The Transvaal Native Congress 
1917-1920: The Radicalisation of the 
Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand

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The radicalisation of black politics on the Rand during and immediately after the First World War has often been noted by writers on South Africa. Simons,1 Benson,2 Walshe,3 Wickens,4 Caris and Carter,5 Roux,6 Legassick,7 Johnstone,8 to mention but the most important, have all commented on the rising tide of militancy in this period, and have tried in varying degrees to identify the growing contradictions which it expressed.

Accounts of the origins of the movement share a number of points in common: the growing impoverishment of the reserves (whether it be explained in terms of structural underdevelopment or merely contingent effects of droughts); the rise of a concentrated black urban proletariat as a result of the secondary industrialization promoted by the war; the concomitant shortage of housing and the emergence of teeming urban slums; the steeply rising cost of living during the war and the simultaneous pegging of black wages at pre-World War I levels; various direct and indirect taxations on African earnings; the example of white worker action, and the continued inflexibility of the job colour bar.

The interpretations provided are not mutually contradictory and it is possible to stitch together a composite account.

The same cannot be said of the shape and dynamics of the movements which were spawned by these pressures, and more particularly of the role and class basis of the Transvaal Native Congress (TNC). Here two broad and mutually contradictory positions emerge. The first, articulated most explicitly by Walshe, is that the TNC and the African National Congress (ANC) more generally, retained its conservative petty bourgeois orientation and never effectively transcended its class origins or effectively mobilised the political constituency that the times had placed in its grasp.

Simons and less explicitly Benson take a diametrically opposite line. Criticising "the binary model of standard Marxist theory" espoused by the International Socialist League at the time, which denounced the ANC as, "Labour Fakirs of black South Africa, black bell-wethers for the capitalist class", Simons suggests (somewhat obscurely) that African nationalism was the authentic vehicle of black proletarian aspirations, by virtue of its effective mobilisation of agitation, and its identification with British imperial capital against its more immediate white working class and farming oppressors.9 Tracing an almost totally different route Johnstone ends up in the same camp. He equates Congress campaigns with working class resistance, and treats African politics in this period as a largely homogeneous movement.10

The purpose of this paper is to explore more sensitively and in more detail the class dynamics of the black population on the Rand between 1917 and 1922. Its main focus is the role and activities of the black petty bourgeoisie and the extent to which their consciousness was affected by living conditions in the townships and slums of the Witwatersrand.

This study hopes to take up these issues by working from 3 central premises. Firstly, that the petty bourgeoisie as a class stands between the dominant relations of production of capitalism, that is to say the capital/labour relation, and as such is pulled two ways. Secondly, that:
the more separated is a social sector from the dominant relations of production, and the more diffuse are its 'objective interests' and consequently, less developed its 'class instinct' - the more the evolution and the resolution of the crisis tend to take place on the ideological level."

Finally that the black petty bourgeoisie in a colonial racist society was a fundamentally different creature from that found in the developed capitalist world. The colonised black petty bourgeoisie was both stunted and repressed, and unable to articulate with conviction its characteristic values of statology, the myth of the ladder of status quo anti-capitalism. In addition, for every one of those admitted to its ranks, there was always a correspondingly great stratum among the upper levels of the working class - generally described at the time as the "educated" or "civilised" - who aspired to their position but found their upward mobility blocked. A downward identification towards this group, at least by a section of those displaced, therefore always on the cards. How far this would proceed, and the extent to which this class which was united only by ideology and its intermediary position would cohere on this issue, or split, would be determined by economic, political and especially ideological class struggle.

In June 1917 the leadership of the ANC shifted decisively to the Rand. Seme and Dube were ousted and S.M. Magatho and S. Msane were elected respectively President and Secretary General.

Much of the impetus for the purge came for the Transvalers and those involved with the Johannesburg newspaper Abantu Batho, the Rand was now overwhelmingly the largest centre of black urban population in South Africa, both of workers and the incipient black petty bourgeoisie.

During the war industrial development had taken off, sucking in huge numbers of those displaced from the Rand. Between 1915/16 and 1921/22 the number of industrial establishments on the Rand increased from 862 to 1763, while the black working class engaged in non-mining activities (including "works") swelled from 67,111 in 1918 to 92,597 in May 1920. Such an environment provided the natural locus of political organisation, more especially as nearby Pretoria was the seat of political power, and it was to here that the centre of gravity of black political organisation naturally moved.

Equally important in forcing the pace of this change was the growth of the black petty bourgeoisie. As industry and the black working class expanded so opportunities for the black petty bourgeoisie opened up. Teachers and others with basic educational qualifications flocked to try their luck in the economic heartland of the Rand. It as these men who formed the organisation core of the TNC and it was to them that the mantle of the leadership now increasingly fell.

1917 was also important on the Rand for an additional reason. In the middle of 1917 inflation began to bite. The rise in prices and falling real incomes which followed the war provided the trigger for the most radical black agitation to be seen in South Africa prior to the Second World War, and provoked a systematic rethinking of "native policy" in the Union, and more particularly in the urban areas of the Rand. Yet is would be a serious mistake to exaggerate the importance of this factor at the expense of the wider range of repressive discriminatory mechanisms which bore on virtually the whole of South Africa's black population at this time.

