Many Races, One Union!

The IWW, Revolutionary Syndicalism and Working Class Struggle in South Africa 1910-1921

by Lucien van der Walt

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the ideas, goals and organisational practices for which it stood, had an important influence on the labour movements and radical press in South Africa. It also had an important influence on the government and radical press in South Africa. It also had an important influence on the neighbouring Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, at least five unions were founded on the IWW model in this period. Four of these unions pioneered the organisation of workers of colour, most notably the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first union for African workers in South Africa history.

MEMORY THE WEAPON

Much of this history has been forgotten, both in South Africa, and elsewhere, including within the contemporary IWW movement, and, unfortunately, most writings on this history have tended to be inaccurate and incomplete. Both the hostility of liberal and Marxist writers, and over-simplification and simplification by anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists, have muddied the waters.

It is therefore an essential task to set the record straight. The history of the IWW’s role in South Africa is important for more than simple academic reasons. It is politically important for us, as IWW members, to understand our own history, learn from it, and, yes, take pride in our accomplishments as anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists.

THE FIRST IWW IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

As founded in the United States in 1905, the IWW spelt out its aims in unambiguous terms in the Preamble of the IWW: "The working-class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, and abolish the wage system.

For radical workers around the world the IWW's model proved immensely attractive. Tired of continual betrayals by workers parties and elected politicians, and often excluded from even the semblance of political rights represented by bourgeois democracy, and processes, millions of working people joined revolutionary trade unions that were committed to direct action to achieve the replacement of capitalism and the state by workers’ control of production between the 1900s and the 1930s.

RED AND BLACK

South Africa’s industrialisation was begun by the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley in 1867, followed by gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. Hundreds of thousands of workers from Australia, America, Europe and from throughout southern Africa were drawn into vast new cities such as Johannesburg and Kimberley almost overnight.

For white workers, conditions were poor and dangerous, but they at least had basic civil and political rights. Not so the Africans who entered the cities as a second people, their lands under imperial authority, their chief colluding in labour recruitment to the mines, and their working lives shackled by paternal laws preventing free movement, indenture laws banning strikes, and residential laws condemning them to all-male hostels or grim ghettos.

Conditions for Indian workers, descended from indentured farm labourers brought out in the 1860s and 1870s mainly from the old Cape colony slave-owners, were a little better, but both black and brown suffered under a succession of white supremacist regimes that were finally consolidated as the Union of South Africa in 1910.

THE VOICE OF LABOUR

By 1910 the Voice of Labour – a radical weekly founded in 1908, and the first socialist paper in twentieth-century South Africa - had by 1910 become a leading forum for revolutionary syndicalist views. For radicals alienated by the brutality and racism of South African capitalism, the syndicalist-reformism of the South African Labour Party, and the sectionalism of the craft unions, the IWW vision was attractive.

The local anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists wrote into the paper to praise "direct action over ... Parliamentary politics" which acts to "chill and paralyse national energy and initiative." They were also the first to call for racially integrated trade unions: the "only logical thing for white slaves to do," wrote "Proletarian," "is to throw in their lot with the black wage slave in a common assault on the capitalist system."

ON THE TRACKS

In March 1910, a pro-IWW Socialist Labour Party (SLP) was founded in Johannesburg, and the founding of a South African section of the IWW followed in June. The vocal and militant blacksmith A.B. Dunbar was soon elected workers were freed, and Glyn was sentenced to three months hard labour. He subsequently left for Australia that year, where he became editor of the IWW’s Direct Action and was one of the “Sydney twelve” tried for treason in 1917.

A second cracking blow against the local IWW came from within: in early 1912, the union was hijacked by members of a local socialist split group under the pretence of a “workers’ party,” and Dunbar was expelled. The IWW seems to have withered by the middle of that year.

THE 1913 GENERAL STRIKE

Then, when the great July 1913 strike by white workers broke out across the Witwatersrand, neither the IWW nor the SLP had any visible presence. The government nonetheless blamed the militant strike – in which imperial troops killed more than 25 protesters, and strikers and their supporters rioted in Johannesburg - and on a “syndicalist conspiracy,” “Anarchy masquerading as Labour,” and the “sowing of the syndicalists” which were “appealing ... both to the poorer Dutch and to the Natives.”

The bounds of Craft and race and sex, “recognize no bounds of craft, no exclusions of colour,” and destroy capitalism through a “lockout of the capitalist class.”

The IWW consistently condemned racism, and insisted that “Our working class does not concede the fullest rights which the native working-class is capable of claiming will be a share in politics.

