overnight. In the meantime I have to approach this whole question as a practical administrator. I am definitely not going to jeopardise the development of educational facilities for the Europeans as well as the non-Europeans in Natal by refusing to face facts as they are. One must temper one's idealism with a certain amount of realism. One must take a people with one in moving forward. That is the only way lasting reforms are brought about.\textsuperscript{85}

To this pragmatism, Mabel Palmer, with all her idealism and energy, was party. Theoreticians, attributing motives and patterns to distant historical events, censure her. It is significant that those who actually experienced her educational schemes have nothing but praise and appreciation for her work.\textsuperscript{86}

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\item[86.] To date I have not encountered adverse comment from any past student of Mabel Palmer regarding her attitude and efforts in education.
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\textbf{THE INDIAN TOBACCO WORKERS STRIKE OF 1920}

\textbf{A SOCIO-HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION}

\textit{by}

Evangelos A. Mantzaris

The struggles of tobacco workers in South Africa is a topic much neglected by historians and social scientists alike. In Johannesburg and Cape Town strong tobacco trade unions had emerged as early as 1901 and played prominent roles in the radicalisation of worker action in these two cities. In Cape Town the Tobacco Workers’ Union under the guidance of the General Workers’ Union and the leadership of Erasmus, Levinson and Gold, played a significant role in the development of worker militancy in the early period of the twentieth century. The cigarette-makers’ strikes in Cape Town in 1906, which resulted in the workers establishing the first socialist-oriented co-operative society in the history of South African Labour is the best example of this militancy.\textsuperscript{1}

In this paper we will examine the struggles of the Indian tobacco workers in Durban, so neglected in South African historiography, even in works written by people who purported to investigate and examine the “official” history of the early trade unions in the Colony of Natal.\textsuperscript{2} We will try to outline the birth and development of Indian trade unions in Durban, the conditions prevailing in the tobacco industry during the period under investigation and the strike in question. In addition several sociological and historical hypotheses concerning strikes in general and labour organisation in Natal in particular will be challenged, namely:-

(a) Turner’s hypothesis that, where industrial situations are likely to lead to conflict, they will generally find leaders to organise it, and that such leaders are naturally likely to be people of aggressive temperament, and

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so also likely to acquire strong views.3

(b) Lipset's thesis that trade unions serve to integrate their members in the larger body politic and give them a basis of loyalty to the system,4 and
(c) Reid's thesis that the only unions that took up actions against the employers were the "white" unions.5

Indian trade-unionism in Natal

There is a great lack of information and research on Indian worker organisations and trade unions, their numerical strength, and organisational structures before 1915. We do know, however, that from 1915 the International Socialist League (ISL) started organising Indian workers.6 The ISL was the first Marxist-oriented political organisation in the history of the South African labour movement, and was an off-shoot of the war-on-war League, a group that split from the S.A. Labour Party, after denouncing the pro-war stand of the latter in 1914.7

Bernard L. E. Sigamoney was the driving force behind the Indian Workers' organisation. He was born in Durban and educated in England and South Africa. He was a teacher at St. Aidans Boys' School, Sydenham, Durban and a charismatic leader who held important positions in Indian public and sporting circles.8 He left for England in order to be trained for the Ministry of the Anglican Church, and returned to South Africa in 1927. During the same year he was the pastor at St. Anthony's Indian Mission of the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg.9 During the early years of his life, he was a committed socialist and a leading member of the ISL, and received fraternal support from trade-unionists and members of the same organisation such as Gordon Lee, R. K. Moodley and Ramsamy. The ISL became very active, not only by organising open-air mass meetings of Indian workers, but also

by establishing night classes for "theoretical advancement" where Marx's works such as "Capital, Value and Profit" were studied together with works of the American Marxist, Daniel De Leon.10

Ivor Jones, the secretary of the ISL, regularly travelled to Durban in order to address Indian workers in open-air meetings, where labour leaders such as Sigamoney, Moodley and Svame shared the platform with him.11 The organisation intensified its agitation amongst the Indian workers in Durban following a resolution passed at its 1917 Conference.12 In addition the ISL through mass meetings supported solidarity across the colour line and its efforts were concentrated in establishing mixed trade unions.13 This strategy however, for obvious tactical reasons, was not applicable to all parts of the country. The Natal conditions were different to those in the Transvaal, because of the presence of a large Indian labour force and thus the League's strategists thought that it was easier to agitate amongst workers with the same cultural background. As Indian trade-union organisation started the ISL organisers concentrated upon producing pamphlets in Tamil and Telugu.14