Without wishing to do violence to the essential integrity of the labour repressive system which governed the daily lives of virtually all Africans of the Rand, five main areas of control can be discerned - wages, passes, housing, contracts on upward mobility and capital accumulation, and education. Each is interrelated; each fell differentially on different sections of the African population. Yet while their differential incidence provided scope for future reformist initiatives, aimed at driving wedges between the black population, their effects were sufficiently pervasive during and immediately after the war to provide the basis for a broad populist movement of agitation.

It is to these that we shall now turn. Wages, constraints on upward mobility and accumulation and education are dealt with very briefly. Passes and especially housing are dealt with in more detail.

The most burning grievance of the day for all classes in society was that of wages. For the permanently proletarianised it was just not possible to make ends meet at the prevailing rates of pay. The generalized poverty of the African working class is readily apparent from an examination of wage levels and estimates of the cost of living at the time. One thing also emerges very starkly from these figures, and that is the small difference between the wages of the black petty bourgeoisie and the rest of the black working class. The objective conditions for an alliance of convenience centred on the demand of 1/- a day therefore clearly existed, and renders intelligible the universal support accorded to this demand in 1918 and 1919. At the same time the lines of potential cleavage within this alliance should not be ignored. A real if blurred line of demarcation existed between those who thought of themselves as educated and civilised and those who deemed were not. A refrain that runs through the evidence to the Moffatt Commission is the needs of this rather amorphous group on the Rand. As Msimang put it:

"Many Europeans do not understand these people. They do not understand that he lives at a fairly high standard of living. These people need - in fact they require - all the things practically required by the European. Take the food bill. Most Europeans seem to think these people are content with porridge,
There was clearly a perceived community of interest between the black petty and aspiring petty bourgeoisie. The possibilities this presented for straight ideological co-option have already been mentioned, but here was more to their community of interest than mere ideological forms. Many, though by no means all of this "community" were permanent urban dwellers who were struggling against the odds to raise their families in town. This meant that their total costs of reproduction had to be covered by incomes generated in the cities, which in the case of urban workers simply did not stretch that far. Powerful pressures therefore existed for their wives to go out to work, which seems to have been as true of all but the most affluent sections of the petty bourgeoisie as it was of those who aspired to join their ranks.

This particular conjuncture of circumstances both served to cohere the petty and aspiring petty bourgeoisie, and paradoxically to drive them closer together with the rank and file of the working class. As Debbie Gaitskell has shown, two broad categories of women came to be settled in the towns. Firstly, those coming unattached or fleeing from their homes, who became domestic servants, washer women or prostitutes, or took up illicit liquor selling to earn an income. Secondly, the wives and daughters of families of those who came to settle permanently in town. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this group was their relatively high literacy levels, 4.71% of Transvaal women from the country being literate as opposed to 31% of their urban kin. It seems likely that the majority of the latter provided spouses for the urban petty and aspiring petty bourgeoisie, thereby serving to cohere it further around the values of education and civilisation, yet their openings for employment were almost as limited as those of the urban unattached. Opportunities for domestic service were limited, besides separating them from their families and homes, and wages had in any case been depressed between 5/- and 10/- at the beginning of the war.

Washing was back-breaking and low paying, and for the women of Klipspruit location, involved travelling costs which virtually cancelled out any profits to be made.

The only alternative in these circumstances was the illicit brewing of liquor, which automatically thrust them back into the arms of their lumpen and proletarian brethren in the locations and in the towns. William Letlalo, for example, recalls how his wife was forced into illicit liquor brewing to provide funds to send his children to school - Letlalo was at that time a Transvaal Native Congress member and a storeman - in my argument, a member of the aspiring petty bourgeoisie. The number of complaints to official bodies and government commissions from members of the petty bourgeoisie about police raids for liquor seem to indicate this was an important occupation of this class. Once again, then, we find arising in the particular conjuncture of the war-time economy two contradictory trends. One the one hand, the cohering of the urban petty and aspirant petty bourgeoisie: on the other, the possibilities of mobilising a broad class alliance comprising the proletariat, lumpenproletariat and petty bourgeoisie. Only the day-to-day flux of the class struggle, and the respective pressures and inducements offered by the main protagonists in the conflict - capital and labour - would determine the eventual position of the petty bourgeoisie.

If the black petty bourgeoisie and working class were thrust together on the issues of wages and cost of living, they found themselves in equally close proximity in relation to housing and passes. Both issues occupied a central place in their representations to official commissions and government bodies, and were central planks in their campaigns of 1918-19.