The IWW set out to promote these sorts of ideas through The International, through innumerable meetings and public meetings, and even through the standing candidates in elections to a platform of equal rights for white and black, and the abolition of capitalism and the state through the One Big Union.

RED AND BLACK

Initially rooted, like the South African IWW, amongst militant white workers, and focussed on anti-colonialism, and increasingly turned its attention towards workers of colour, the African, Coloured and Indian wage slaves who formed the backbone of the South African capitalism.

Unlike the South African IWW, which was open to all workers, but based, in practice, amongst whites, the IWW was able to win workers of colour into syndicalist unions on the IWW model.

Not only were links made with nationalist organisations such as the African Peoples Organisation and the African National Congress (ANC), but African workers were also drawn into the IWW. The IWW's main speaker at these study groups was a former member of the South African Education Union, which focussed on cross-cultural trade unionism, mass civil disobedience against racial laws, and education of the black worker, for the IWW.

In the port city of Durban, IWW militants like Gordon Lee founded an Indian Workers Industrial Union in March 1914 "The Voice of the IWW." Whilst "the Indian Workers' Choir entertained the crowds by singing the Red Flag, the international and many IWW songs," plans were put in place to translate ISL materials into Tamil, and create a "direct action" movement.

The key organisers of the Union were the political journalist Bernard Sigamoney, who seem to have been very effective: according to the local Indian Opinion, the "Indian Workers' Industrial Union, and Comrade Sigamoney's activities therein reached Lahore in India" where a local paper was quoted as saying: "we shall soon see the IWW in the working classes in India."

In 1918, noting a "great awakening of industrial solidarity among coloured workers in the diamond mining town of Kimberley," the ISL dispatched Sigamoney to Durban to organise workers. An ISL office was set up, and Durban organised a Clothing Workers Industrial Union, which set up an branch in Johannesburg in June 1919. Twenty-seven colourful workers subsequently joined the ISL, including Fred Perier (the union's secretary), and Joseph Gomas, later a prominent communist. Durban also set up a House Dieners' Union in the town, and gained amongst coloured workers. Both unions struck in 1919.

Meanwhile, in Cape Town, the Industrial Socialist League (Isdl), a second revolutionary syndicalist group founded in March 1918 on the basis of the IWW, and the coloured and Indian coloured factories into a Workers and Jam and Indians' Industrial Union and printed ISL ideas in its monthly The Boldbeik.

For Africa

In December 1917, the Johannesburg ISL study group for African workers was transformed into the Industrial Workers of Africa, the first African trade union, the ISL's model of syndicalism possibly in Southern Africa as a whole. Rhein Cetloe, a key African militant in the new union,


Many Races, One Union! …continued

After the call fell through, protest continued, with Cetwele and Krais joining a leading role in the ANC's March 1919 protest against the pass laws, and African ISU militant T. N. L. Tshidi, revising the Industrial Workers of Africa with a "generously large attendance" of several hundred supporters and members.

Once the ANC rightwingers regained the upper hand, it closed down all such mass protests, returning to its traditional tactic of mobilising the British Crown and liberal white opinion. Cetwele and Krais then moved to Cape Town to set up a branch of the Industrial Workers of Africa. Organising amongst African and Coloured workers, the two syndicists militarily organised a joint strike by the Industrial Workers of Africa with two other unions – the Industrial and Commercial Union and the (white) National Union of Railways and Harbour Servants - in December 1919. Supported officials - the ICU remained influenced by the IWW. It called for One Big Union, and its constitution included a version of the IWW Preparatory.

Whereas the interest of the workers and those of the employers are opposed to each other - a struggle must always obtain about the distribution of the products of human labour, unless the workers through their industrial organisations take from the capitalist class the means of production, to be owned and controlled by the workers for the benefit of all, instead of for the profit of a few … This is the goal for which the ICU struggles along with other organised workers throughout the world.

The ICU peaked in 1927 with 100,000 members. By the 1930s it had also established loosely linked sections in Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Internal splits, strategic confusion, a lack of internal democracy and state and vigilante repression all led to a rapid decline of the organisation to a shadow of its former self by the early 1950s. Still, the ICU was the largest mass African movement in South Africa until the ANC's "Congress: Annual Delegate campaigns of the 1920s.

Race and Anarchy

and activities, a militancy that spilled into the African working class all over the continent. In its "glorious period," between the 1880s and 1930s, anti-colonial and anti-capitalism were not just a "European" phenomenon. The anti-authoritarian left was an international movement. It was also internationalist and anti-racist. These principles remain burned into our hearts as we enter the second great century at the centre of the new anti-capitalist movement. Can we do any less than our forebears?