The most important step towards the Indian Workers' unity was the formation of the Indian Workers' Industrial Union, on the lines of the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), representing certain sections of the Indian working class in different factories. It was inaugurated in March 1917 in Durban under the chairmanship of Gordon Lee.15 The union became very active during 1917–1918 with a series of open-air meetings and theoretical classes, under the guidance and instruction of the ISL. The "International" proudly proclaimed that hundreds of Indian workers from various industries were enrolled and Indian leaders were trained. It was optimistically stated that the "new Indian union officials have so good a grip of the class struggle [that] it is safe to say that the Union can stand alone today under its own elected leadership".16

The regular meetings of the organisation took place at the corner of Grey and Victoria Streets, and Lee's Indian Workers' Choir entertained the crowds by singing the Red Flag, International and the many IWW songs.17 The ISL leadership of Ivor Jones and W.H. Andrews (both of them white trade-unionists), together with the Indian workers' leaders, kept alive the trade-unionist consciousness of the workers; but in a spontaneous strike situation

6 See the Presidential Speech by Advocate Albert Christopher at the Town Hall, Durban to inaugurate the Trade Union Congress of Indian Workers, M. Ballinger Papers, Correspondence 1928–1949, Item 2490, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville.
10 See International, 2 June 1918.
12 See letter of the S.A.P. Commissioner to the Secretary for Justice, April, 1918, Justice File 3/524/17, Part 2, entry 60, Pretoria Archives.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 International, 3 August 1917.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
they could not control the striking workers who, in such cases, were agitated by certain anarchists or social democratic Fabians such as Harry Norrie or Hoggins of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which operated in Natal at that period.18

Most of the strikes involving Indian workers in Natal during the period under review were led by the Industrial Union and its affiliated bodies, but at the same time many trade unions consisting entirely of Indian workers were operating independently of the IU. The most important of these were the strong Indian Typographical Union with a membership of approximately 300 in late 1917,19 the Indian Shop Assistants’ Union, the Sugar Mills Workers’ Union which was organised by the Natal Shop Assistants’ and Commercial Workers’ Union,20 the Durban Hotel Employees’ Union, the Bakers’ Van Union, and the Indian Dockworkers’ Union.21

One of the most organised Indian trade unions in Natal was the Tobacco Workers’ Union, supported organisationally and financially by the trade unionists referred to above, but mainly by Sigamoney, the man regarded by Natal Indian workers as the leader of radical opposition to local capitalists.

The tobacco industry in Natal22

During 1920 the tobacco industry in Natal was in a healthy state. The Union’s exports of tobacco in that year totalled 1,946,000 lbs, Natal supplying one-third;23 imports totalled 517,000 lbs. The lack of overseas markets was a serious problem but the volume of the 1920 exports increased the hopes of a future stable export market. The total tobacco crop for the Union in 1920 was 13,000,000 lbs, one-third of which came from Natal.24 Prices for all qualities were more than satisfactory yet the tobacco plantation owners were in a panic with the “Damocles Sword” of the Tobacco Tax Law hanging over them, predicting that it would be disastrous for them.

The Natal tobacco planters had solved the problem of cheap labour by employing on their holdings large number of ex-indentured and “free” Indians.25 Therefore they were not faced with the problem existing in the

Transvaal where tobacco farmers were short of labour.26 A successful tobacco grower in the Transvaal stated publicly that, although there were not “huge profits” in the industry during the period 1911–1918, the price of tobacco in the market was constantly increasing and a man who in 1914 grew 6,652 lbs and made £150 could, in 1919, produce 13,149 lbs and make £570.27

In Natal the tobacco industry was controlled by a small number of people.28 The growers were also the manufacturers and thus dominated the market by selling their product through their own agents. This small group dominating production, manufacture and distribution (bearing in mind that even the “independent” retailers and experts on tobacco were working harmoniously with the producers), obviously found itself in a monopolistic position.