Passes were perhaps the most bitter source of grievance, and by their multi-functional nature afflicted and hence united all sections of the black urban population. Passes were primarily used to enforce contracts of employment and to prevent workers from seeking new jobs, higher wages or improved conditions of work. A sense of the repressive function of the pass law was no doubt present in the minds of black workers from the earliest days of the system, but it only emerged fully in the consciousness of the black petty bourgeoisie with the sanitary workers strike on the Rand in April 1918. Sentenced to three months hard labour on the jobs they had previously performed, for presuming to strike for higher wages, the "bucket boys"' helplessness before the interlocking mechanisms of Pass Laws and Masters and Servants legislation stripped bare for all to see the labour repressive functions of the law.

Nine months later the same point was driven home in a pamphlet issued by the Transvaal Native Congress. "At our meeting at Vrededorp on 30.3.19", it bluntly proclaimed "we came to the conclusion that passes prevented money." Passes did indeed prevent money, and in a variety of more subtle and disguised ways. Passes were renewed each month and wages recorded on them. This served to prevent workers from pushing new employers for higher wages. In addition to this workers and the African petty bourgeoisie were subjected to a range of other passes - the 6-day pass, which obliged the worker to find new employment within six days; the travelling pass which required the payment of a shilling before the worker was allowed to seek employment outside of the district of his registration; and the 'special' which, strictly interpreted, needed to be carried by the worker when he left his employer's premises. Night passes were required by anyone who wished to be out after 9.00pm in a municipal area, and their application had been extended to black women shortly before the war. This proved a fertile source of complaint from the African petty
bourgeoisie in particular, since it exposed women to the uncouth attentions of police allegedly in pursuance of their duty.

Before moving on we should consider two last aspects of passes which served to maintain a submissive and servile workforce for employers in town. These were the character column on passes and the endorsement of the stamp FIRD for anyone convicted of a criminal offence. The way in which the character column on passes served to suppress employee unrest or resistance has been mentioned by van Onselen, and is graphically illustrated by H.S. Mgqamo's speech to the Superindendent, Native Affairs, Benoni:

A native works under a white man for 5 years or more. He by mere misfortune, breaks a glass or any article in the house. His master gets annoyed and forgets this man worked for such a long time under him. He discharges him and on his way anywhere and in some cases even if engaged by another white man, when work anywhere and he writes the words FIRD imprisoned in his passport. He is now of necessity condemned to a life of permanent criminality from which he will never escape.

Hgama then went on to trace this hypothetical individual's descent into depravity - he meets a 'white hooligan' who gets him a forged pass in turn for selling liquor: he is arrested and convicted, and on discharge has the words FIRD implanted in his passport. He is now of necessity condemned to a life of permanent criminality from which he will never escape.

The connection between criminality and the pass laws was indeed intimate, and is worthy of special consideration. An enduring concern of the urban authorities was the canker of criminality in the black community on the Rand, and the threat that this volatile constituency could constitute (particularly if allied to poor white lumpen proletariat) in times of hardship and political instability. The pass laws were the principal means of policing and if possible of rooting out this 'evil', since by definition the unemployed could not possess a pass stamped with the appropriate contract of employment, unless, of course, this was obtained by extra legal means. This in practice was what often happened, and so the pass laws were often leaky in respect of this particularly crucial function. Nevertheless, to the extent that the obliged recourse to such expedients, with the various costs which it necessarily entailed, they were as unpopular with the lumpenproletariat as they were with the African working class. It was for this reason that they came to constitute a key component of the anti-pass agitation and infused the movement with much of the volatility and violence that it came to possess.

To sum up then, passes clearly 'prevented money', whether of a legal or extra-legal variety; they also delivered a submissive, vulnerable workforce, which would not lightly run the risk of crossing the wishes of their masters. It is hardly surprising that they became the focus of militant agitation on the Rand in March and April 1919. Yet while oppressing all sections of the African community, and providing a focus of cross-class opposition, they did not oppress all black urban dwellers in the same way, and thus simultaneously furnished a means of fragmenting and defusing the agitation to which they had given birth. The irreducible core of the pass laws was maintaining a politically stable low wage economy by enforcing contracts and inhibiting mobility, and by policing and rooting out the criminal lumpenproletarian mob.

The authorities were however always keen to relax the regulations governing the granting of exemptions and certificates of registration. Registration and exemption certificates freed their holders from the normal operation of the pass laws, from the night curfew and from 'native' taxation - all of which were major grievances of the urban populace at the time. They also virtually automatically entitled the possessor to higher rates of remuneration, since the pass could not now fulfill its customary wage pegging function, and since exemption was taken as an index of potential for a higher calibre of work. Like the agitation on wages therefore, the agitation on passes was a double edged weapon since its central target could as it were be dismantled and used to disorganise the alliance it had spawned.

"The Pass Law is .... slavery." Housing ran close second for the prize of the most hated single institution governing black urban life on the Rand. Conditions were truly appalling. Existing accommodation fell into five distinct categories: in townships like Klipspruit which served Johannesburg, or others like the Blue Sky location which were dormitories for other towns along the Rand; in areas of freehold occupation like Sophiatown, Martindale, Newclare or Alexandra; in the urban slums of Vrededorp and the Malay location, Fordsburg, Doornfontein, Ferreiras town, Jeppes town, Marshalltown and Prospect Township, where rooms in yards could be hired; on the premises of employers or in compounds they built to house their employees; and in barrack-like compound accommodation such as that at Jubilee and Salisbury which the municipal councils built to accommodate their own and other private businesses' employees.

