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At its strongest the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) had a national membership of 100,000. The ICU was the first nationally organised black trade union in South Africa, and it survived 10 difficult years. Despite its eventual decline there is much that can be learned from its experience and problems.

According to Clements Kadalie, the main ICU leader, the initiative for starting the union came from Alf Batty, a founder of the white Labour Party who asked Kadalie to join his electoral com-

In this issue of *The Socialist*, we introduce a new series on the history of working class struggle in South Africa. Lisa Goatley looks at the ICU.

mittee in the Harbours Constituency.

The ICU made its first impact in 1919, when dock workers went on strike in Cape Town. The strike was organised with the white railway and harbour workers' union. The objective was to prevent food being exported during the war and against food shortages. The ICU also independently decided to use this strike to demand an increase in the minimum wage. A committee of workers from both unions was formed at the offices of the Cape Federation of Labour.

## Gains

Although the strike was called off prematurely, gains were eventually won in 1920. The success was a boost for the ICU. Word of it soon spread throughout the country.

In 1920, 50 delegates from various black worker organisations held a conference in Bloemfontein. The result was a decision to join the ICU and form one big union. The aim of the organisation was: "to bring together all classes of labour,

skilled and unskilled...to obtain and maintain equitable rates of wages and reasonable conditions of labour...and to promote co-operation."

By 1923 the ICU was growing rapidly, and expanding into rural areas and northern provinces. In 1925 its headquarters were transferred to Johannesburg, and its annual conference was held there.

Such was its growth and strength that in 1926 the government threatened to pass a law to halt the action of the union. The bill was eventually incorporated into the Native Administration Act, but the response was one of agitation and defiance of pass laws.

In their anxiety the government further tried to control the development of the ICU by restricting Kadalie. In 1926 he was banned from entering Natal; he ignored the ban, was arrested, but won his case in court.

During this same year the ICU had to deal with its first significant internal crisis. While the ICU was growing in many parts of the country, it was also showing signs of weakness. After the headquarters were transferred from Cape Town, the union gradually lost touch with workers in the western Cape and membership dropped there. While farm labourers were joining rapidly in the rural areas, there was no time to consolidate and establish strong networks. As the ICU sprawled across the country the question of policy became important; the movement had reached a stage where something had to be done to satisfy rank and file members.

## Disillusionment

Thousands had been recruited into the union, but no positive major gains had really been made since the initial dock strikes. Furthermore, no coherent action had been taken against the pass laws. The ICU was divided on what path to take; the more militant sections wanted strikes and the burning of passes, while a more reactionary, conservative group argued for a policy of conciliation.

No decisions were taken and people grew disillusioned with the movement. The left element within the ICU began to demand action, and the communist members argued for a militant policy of struggle; they also wanted to curb the powers of the leaders - such as Kadalie - and demanded that finances be better controlled

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(it became apparent that people in leadership positions were using union funds for personal purposes).

At the same time this split was widening, the government was putting pressure on the ICU to disassociate itself from its more radical and militant component.

The final consequence was that at the height of the ANC's 1926 campaign for the removal of the Colour Bar Act, the ICU's national council banned communists from official position, and dismissed 3 prominent communist members. This action, predicted the Communist Party's annual conference, would split the union and betray the people into the government's hands. Kadalie attacked communist members, and argued for "the strictly constitutional path of peaceful methods and moral suasion."

## Parliamentary road

By taking this new reactionary path Kadalie was attempting to win support and recognition from the government, and thereby consolidate his position within the leadership. The move to placate and work with parliament, combined with financial irregularities, a strong bureaucracy, and general inefficiency paved the way for the union's decline.

The more it grew, the more the ICU found itself trying to satisfy the aspirations of all groups and classes of black people: its membership included numerous petite-bourgeois activists who wanted influence in the government; working class people who wanted to control their own labour and working conditions; and farm labourers who wanted their own land to farm. Kadalie had worried about the ICU's political threat to the ruling class, and tried to tone it down to one that might gain legal recognition.

By 1928 thousands were leaving the ICU, and the organisation split into smaller, regional groups. The once-powerful union would never recover. For a time it had seemed to have the capacity to change political and industrial relations in South Africa, but harassment from the government, combined with significant internal disruption, eventually led to its collapse.

The ICU had brought the promise of freedom from oppression to thousands of workers, but a lack of cohesion, and the mistaken belief that gains could be made by working with the government, destroyed this promise.