

# Digging into IWW History: South Africa

John Philips, *Industrial Worker*, October 1976, p. 8

*This pioneering article sheds light on the early impact of the IWW in South Africa, and on early black strikes and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). While not altogether accurate (for example, the ICU claimed to have white members, and David Ivon Jones was not part of 1920s night school where workers wrote "Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win!", and the IWW influence continued well after 1920), it is a commendable account.*

"Sifuna Zonke ! they cried. - "We want the works!". In that society most infamous for its racism and most implacable in its hatred of "reds", the IWW once tried to organize revolutionary industrial unions of class-conscious workers from every race, tribe; and religion.

South Africa in the early 20th Century was another of those rapidly industrializing nations where the rising alienation and militancy of wage workers gave rise to bitter and bloody class struggle. Given the peculiar structure of South African society and the nature of the introduction of industrialization there, it is perhaps not surprising that most white workers put their efforts into craft unionism - and political action which ensure, through "job reservation", that their black fellow workers, would never compete in skilled trades.

Here was a land so reactionary that the Labour Party demanded "equal pay for equal work", not daring to question unequal work. Yet by 1911 Fellow Worker Archie Crawford, editor of Johannesburg's *Voice of Labour*, toured the United States, speaking under IWW local auspices about (among other topics) "Industrial Development in South Africa". By the time of the Palmer Raids, his organization was being destroyed by the South African Government.

Inspired by a successful strike of white municipal employees, Johannesburg's "bucket boys" demanded raises of six pence (some say one shilling). They stopped taking shit until they got what they were after. The Government gave them what for.

"Native police" were used as scabs. When it became apparent that these were only sufficient to keep public facilities open, 152 "night soil workers" were sentenced under the "Masters and Servants Act". Under the provisions of this act (which is still in force) workers have fewer legal rights than the slaves of many human societies.

All 152 workers were sent back to work under an armed guard of spear-carrying Zulus and gun-toting white bullies. Those who tried to escape were shot down and those who refused to obey orders were lashed until they obeyed.

Meanwhile, African miners went on strike. With no organized union or central committee among the workers, it was a relatively simple affair for the police to isolate the various compounds and inform each group separately that the others were scabbing. It was quite another matter, however, to convince the workers to actually scab, even when white miners were still going to work.

Although the Government refused to make public the methods it finally used to break the strike; it is known that police breaking into the Village Deep Mine Compound murdered eight Africans. Bayonets are alleged to have been the most potent arguments driving Africans back underground.

Who got the blame for all this? You guessed it :the One Big Industrial Union, which was credited with introducing the subversive notion of strikes to a heretofore "contented" African population.

The Government charged five Africans and three Europeans with having fomented the strike. Thanks to the extensive legal knowledge of Fellow Worker SP Bunting the prosecution were soon made to look like fools. The IWW had not been urging these workers to strike; they had been urging workers NOT to strike until they had a tighter organization and a strike fund that could support them.

Like many expatriate employers, the IWW had failed to understand African society. Many African unions have no membership rolls and few dues-paying members. But if the workers decide to strike, woe to the employer

who thinks that the union doesn't represent his workers, or that lack of a strike fund will drive his slaves back to work! The extended family could help its members stay out on strike indefinitely.

The case became so embarrassing for the Government that the Attorney-General refused to prosecute. Luke Messina, a Government infiltrator, confessed to having signed a false affidavit. Although the case never went before a jury, the financial impact was more than the union could bear, even though it shared costs with the African National Congress (ANC).

David Jones left to start a night school for Africans where they learned to write on their slates: "Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win!" But the IWW had died. Africans soon organized a union of their own.

The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) was founded In 1919 by Clemens Kadilie [sic.]. It organized workers of all industries into one big union. Its constitution was based on that of the IWW, but with one important difference: No whites were to be allowed to join!

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**Sources:** *Time Longer than Rope*. Edward Roux, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin and *Industrial Solidarity* #78, June 10th, 1911