Material conditions were uniformly squalid and depressed. Klipspruit, Sophiatown, Martindale, Newclare and Germiston and a number of other east Rand locations were built immediately adjacent to municipal sewage depositing sites, which was the principal reason for them becoming available for African occupation. Klipspruit was the worst. By 1917 it was virtually surrounded by the sewage farm, with many huts being within 300 yards of its perimeter. Most families lived in the municipal built V-shaped huts, which were "no more than an iron roof placed over the floor";
virtually no facilities were provided; the mortality rate was staggering (20:100 adults in 1914/15 and 380:1 000 infantile mortality); and the transport cost of the ten mile journey to Johannesburg bit deeply into the earnings of those who had to work in town (sixpence daily return, 2/6d weekly and 8/6d monthly). In addition residents were subjected to highly autocratic location administration. Arbitrary actions of all kinds were a regular feature of location life. Raids for the brewing of illegal liquor; the auctioning of owner-built accommodation valued at anything up to £100, when the occupier had fallen into arrears on stand rent, which were then auctioned to the municipality for ludicrous sums (for example 7/6d, 11.10.0), and re-let at rentals from between £1 - £2 a month; a 2/6d charge to ride a bicycle and so on.

Other locations along the Rand endured equally austere and insensitive regimes. Rents were often higher, even less municipal housing was provided, facilities were miniscule and the same continual harassment took place. The functions and objectives were in essence the same. Conditions were little better in the freehold areas of Sophistown, Martindale, Newclare, etc. Prices of property were too vast to five times higher than those in neighbouring white suburbs; facilities were non-existent; overcrowding was rife; and diseases endemic. And while they were located considerably nearer town, no municipal transport was provided.

It comes as some surprise therefore to learn that there were long waiting lists for accommodation in each of these locations. A brief review of the housing ecology of the Rand helps suggest some of the reasons. The massive increase in the Witwatersrand black urban population, as a result of the structural transformations engendered by the war had created a tremendous demand for African accommodation, which the building industry had conspicuously failed to satisfy. Costs of building materials which had soared during the war provide part of the answer, but much more crucial was the inabilty or unwillingness of the municipal authorities charged with the responsibility for black housing, to undertake the necessary programme of relief. The constraints under which the municipal authorities laboured have been treated extensively by Kagan and Proctor, and will not be examined in any detail here. Suffice it to say that white rate-payer opposition; commercial and speculative interests who profited from the high rentals yielded by the slums or looked for windfall gains on sale of land to the municipality; the reluctance of mining companies to part with the surface rights to their land; and the overlapping jurisdictions of municipal, provincial and central authorities, all served to paralyse any action in this field. There were as a result at least 10 000 blocks in Johannesburg alone without authorised accommodation in municipal compounds, locations or black freehold areas. Their needs were met - though hardly satisfactorily - by a municipal permit system which allowed employers to house employees on their premises, in small employer constructed compounds, or in rooms hired in adjacent multi-racial slums. Each - and certainly the last - was less satisfactory than accommodation provided in locations and hence helps further explain why such urban dwellers were so anxious to move out. On the premises of employers heavy rentals were often charged, leading to overcrowding; in compounds, there was no provision for families to stay; and the slums were characterised by the most degrading conditions to be found anywhere on the Rand. Tenants were housed in unsanitary yards, divided up into numerous tiny rooms; they lived cheek by jowl with criminals, prostitutes and other lumpenproletarian elements; rents were exorbitant, usually averaging 25/- to 30/- per month for a room; disease was rife (these areas usually being the source of epidemics that periodically ravaged the Rand); and infant mortality rates were higher than anywhere else (355,18:1 000 in 1919-1920).

The collective grievance over housing was thus one which could mobilise virtually all sections of the African community. At the same time it should also be recognised that it was felt most keenly by the same "educated" and "civilised" who were struggling to construct a tolerable family life in the towns. Jammed together in disease-ridden hovels with the lowest strata of black society, they were the most anxious to escape the dubious advantages of the location. To the extent then that the authorities could provide housing for this sector and introduce a few elementary reforms in the running of the locations, these people were open to being detached from the radical populist alliance that emerged in 1918-1919. The authorities themselves were not slow to take the point. Disease, and the influenza epidemic were jeopardising the reproduction of the more permanently urbanised population on the Rand; shortage of housing was breeding intense disaffection both in the locations and the volatile urban slums.

As Major Cooke observed in discussions with the Parks and Estates Committee:

The Committee is perfectly aware the period has been marked by a considerable amount of industrial unrest, and that no longer did the native take up that docile attitude which he had done in the past. This is a result of education which has been instilled in him, and will be found even more apparent, with the result that we must look for more increased difficulties and we must be more careful than in the past --- the time was by no means inopportune for reviewing the procedure regarding native administration (and in particular) housing.