The biggest grower and manufacturer was R.B. Chetty, the principal of Durban’s Imperial Cigar Manufacturing and Trading Company; he was a Tamil-speaking Indian and renowned philanthropist. He was also sole shareholder in Rex Printing Company, also based in Durban. He had arrived in South Africa from Mauritius in 1896 and started trading in Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg, from where he moved to Durban in 1902. He was one of the wealthiest supporters of Gandhi, but did not actually participate in the Satyagraha movement. He represented South African Indians at the Conference of the Indian National Congress that took place in Madras in 1908, and was for many years Vice-President of the Natal Indian Congress. His philanthropic activities included many donations to the Indian Girls’ School and the Indian Tamil Society.29

In 1917 he performed the opening ceremony of the Sentamil school, and in 1920 he was leader of a deputation which met the Director of the Natal Education Department to discuss the establishment of schools for Indian girls and the raising of salaries of Indian teachers. After an illustrious trading and manufacturing career he died in June 1961.30

The factory, in which approximately 120 Indians were employed, was receiving the tobacco from Chetty’s own plantations. He manufactured it, and distributed it through his own channels in the retail market, through contracts.31

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19 See Gordon Lee “The bloody coolie”, in International, 12 October 1917.
20 On the details of the formation of the Sugar Mills Workers’ Union and the role of white trade unionists such as Rodgers, Buckley and Heyns see International, 31 October 1919.
21 Information about these unions appeared in an article in the Indian Opinion, November 1919 signed by “Solidarity”.
22 On the problems of cultivation of Turkish and Virginia tobacco and the development of the tobacco industry in South Africa see E.A. Mantzaris “The tobacco-makers’ strikes”, part one.
24 Ibid.
26 See evidence of Percy Lothrop, a Transvaal tobacco grower in the 1919 Unemployment Commission, as appeared in the Farmers’ Weekly, 27 October 1920, p. 21.
27 See evidence given in the same commission by N. van der Merwe, representative of the Magaliesberg Co-operative Society.
31 Interview with Ramgoolum Naidoo, a worker at Chetty’s Factory, in Lenasia, Johannesburg, 23 June 1978.
The strike

During the second week of October 1920 the Indian workers in Chetty's factory went on strike, demanding the opportunity to use more sophisticated techniques in the making of cigars (which would obviously increase the manufacturer's costs), better working conditions and pay increases. The working conditions in the factory were appalling. Cutters, packers and machine operators were sitting and working together; and there two lavatories for males only (there was no lavatory for female workers who were employed mostly temporarily). As they were working in a manual capacity, the workers felt that the acquisition of better machinery would not only increase productivity, but would also benefit them financially, as they would be capable of producing more cigars per day. Their strike was primarily a strike over working conditions, economic demands and overwork. Chetty used to call upon his workers to work from seven o'clock in the morning till seven in the evening with a half an hour lunch time. He required from his workers however to arrive and start work at 5.45 in the morning and finish at approximately 7.15 in the evening. Thus, the workers performed an additional half an hour work per day, or three hours per week. Although the Natal Criminal Investigation Department thought that the strike was not a dispute over pay increases, the existing press reports of the period suggest exactly the opposite.

The Indian tobacco workers in Durban, who were organised by the ISL trade unionists, did not take a militant stand until the strike occurred. Most of them had worked for Chetty for over fifteen years and felt obliged to stay with him as it would be difficult to find other employment after the termination of their contracts. The strike started, but production and distribution did not halt because Chetty easily found "scabs" to replace the workers. The workers assaulted the "scabs" and two strikers subsequently appeared in court accused of vicious assault and were fined £5 each.

After the violent incidents, the strike leaders assured the police that such demonstrations and disturbances would not be repeated, and the accused were released on bail. A Strike Committee was elected democratically by the workers consisting of fifteen individuals, who started working in the Indian neighbourhoods canvassing for the moral and financial support of the community. In a matter of a few days, a substantial amount of money was collected. Many (the exact amount is not known) ex-indentured Indian workers who worked as occasional labourers in Chetty's factory came out on strike in solidarity with the striking workers. Chetty's reaction was immediate. He took them to court accusing them of criminal breach of contract, and he recruited more strike-breakers to work for him and keep up the production. A solidarity strike by Indian workers in the railway sheds came as a shock to the authorities as the white foremen could not cope with the situation. The difficulties faced by the railway authorities were many but their attempts to negotiate a "sensible" settlement with the Indian workers fell on deaf ears.

The strike continued and the railway authorities were compelled to recruit new workers in order to replace the strikers, who preferred to be dismissed rather than betray their fellow striking workers. In the meantime during the first days of the cigarette-makers' strike, all but one of the cigarette-making factories in Durban combined against the workers. The combine included the wealthy retailers, wholesalers and producers imposed the worst conditions on the factory hands and found increasing support from the racist organisation called the South African League. The leaders of the League used every public platform available in order to discredit the strike and generally slur the Indian population.

