

Black opposition: a historical perspective

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This is the second part of Mr Lodge's paper delivered to the AGM of the Johannesburg Black Sash in April, 1978

IN the first part of this article (SASH, November 1978) we examined the current of separatist consciousness that runs through the history of the nationalist movement. During the period we are concerned with, that is from the beginnings of African political organisation to the Sharpeville shootings, separatism was never the dominant tendency in African politics.

We are now going to turn to the strategies that arose out of integrationist perspectives. *Firstly* the defensive reaction of an African petit bourgeoisie will be examined: this was a group who had won a sufficient stake within the existing system to identify themselves with certain tenets of liberal ideology. The period witnessed the slow withering of opportunities for petit bourgeois advancement and by the final decade political leaders drawn from this class had been thrown back to attempting to mobilise African workers and slowly identifying their interests with the workers' cause. But this process was a gradual one: the existence of a propertied professional class in the African community in command of the national movement meant that for many years the ANC would be engaged in a struggle for acceptance rather than for power. *Secondly* we are going to look at the workers' struggle. It took nearly thirty years of effort to attempt to create a non-racial working class solidarity before it became clear to labour leaders that the interests of white and black workers were opposed. That it took such a time is important. It meant that up until the outbreak of the Second World War black working class organisations and their political allies were influenced by men who were committed to a certain vision of a common society. It was not altogether naive: there were times such as in the 1930s when poor whites, squeezed off the land by capitalist farming, were placed in industrial situations where the degree of their exploitation was objectively similar to that of blacks. The history of non-racial trade unions, especially among women clothing and textile workers during the 1930s, bears testimony to a perceived unity of interest among black and white members of the working class.

ANC constitutionalism

The early history of organised African protest was dominated by, to use the words of John Dube, first president of the ANC, a 'hopeful reliance on the sense of common justice and the love of freedom, so innate in the British character'. The 1919 constitution of the ANC defined its inten-

tion to remove discriminatory legislation by constitutional means. At this stage the ANC did not view itself as a liberation movement: its rôle was intended to be a consultative one, its struggle to be for European acceptance of Africans, not for power. Its favoured methods were to be the deputation, the petition and the memorandum.

Five years before the formation of the ANC a delegation of African leaders had gone to London to plead for British intervention over the South Africa Act, which not only did not extend the non-racial Cape franchise to the other three provinces, but also prohibited blacks from sitting in parliament. The delegation was accompanied by the liberal lawyer, W. P. Schreiner, and it succeeded in obtaining an interview with the Colonial Secretary. However the British Liberal government had no real intention of interfering in South Africa beyond keeping the High Commission Territories out of the Union and so the delegation was to be disappointed. For British politicians, the major issue was white unity in South Africa. Sir Alfred Milner, High Commissioner for South Africa had written in 1897:

I personally could win over the Dutch in the (Cape) Colony and indeed in all of South African Dominions in my term of office... without offending the British. You only have to sacrifice the 'nigger' absolutely, and the game is easy.

Milner, to his credit, put the word nigger between inverted commas, but the note defined in brutal terms the rationale of post-war Imperial policy on South Africa.

The second major attack on African rights was in 1913 with the passage of the Land Act which limited African landownership to 7,3 per cent of the land and imposed on blacks who remained on white property a requirement to work ninety days a year for the landowner. People were offered the choice of returning to the reserves, becoming labour tenants or seeking employment in the mines or in the towns. Congress was to oppose the act on two points: first the area set aside for African use was grossly inadequate, and second, the principle of land segregation was objectionable. However, its reaction was tempered by moderation and caution. After a deputation to Cape Town had failed to persuade the Minister of Native Affairs to withdraw his sponsorship from the bill, Congress looked once

again to Britain for help. In 1914 a five-man deputation sailed for Britain where the Colonial Secretary bluntly informed it that the Land Act was an internal South African affair and did not concern his government.

A further snub for Congress leaders came with the outbreak of the First World War. It was agreed by a Congress conference that all criticism of authority would be suspended, and Walter Rubusana, vice-president, offered to raise five thousand soldiers to fight the Germans in South West Africa. Smuts replied curtly that the war was a white man's affair, natives were not to be recruited. As it happened, ten thousand blacks were to be enlisted in non-combatant roles and 815 were to be killed.

During the war a fresh attempt was made to segregate blacks from whites with the 1917 Native Administration Bill. This proposed a separate set of institutions for African legal, administrative and legislative affairs as well as the eventual replacement of the Cape franchise. The bill did not get past a second reading, but it led the ANC to demand an extension of parliamentary representation as the only measure which would safeguard African interests.