H.S. Bell, Native Sub-Commissioner, embroidered on the theme. After commenting on the unsympathetic treatment meted out to "the better class of educated and skilled", he went on to say:

There are the educated and skilled native labourers, many of whom are of decent class and desire to live decently, and many young men and women growing up of the same class, who have nowhere to go for any sort of recreation after their daily labours, nowhere where they can go in the evenings ... it is surely the duty of the public to assist them to become respectable, and try and alienate them from the illicit liquor evils and other evils to which so many are driven ... As far as
I know there is absolutely nothing being done to meet the requirements of this class, who claim to be the leaders of the natives and some grow into bitter agitators.

The Government was not slow in grasping the nettle (although it should be noted that its grip quickly slackened when the urban agitation died down after 1921). In September 1918, Louis Botha urged the Administrator of the Transvaal that the housing question should be taken up urgently addition the social and moral evils accruing of its grip quickly slackened.

Shortly afterwards, in 1919, the Public Health Act was passed, empowering local authorities to prevent or remedy unhealthy housing conditions, and this was followed in 1920 by the Housing Act which authorised the central government to assist local authorities in preparing housing schemes and which allowed them to raise loans either privately or from government sources. Clearly the needs of the better class of educated and skilled were finally receiving some attention, which may provide one part of the explanation of why the urban militancy on the Rand flickered out in 1921.

The black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand were not a homogenous group at this time. This group can be divided between the small business owners on the one hand and professionals and salaried employees (clerks, teachers, etc.) on the other. One thing that united both strata of this class was the tight limits placed on their capacity for capital accumulation. To both groups this was what was signified by the "colour bar". Government service was closed to blacks. They were also not allowed to own businesses or black eating houses in white areas. A number of restrictions in the form of rents and licence fees operated even in the black townships.

Some locations, according to Bell, the Native Sub-Commissioner of the Witwatersrand, were monopolised by European traders, and Kagan gives examples of such intrusions into Alexandra and Klipspruit. In the f reehold areas the situation was in many respects worse. Properties in Sophiatown cost two to five times the going price in neighbouring white areas, and were beyond the reach of most of the African petty bourgeoisie, while trading was dominated by "coconuts and foreigners". Perhaps the clearest evidence of the slender resources of the African petty bourgeoisie however is the small number that could even afford to build their own houses under leasehold arrangements in places like Klipspruit, and the frequency with which those that were built were auctioned to cover arrears to stand rent.

As a result of this many educated Africans chose salaried employment as a preferable alternative. We have already noted the effect of wage levels at the time on this group's tendency to identify with the working class.

It is striking that prior to the sanitary workers' demand for higher pay in June 1918 there is scarcely a hint of the impending radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie.

At the outset of this paper I argued that the petty bourgeoisie, lying between the two dominant relations of production, tended to swing according to the pressures exercised on it by the two contending classes.

The events of 1918-1920, in my view, bear out these propositions. The ideology of one wing of the petty bourgeoisie was clearly disarticulated and re-articulated to that of the working class. A middle section vacillated continually and experienced an identity crisis in response to the contradictory pulls of capital, state and the black working class, and the more established affluent and reactionary section sustained, with occasional deviations, an ideology articulated with that of the ruling class. The speed with which substantial sectors of the petty bourgeoisie swung in mid 1918 is clear evidence of the precarious ideological hegemony exercised by the ruling classes over a racially repressed petty bourgeoisie in a colonial situation. It is also testimony to the depth of working class resentment that had built up in the course of the war.

What prompted the move to collective action after the war is a complex question. Even before the war, when inflation had begun to bite workers had been pushing for a wage increase. A major precipitating factor however was the Municipal Engineers Strike of 11-14 May 1918, which put out the town's lights for five nights. The speed with which the municipality caved in and a 23% increase was awarded to all white municipal workers as a result of their action was no doubt an object lesson to all black workers on the Rand. Whatever the precise interplay of these factors the black workers employed on the mechanical section of the S.A.R. soon got the message. On 13 May - right in the middle of the Engineers strike - they also demanded and secured an increase of 3d a day. The success of the railways workers' action had a ripple effect across the Rand.

Black workers in the municipal compounds soon followed suit and made similar demands. The town council was intransigent and adopted a repressive strategy to those workers who refused to work.

The upshot was 152 arrests and the callous sentence handed down by Magistrate McFie. Congress and the African public generally were outraged and the 1/- a day campaign was about to commence.
The first TNC meeting on the matter was held on the evening of the 10th, although its executive, through the offices of Letanka, had taken up the case of the strikers when the first arrests were made. Its proceedings soon revealed many of the cleavages, as well as the pre-occupations, that were to characterise Congress over the next two years. Maghato, President of SANC, opened the proceedings by observing that the municipal workers had struck because they were united and had been arrested because of the pass laws. If the blacks just folded up their arms and stopped work, they would surely hurt the white man. H.L. Bud Mbelle, by contrast, proposed that they should petition the Governor General, for a relaxation of the penalty, to which Mtota (probably an IWA member) retorted they should forget the Governor General and if no satisfaction was given they should strike. I. Bud Mbelle (fifteen years interpreter in the High Court in Kimberley) then intervened and made a plea for moderation.