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Kalgoorlie’s line of load.

The wealthy class they often say, There is work for those who try, And repeat the phrase so often, Till they believe the ancient lie. To all of you who disbelieve, Their doubts will soon explode, If they will only take a walk. Along Kalgoorlie’s line of iron, From north and south they come in scores, And search through mill and mine. It doesn’t require a Sherlock Holmes To know that they are on the hunger line. And as they beg the right to work, The boss looks real annoyed. He grunts and frowns, "Not today," To the starving unemployed. And you who work below the ground, Two thousand feet or so, When your tired limbs are aching, And your strength is getting low, Across your brain will flash a picture, Of a large and hungry mob, Who with eager lynx-eyed movements, Are looking for your job. Then you flog the hammer quicker, And you blindly sweat and moan. You consign the boss to blazes, And curse the hardness of the stone. You weakly wish that you were dead, You humble servile load. You fear the mighty multitude, Who tramp Kalgoorlie’s line of load. When you’ve been flogging all the month, And you find you’ve earned a cut, You call the boss some filthy names. But all your friends say, You don’t let him hear you, No matter how you feel. You know that fellow out of work, Is right upon your heel. Each day your task grows harder, Still in your brain will burn, A mighty thought, that you’ll rebel, But you dread the getting-out-of-work. Then you crush the rebel spirit, You cringe and force a smile, And kiss the hand that sheds the whips, In Kalgoorlie’s Golden Mile. You peering Shibwingers, You know his road is long. We will exert a heavy penalty, For all the blood and tears. When the tarapins enter the march, And rate from sea to sea, You will parade with interest, In the days that are to be. Red commercial war is raging, Far across the burning desert. There is one wants badly waging, A damn sight nearer home. Workers, take it into orbit, For the German or the Turk, Fight for shorter hours in better ages, And the right to live and work.

Tom McMillon

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Direct Action Review

"Working Class First! The Working Class and Anti-Capitalism," by Jacob Pugh

This pamphlet argues that working class people have not achieved full citizenship in Britain during the post-war period. It highlights that the reason for this is that needs working class people could meet in the past without making a cash payment, have now to be met by buying commodities. This is due to changes in the urban environment and lifestyle. As working class people need to buy more and more commodities to meet their everyday needs, it appears that the working class is becoming richer and richer. In fact, ordinary people live in a state of constant financial precariousness. The pamphlet argues that only the end of the profit system and the end of inequality can real prosperity to the working class in Britain and in the post-colonial West.

I liked this pamphlet. It's a very original analysis, well presented and backed out with facts. I have always thought that the movement of working class people from the inner-cities into the suburbs was at the root of the modern destruction of working class radicalism, but this pamphlet is the first time that I have seen the argument put.

Pugh's writing is very specific to England, but as a result of his analysis, the effects of suburbanisation is more pronounced here in Australia. Here the belief is that you're paying to live in the house you're in, that you have a car, a family, CD player and all the goodies, then you're up there among the middle class. Being stuck-in is a worldwide condition.

My only criticism of this pamphlet is that

Low Morale, High Stress, Deep Depression: You Need a Union, Not a Shrink!

The IWW had an important impact on the radical left, militant white workers, as they were workers of colour in South Africa in the 1910s. An influence that persisted into the 1920s in a diffused form in the ICU, and even spread into neighbouring colonies.

Can we say, then, as our detractors do, that classical anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism "ignore" race? Not at all! Within a white dominion, within the British Empire, within colonial Africa, the IWU and the revolutionary syndicalism it exemplified and promoted had played a pioneering role in organising workers of colour, in defending the right of African labour, in organising civil rights

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Review by Wal Larkin.

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by the InSUL, more than 2000 workers struck for better wages and against food exports (which workers blamed for massive post-war inflation).

From Cape Town to the Kimberley: Although the strike was not won, it did lay a basis for cooperation in the docks, and by 1921 the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Union and several other African trade unions had merged to form the Industrial and Commercial Workers (or ICU).

Not a true revolutionary syndicalist union - the ICU was influenced more by nationalist and traditionalist ideologies than anti-capitalism, and was run from above by a parasitic, weak, and sometimes crooked, layer of middle class

This pamphlet is a slender read, but it is well worthwhile. "Working Class First! The Working Class and Anti-Capitalism," can be got from AK Press and Distribution PO Box 12766 Dublin E99 9YE

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