selling the *Workers' Dreadnought* at an unemployed demonstration at the Parade in Cape Town, where he was a speaker, and where he sold the paper "Sunday after Sunday".³¹⁶ He was charged under an old ordinance forbidding trade on Sundays, but the real concern of court was clearly reports by detectives that the paper "aims at destroying the Parliamentary system of government by revolution and force", and "is circulated

³⁰⁴ See Johns, 1976, *op cit.*, p. 392

³⁰⁵ For example, *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 27 August 1921, p. 4; *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 26 May 1923, p. 8

³⁰⁶ Andrew B. Dunbar, 17 March 1923, "Correspondence", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³⁰⁷ Andrew B. Dunbar, 17 March 1923, "Correspondence", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³⁰⁸ Isaac Vermont, 25 November 1922, "Execution of Rand Strikers", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³⁰⁹ Isaac Vermont, 31 March 1923, "South African News", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹⁰ Isaac Vermont, 25 November 1922, "Execution of Rand Strikers", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹¹ B. Kreel, 29 July 1922, "The Rand Industrial Revolution", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹² B. Kreel, 30 December 1922, "On the Rand", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹³ B. Kreel, 30 September 1922, "On the Rand"

³¹⁴ B. Kreel, 8 September 1923, "Starvation in South Africa", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹⁵ For example, *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 14 April 1923, "South African News", probably written by Vermont; Isaac

Vermont, 25 August 1923, "Correspondence", *The Workers' Dreadnought*; B. Kreel, 11 August 1923, "South African

News", *The Workers' Dreadnought*; B. Kreel, 8 September 1923, "Starvation in South Africa", *The Workers' Dreadnought*;

B. Kreel, 29 September 1923, "South African News", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

³¹⁶ Isaac Vermont, 5 May 1923, "South African News", *The Workers' Dreadnought*

amongst both Europeans and non-Europeans throughout the Union”.³¹⁷ Vermont was fined 10 shillings, paid on the spot by collection from the large crowd present.³¹⁸ Despite the official Bolshevism of the early CPSA, then, it is clear that there was some space for organised factional activity. It is not altogether clear exactly how the anti-parliamentary faction was organised,³¹⁹ but it is clear that the situation was quite different to that in (for instance) Britain, where the early Communist Party quickly clamped down on dissidents.³²⁰ The Comintern was not very interested in South Africa at the time, this allowed syndicalist views to be expressed openly, and space for an early critique of the Soviet Union and Leninism: Dunbar attacked the “dictatorship of Moscow” as early as 1921.³²¹ The early CPSA was a far more complex body than has generally been recognised, and the debates that took place before the Comintern took firm control of the Party in 1928 have yet to be fully explored.

In conclusion

This paper, an initial investigation into the specificities and details of early radicalism, social activism, and labour organising in Cape Town, South Africa, has argued that there was an important and continuous anarchist and syndicalist current in this, South Africa’s second city. The different racial dynamics of the city contributed to the relative ease with which far left ideas moved across racial boundaries, and between the radicals, white and Coloured labour, and African and Coloured nationalist group. It also helps explain and the relative appeal of the anarchist and syndicalist arguments for – and practice of – interracial workers’ unity. The situation was rather different on the racially charged Witwatersrand, where such arguments were often met with ostracism, violence, or scepticism. Cape Town was, at the same time, fairly isolated from the storm centre of the Witwatersrand, rocked by mass strikes in 1907, 1914, and 1920, general strikes that assumed an insurrectionary character in 1913 and 1922, and regular proletarian massacres. If its left and labour movement was fairly large, and notably interracial, it was also relatively quiescent and fragile, operating in a weaker economy with smaller workplaces. More influential, perhaps, but less powerful, than the movement on the Witwatersrand: that was the anarchist and syndicalist movement in Cape Town.

³¹⁷ Isaac Vermont, 23 May 1923, “Correspondence”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*

³¹⁸ Isaac Vermont, 17 March 1923, “South African News”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*

³¹⁹ There were, for example, occasional mentions of a “Revolutionary Communist Workers’ Party”, open to all workers, “regardless of race, labour and creed”, but it was not clear whether this body actually existed, and whether, if it did, it existed outside the CPSA: see Isaac Vermont, 25 November 1922, “Execution of Rand Strikers”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*. Dunbar spoke of “joint meetings” by those who supported the Comintern and the “Fourth International” in 1922 and 1923, but it is not clear whether he meant there were separate parties: Andrew B. Dunbar, 17 March 1923, “Correspondence”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*. There were no reports of an open split, and Vermont often identified himself with the CPSA: for example, Isaac Vermont, 24 June 1922, “From South Africa”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*; Isaac Vermont, 23 June 1923, “From South Africa”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*; Isaac Vermont, 6 January 1923, “On the Rand”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*; Isaac Vermont, 23 May 1923, “Correspondence”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*; Isaac Vermont, 27 October 1923, “South African News”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*. Dunbar, prosecuted after the Rand Revolt, described himself as one of the “Communists” on trial: Andrew B. Dunbar, 3 March 1923, “On the Rand. Death Sentences Expected”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*.

³²⁰ Andrew B. Dunbar, 3 March 1923, “On the Rand. Death Sentences Expected”, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*

³²¹ Ivon Jones, [29 March 1921] 1981, *op cit.*, p. 55