Melle was however shouted down by the audience. At this meeting the working class was already beginning to exercise its pull. However no definite demands or course of action emerged at this stage.

For Isaac Bud Mbelle and the older, more established and more affluent section of Congress things were now getting thoroughly out of control. On 13 June he telegraphed the Minister of Justice and appealed to him to revoke the harsh sentences imposed on the municipal workers and thus dampen the militancy that was growing amongst the black working class.

However, other sections of the TNC began to repeat a more militant position and the meeting of the 19th was far more significant. Until this point no single formal demand had been made for an increase in wages, although it is safe to assume that complaints had been registered from the floor at Congress meetings. Mabaso started with what was to become a familiar diatribe against location system:

He pointed out Klipspruit and Germiston location as the place of the natives where all the dirt from the towns is deposited or thrown. This aims at making natives bring forth unhealthy children, who would soon die away.

The Union Government, he continued, was asking to take control of the later German colonies:

We oppose the idea. We are in hell and do not wish that our brethren come to this place of tortures.

Charlotte Maxeke took up the same point of the genocidal policies of the white population. After protesting that:

in order to get a living most of the girls and women are engaging in the illicit liquor trade and ended up in jail.

Mvabasa and Selope Thema then launched into attack on Christian missionaries and Christian teaching.

What is interesting about these speeches aside from their evident passion, is the transformation of consciousness which they seem to entail. The logical inconsistency of elements in their previous ideological discourse had been revealed; Christian values like submissiveness and expecting your due reward in heaven had been found wanting and discredited. In their place we see the process the construction of a new ideological unity with popular appeals to the land of our chiefs, the God who brought us our customs being re-integrated into a new populist discourse. Politically and ideologically the tide was on the turn.

As significant are the continued cleavages within Congress that emerge at this meeting. All were infected by the atmosphere of the gathering, but here was a limit to which some of the leadership would go. Maghato for example stopped short of aligning himself with the activities of the International Socialist League. Mabaso on the left of Maghato was more prepared to trust the white radicals in this movement.

It is was left to Mvabasa to articulate the militant class position in its most unadulterated form. To the horror of his more moderate colleagues on the platform he moved a resolution, seconded by Thema, that Congress request the authorities and employers to increase wages of black workers by 1/- a day as of 1 July 1918. In motivating this motion he made the following remarks, which clearly betray the influence of the ISL, whose meetings Mvabasa had attended since late the previous year. "The capitalists and workers", he said,

are at war everywhere in every country... The white workers do not write to the Governor General when they want more pay. They strike and get what they should.

Despite interventions by the Reverend Lebalo and Caluza, who were respectively ignored or shouted down, the die was now well and truly cast. It only remained for Herbert Msane of the ISL to propose a secret committee of five from the ISL and TNC (to avoid detectives) to work on a strategy and for a collection to be made before the main business of the meeting was over.

If some Congress leaders were becoming uneasy the Government was also clearly getting cold feet. To begin with, they had taken up an extremely hard and uncompromising line. When it had seemed that the municipality might be caving in to the municipal strikers' demands, the Magistrate, Johannesburg, the Deputy Commissioner of Police and the
Acting Assistant Director of Native Labour, had written to the council urging them to take a hard line on the strike.

The prospect of a general strike of black workers quickly concentrated their minds. On the 14th, the Minister of Justice replied to Mbelle's telegram, saying he would place it before his colleagues at the earliest opportunity; and opportunely from the point of view of the timing of the strike, the Director of Prisons was able to inform Mbelle on 26 June that the Governor General had agreed to the release of the municipal workers on probation.49 The hesitation of the Congress leaders at this point meant that little progress in devising a strategy was made. Part of the reason was that no-one was clear whether a strike call had been made on the 19th. In any case, as Mvabasa pointed out, it was foolish to strike on the first day of the demand. Equally important, however, in the eyes of Tinker, Ntholi and other members of the ISL/IWA was the belief that the black working class was not yet well organised enough to strike.50

Yet for all these differences of emphasis it is clear the strike idea was still alive and well in the minds of some of the Congress leadership.

Nevertheless, it appeared that for the time being at least the strike had been postponed. On the following day (Sunday), a mass meeting was held at New Market, Newtown, attended by “thousands of natives” which Maghato addressed, telling them there was no strike, and that they would be told what to do the following Sunday.