Several letters by anonymous correspondents also called upon a united struggle of employers and the state against the workers in order to abolish the "devil of trade-unionism". The umbrella body of South African Trade-Unionism at the time, A. Crawford's S.A. Industrial Federation ignored the strike, while in Natal their District Secretary, J.E. Buckley, represented the white workers to the Durban City Council in the negotiations over the wages of Durban's white tramway workers. The Labour Party, which was fighting an election at the time of the strike also ignored it completely. Although T. Boydell, who was one of its leading members and was canvassing for votes in Durban at the time of the dispute, promised to small audiences that his party would abolish the evils of capitalism and promised to save the "Asian" from the exploitation of ruthless capitalists, he did not even acknowledge the strike that had been the city's talking point during that period.

32 Indian Opinion, 8 October 1920.
33 Interview with Naidoo. Also interview with Raj Naicker, Cape Town, 15 August 1978.
35 See Indian Opinion, 8 and 15 October 1920.
37 Natal Witness, 13 October 1920.
38 Justice Files.
The white section of the working class however was not absolutely apathetic towards the strike. The “original” worker organisation, the ISL, decided to send two of its most dynamic personalities—W.H. (Bill) Andrews and Ivor Jones—to support the militancy of the Indian workers. Speaking in the Alexandra Hall, Andrews called on the workers to join forces with the ISL in order to establish a workers’ Republic and Jones asked them to form their own Soviet in every work place, including Chetty’s factory.48 The revolutionary rhetoric of Labour’s “hard-core” did not attract much attention, however. The Workers’ Committee, in hour-to-hour consultation with its rank-and-file membership and the “concerned” community organisations, was negotiating with Chetty on an “economic basis” only. In the process it included in its demands the exclusivity of employment for trade union members only.49 The attempt of the white socialists and their Indian followers such as Ramsamy and Sigamoney to diversify the nature of the struggle on the political level did not succeed, as the strikers saw their activities mainly as part of a continuous bargaining process.

According to contemporaries, the lack of politically advanced workers amongst the strikers who could have provided a dynamic political leadership was evident. Sigamoney and the white socialists were regarded as sympathisers, but the broad and sectional character of the strike and the narrow economic demands of the union did not permit a turn to a long-term strategy of a political nature.50 The local press did not pay serious attention to the strike, possibly because it saw it as an “inter-Indian” dispute. A popular journal however attacked the ISL for forcing Indian labourers into confrontation with local capital and condemned the tactics and strategies of this radical group.51 It advised Indians—referring directly to the striking workers—that the free market gives all opportunities to individuals “to make fortune by drawing money from nature”.52

Nature, however was not very generous to Indian workers, especially at this particular juncture. The cost of living in Durban had risen enormously since the end of the war and this had adversely affected the lower paid workers. The price of bread had risen by 120 per cent, potatoes by 100 per cent and rice by 120 per cent. Boots and shoes cost 100 per cent more and clothing prices fluctuated accordingly.53 Rents and housing had also increased drastically from 120 to 150 per cent since the war.54 This was one of the main points raised by the workers when they addressed neighbourhood and mass-meetings within the community. The Workers’ Committee also accused the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) of ignoring Labour in its totality and paying attention only to white labour. The moral support of the community was expressed in many forms, particularly financial donations.55 The SAIF was also accused of allying itself with the South African League against the workers, especially against Indian labour. The ISL supported the stand of the tobacco workers against the “Crawford clique” and declined to participate in an open meeting organised by the South African League and the SAIF. In a strongly-worded letter to Buckley, Durban secretary of the SAIF, J. Kerr, the secretary of the ISL, accused the Federation of siding with “middle-class racist bodies” such as the South African League against the Indian working class. He criticised the Federation for even failing to acknowledge the existence of the tobacco-workers’ struggle and called upon all white workers to ally themselves with their “companions” and “not their enemies”.56 The only section of the white working class that supported directly the strike of the Indian workers was the Natal builders who, following the example of the Indian trade union, established a union for themselves, and also published a pamphlet under the heading “The Building Industry by the Building Workers”. Supporting the strike of the Indian workers, the pamphlet concluded as follows:

We believe that this matter of getting a practical hold of your own industry is by far the most important concern of the workers at the present time. If we believe that control to be impossible of attainment under existing conditions, we must still grant that the mere attempt must educate the workers and leave them better fitted to assume control when those conditions are changed. We have built our castles in the air too long. Let us begin now to build them in brick and stone.57