The leadership might have compromised but the workers were in no mood to be fobbed off. On July 1st "practically all the natives employed by the various firms ... put forward an application for an increase of wages at a rate of 1/- a day", and were waiting for a reply. "... all disclaim (ed) any intention of striking, but I (E. Berg, Town Inspector) very much doubt whether they will continue that attitude were they to meet a general refusal".51 Others were not so long suffering. Several industrial concerns struck, while at Ferreirasdorp, Robinson Deep and Crown Mines, 4 000 several hundred (?) and 2 000 mineworkers respectively refused to go down the shafts, only complying once they had been charged by bayonet and rifle wielding police.

A few days later, on 9 July, Prime Minister Botha graciously agreed to entertain a deputation of the black community to listen to their grievances. The list they presented was a judicious mixture of working class and petty bourgeois concerns, providing plenty of scope for cosmetic concessions. It included complaints about the increased cost of living due to the war, low wages, disadvantages imposed by the "colour bar", lack of educational facilities, the shortage of housing, the distance of locations from the town, together with a request for suitable housing provisions.52

On 24 July a further delegation was admitted, representing black residents in the Pretoria district. The process of token conciliation was clearly in full swing.53

The latter part of 1918 marks a lull in African opposition, and this is perhaps the appropriate point to draw some general conclusions about the agitation that emerged. One thing that is absolutely clear is that for the Congress leadership at least, and probably also for the mass of the African working population, these events provided the first full realisation of the strength of the organised working class. As Saul Msane said in evidence to the Moffat Commission:

The masses in the native population are beginning to realise that they are an indispensable factor in the natural and social fabric of South Africa. They are beginning to see that the whole industrial system in this land is based and must be based on their willing co-operation.54

Numerous speeches at meetings in this period corroborate this impression. Also apparent is the polarisation among the leadership of the TNC. The older, better established section who were also frequently residentially divided from the working class (eg. Msane lived in Bree Street)55 proved extremely reluctant to throw their lot in with the working people, having more to lose in terms of their standing with the authorities, and the favours which this might ultimately provide. On the other side, there were those whose outlook was profoundly transformed by this period of working class mobilisation - people like Mabaso, H.C. Bud Mbelle, Selope Thema, Mvabasa, and to a certain extent Letanka too. Nor should the influence of the ISL and IWA be underestimated here - as it often is - since it was their members (Ntholi, Kraai, Cetive, Sebeho and others) who often held the line when it came to more militant action. Finally, there were those - most classically Maghato - who were caught between and remorselessly pulled two ways, men who were nevertheless important in Congress because they could speak to both factions, and who eventually helped it back on a constitutionalist path.

The Moffatt Commission's recommendations which were published in September were received differently by different sections of the black population. While some were mollified by its concessions (and the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce agreed to a 25% increase over pre-war rates of pay in the categories Moffatt specified)56, the vast majority were not. Moffatt had barely touched on the broader structures of exploitation and oppression, and as inflation bit deeper a further explosion was on the cards.

Inflation kept on rising; no new housing was forthcoming; and passes continued to be viewed as the principal means of obstructing higher pay. Early in 1919 therefore African leaders began, in the words of Johnstone, to advance a new tactic in the
The anti-pass campaign precipitated one of the more dramatic expressions of African cross class unity to be seen in this period - not surprisingly since the common, but by no means uniform, incidence of the pass laws across the African population served as a focus of grievance for virtually all classes. On 3 April the newspaper Abantu Batho reported that the previous Sunday (March 30), the delegation which interviewed the NAD, the Chamber of Mines, the NRC and the Municipal Council on the question of 1/- a day had held a mass meeting to communicate the substance of the discussion. "The report", according to Abantu Batho, "didn't please the meeting as this question was an old one. It was therefore agreed that passes be thrown away as passes are the foundation on which the refusal of Europeans is based." 58

The decision was made on the basis of the fact that employers proved very reluctant to implement the wage increases recommended by the Moffatt Commission. Since pass laws prevented the successful prosecution of strikers then the obvious target was the pass laws themselves.

The movement got into full swing on 22 March 1919. A large gathering met outside the pass office and informed the pass officer that after repeated representations they had received no increase in wages and they had therefore decided to refuse to carry passes. 59

In the afternoon, pickets proceeded to the suburbs demanding passes from employees in white businesses, and collected probably 2000 or more. 60 The following day threatened even more militant agitation. The Director of Native Labour cabled the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria that the movement was still growing and that a meeting of 3000 black had been in progress for the last four hours. A cordon of friendly pickets surrounded the meeting which would only allow entry if passes were surrendered. Much the same pattern of events was expected for the 2nd, it having been decided on the previous day that a new mass meeting should be held; that all blacks working in town were to be pulled out by pickets - special attention being given to the municipal compounds; that mine clerks were to co-operate in getting the mine labourers to come out; and that delegates from Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Boksburg and Benoni were to secure the surrender of passes and the cessation of work in those areas. 61 Police reinforcements being by now available however, the strike leaders were arrested and a large crowd followed the arrested to the charge office. Here, further demonstrations took place and further arrests were made. 62

Sporadic incidents occurred for the rest of the month. Violent clashes took place between black and white civilians in Vrededorp on the 3rd and 4th, resulting in 108 arrests; on the 9th, when a meeting was urged to release the prisoners from gaol; on the 14th, when those arrested on the 4th handed in their gaol tickets and with other passless Africans were arrested once more; and on the 25th, when an unsuccessful attempt was made on a police escort taking prisoners from the court house to gaol, a total of 306 being detained on these occasions. Meanwhile similar outbursts were taking place all over the Rand. Benoni was perhaps most seriously affected. At a meeting on the 2nd, fifteen arrests were made after which large crowds gathered at the charge office behaving, in the language of the police report, in a disorderly fashion. Similar episodes were reported from Maraisburg and Springs in which latter instance fifty ringleaders were incarcerated in gaol. 63 Only Boksburg for a time seemed relatively immune, owing largely to the "moderation" of its branch chairman.

What conclusions can we draw from this new phase of political radicalisation?

Firstly, although it cannot be traced so readily through the minutes of meetings, the process of polarisation was still going on. At the very beginning of the disturbances Maghato hurried off to the Native Sub-Commissioner, Pretoria, to say that the situation was getting out of control. 64 On the other hand it was the familiar figures of Mabaso, H.L. Bud Mbelle, E. Dunjwa, Cetwone and Kraai who led the march to the Pass Office which started the affair. At the same time we see a new element entering the agitation, no doubt because it was passes that were under attack - the lumpenproletariat of Vrededorp and other urban slums. Of the 316 arrested on
4 April in the Vrededorp disturbances, 45 had previous convictions for serious crimes, 15 for desertion, and 10 for minor offences (for example, pass laws, drunkenness, habitual loafing). One enterprising individual had 26 previous convictions, another 22, one 15 pass law offences, and another two had convictions for altering passes. A similar pattern emerged from the arrests of the urban proletariat, as would the population and readily set vision of housing and to see illicit still being rifts. On the 19th £41.18.6 at Potchefstroom and new particular {chief leadership one way, and Ramailane was at pains to emphasise that Congress had no part in the 1920 black mineworkers’ strike. Yet it was still not possible to ignore more radical kinds of pressures being exercised on the other wing of Congress or the political polarisation within its ranks, that would persist until as late as 1921. At the “native strike” meeting for example on 20 February, “a Zulu” announced that he wanted to speak about the strike. “They must do what they were told”, he said, “because the strike was organised and directed by educated people”. The strike was to take place on Monday morning, and the strike headquarters was 21 Delvers Street. Its telephone number was 5791 to which all news should be sent. Similarly, in response to Nabas’s plea for moderation on 22 February, the crowd replied that Congress had failed to accomplish anything, and their faith in it had vanished. The only thing for them to do was to go out on strike.

Other evidence of the continued radicalisation of Congress, in at least its middle ranks, is supplied by a report of a Congress meeting at Boksburg on 8 February 1920. At this, Ngoja got up and gave a speech in a more familiar vein; The black race must know that white people are thieves and devils ... God did not want cowards. They must look to the goals as their homes. The nine natives must know they are producers of wealth and must get better pay ... There must be unity among blacks. The town lights can be put out ... America said they would free all natives and they will help ... America had a black fleet and it is coming.

A millenarian and apocalyptic vision was also beginning to intrude. Which wing would win out in this battle would be the product of changing rhythms in the economic life of the country and their effects on class struggles.

Some tentative hypotheses on this subject have been advanced in an earlier paper I wrote on this period 12. Detailed investigation, however, will have to await another time.

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FOOTNOTES

14. TAD, Municipal Archives Box 823, 18/37.
17. Walshe, P., 1970, especially 60.
46. DNL Brown Manilla file, Native unrest reports from Town Inspectors and others.
47. DNL 281 446/17/048 Native unrest, Native Detective Moorosi to Det. H. Const.
51. DNL, brown manilla folder, E. Berg to DNL 2 July 1918.
52. Evidence to the Moffatt Commission, pp. 4-6.
53. DNL 294/263/16/48 Deputation of representative natives to General Botha enc.
58. This period has as yet not been adequately covered in my researches. I rely on Johnstone, F.A., 1976, 176-7.
59. DNL 125/190/48 Anti-Pass Agitation, April 1919 encl. Abantu Batho, 3 April 1919.
60. SN 85-527/17/164(1) Affidavit W.C. Lawrence, Acting Chief Pass Officer, 1 April 1919.
62. DNL Telegram DNJ to department of native Affairs, Cape town, 2 April 1919, 11.20pm.
64. SN 216 389/19/F47 3G, Wilfred Jalji, CID Maraisburg to Mr. King, April 19(7), Cape Times, 7 April 1919.
65. SN 85 527/17/F164(1) Transvaal unrest, Stubbs Commission teleg. Natives Pretoria to natives Cape Town, 1 April 1919.
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67. DNL 206 669/14/76, Interview Pritchard with TNC delegates 1 July 1919.
68. Skota, Yearly Register, 180.
70. Ibid., report of meeting 20 February 1920.
71. Justice Department, Det. Constable Brandon to District Commissioner SAP, 9 February 1920.