Although community support gained momentum, Chetty tried to use his influence as a philanthropist to calm down the workers, but in vain. His major bargaining point was to remind them that during the period of the rice price increase and shortage he had bought all the available rice and sold it at cost to his compatriots.58 Although the union felt weak at certain points of the negotiation process as far as the “black legs” were concerned,59 and was unable to demand their withdrawal because of Chetty’s insistence to keep

48 Natal Witness, 18 October 1920.
49 See Indian Opinion, 22 October 1920.
50 Interviews with Naidoo and Naicker.
51 Natal Licensed Victuallers’ Journal, October 1920, editorial.
52 Ibid., November 1920, editorial.
54 Ibid., pp. 42–45.
55 Interviews with Naicker and Naidoo.
56 Letter of J. Kerr to Buckley, as appeared in the International, 15 October 1920, as a form of editorial.
57 See Natal Advertiser, 14 October 1920.
58 South African Indian who is who.
59 Interviews with Naidoo and Naicker. See also International, 15 October 1920.
them, the Workers' Committee felt that the strikers' demands were moderate. Eventually the other manufacturers, wholesalers and producers, who had originally rejected the idea of negotiations agreed that the workers' demands for pay increases, union recognition and better working conditions were justified. Pelunis, a Jewish tobacco expert, and one of the wealthiest retailers in Durban played a very prominent role in the negotiations and regarded recognition of trade unions as inevitable. It appeared that the strike was heading towards a settlement, although Sigamoney, in his capacity as the official Indian Labour spokesman, tried desperately to radicalise the activities of the Workers' Committee. The latter's concern at the late stages of the strike was the question of the "black legs". While the workers were on strike, several strike-breakers were producing cigars in the factory and Chetty would not under any circumstances agree to sack them. The "scab" question gave rise to much discussion amongst the workers and the pleas of Jones and Sigamoney that the latter should not return to work before the question was finally resolved did not appeal to them.

As time passed and the financial burden became impossible to bear, the day-to-day problems forced the Workers' Committee to come to an agreement with Chetty and the Combine. The seven "black legs" working in the factory attended the final meeting of the striking workers and the ISL "experts" gave their ideas of how the workers should face the problem. Jones explained the methods used in other countries concerning strike-breakers, and the Union decided to levy a fine on them and go back to work on that condition. The "black legs" refused to follow the union's instructions and the Workers' Committee decided to extend the strike. Chetty pressed the strike-breakers to pay the fine in advance, as the new crop was ready for cutting, and the strike was resolved.

The ISL and its official organ celebrated the victory of the Durban workers through the pen of Ivor Jones, who wrote triumphantly that all demands of the workers had been conceded by the Cigar Makers' Combine. In the eyes of the ISL and the workers, it was a victory against all odds, the Labour Party, the South African League and the SAIF.

The financial and moral support of the community and the democratic way of organisation and leadership opened new paths to the Indian labour movement in South Africa. The economic and other demands of the workers, however, characterised as they were by moderation, did not permit them to go beyond a bargaining procedure, thus ignoring the possible benefits of a well-orchestrated long-term strategy, backed up by the increasing solidarity of other groups of Indian workers in Durban. It was basically a sectional strike, lacking in long-term organisation objectives and political vision.

Conclusion

This article has argued (through a socio-historical analysis of a specific strike that occurred in a particular historical conjuncture) three main points. First, collective leadership of a highly exploited section of the Durban working class and its mass action on a democratic basis are in no need of people ("agitators" according to Turner) of aggressive temperament and strong views. Second, the trade unions (at least during the period under examination) concentrated primarily on an economic, rather than political, struggle and did not serve as a vehicle of integration of their members in the larger body politic, contrary to Lipset's hypothesis. Third, it is a historical distortion to identify workers' organisations and struggles in Natal with white trade unions alone, as Reid has suggested.

As historical evidence concerning the numerical strength of Indian trade unions and Indian unionised workers is meagre (and it would be a very difficult task indeed for the future researcher to assess them in any meaningful way), the Indian cigarette-makers' strike of 1920 could be seen by certain historians as an insignificant and isolated incident of minor importance. It should be viewed, however, as an instance in the long and turbulent history of the struggle between labour and capital in the totality of the South African Labour Movement.

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61 Interview with Naidoo.
63 Ibid., 29 October 1920.
64 Ibid.