To this end a third deputation was sent to Europe in 1919. However all the delegation was to achieve was a vague promise from Lloyd George that he would forward their views to General Smuts (who was well acquainted with them already).

For the next twenty years, though all hope of British intervention had been given up, ANC policy was still to gear itself to the limitations of the constitutional framework. So, for example, in 1921 a Native Affairs Act provided for local councils to be established on the basis of the land distribution defined in the 1913 Act. An ANC conference in 1923 resolved to assist the government in shaping native policy, and to cooperate fully with the implementation of the Native Affairs Act, urging the early establishment of Native Councils.

Similarly the Areas Act of 1923 which legalised urban residential segregation throughout South Africa and forbade black freehold tenure in urban areas, offered some chance of African representation through the location advisory boards. Because of this addition to the existing consultative machinery the ANC leaders declared themselves in favour of urban residential segregation and were prepared to negotiate on that basis.

And even the 1936 Hertzog legislation, which consolidated the 1913 land provision and abolished the black Cape franchise, did not provoke a break in the constitutional behaviour of the African political leaders. The immediate response to the bills when they were published in 1935 was the formation of a convention 'of chiefs, leaders and representatives of all shades of political thought' including the ANC. The All African Convention was to base its opposition to the

bills on the principles of Cape liberalism: it accepted that a 'civilisation test' was a fair basis for African constitutional advancement. Its opposition was limited to a 'day of prayer' and the despatch of the routine ineffective delegation, this time to Hertzog.

Once the legislation was passed the ANC tried to take advantage of what limited political channels it did offer for African representation. Its members were to participate in the impotent Native Representative Council until 1946 when finally even the most conservative African leaders were disenchanted with the 'toy telephone' Congress gave its full support to parliamentary native representation, nominating its own candidates.

It was not until 1945, when the ANC published its Bill of Rights, based on the Atlantic Charter, that a demand for universal suffrage was made by the organisation, and only in 1949 that the ANC Programme of Action rejected the old methods of petition, deputation and representation and actually challenged the concept of white leadership.

The ANC's constitutionalism was, firstly, a result of the Cape franchise: limited as this was, it did at times assume a political significance. There had been occasions in the 1920s when Afrikaner Nationalists had wooed the black vote: for example, in 1921 ngvewkkzodneicmfwgrammed this message to an African assembly at Queenstown:

No race has shown greater love for South Africa than the natives. Therein, he, the native, assuredly is a pattern of true patriotism and is entitled to take his place side by side with the Nationalists in the common political arena.

The existence of some outlets for political activity in the Cape was to reinforce a belief in an essentially benevolent British concern: the African elite had viewed the Anglo-Boer war as a struggle to extend non-racial justice to the other provinces of South Africa.

The second factor was the background of these men. The founders of the ANC were not by nature socially radical; they were ministers, teachers, doctors — people who had, despite all difficulties, achieved a measure of professional status and wealth. Most were mission school educated, many received their higher education abroad: initial discussions before the foundation of Congress were started by lawyers all of whom had been called to the London Bar. ANC leaders were to continue to be drawn from this class. Quite apart from their position within the black community these were people who were able to have contact with Europeans on a basis of relative equality. Dr Moroka, ANC President in the early 1950s, had Afrikaners as patients in his Free State medical practice. In 1921 contact between middle class Africans and liberal Europeans was institutionalised with the creation of Joint Councils.

All these things helped to condition a belief in the efficacy of evolutionary processes, the virtues of education and a stress on an ideal of a common society. These were men who, for all their idealism, had something to lose. To criticise them for not being revolutionaries is to misunderstand their position.

Perhaps the dilemma and the tragedy of this African middle class was that often they were interpreters: intermediaries between black and white. Sol T. Plaatje, ANC secretary in 1917, for example, had served in the South African War as Baden Powell's interpreter at the siege of Mafeking. Conscious and proud of his Barolong ancestry, his loyalties, as expressed in the diary he kept during the siege, were to the British Empire standing, as he understood it, for a greater degree of social justice than the Afrikaner army encircling the town. The hopes of such interpreters were based on a delusion. As Lutuli was to point out, thirty years after Plaatje's death, dialogue between African leadership and white authority was pointless for they lacked a common language.

Proletarian opposition

The history of the ANC between the wars is largely the story of the defence of an embattled African middle class. But simultaneously there was occurring also the formation of a fully urbanised African proletariat. The First World War had seen the replacement of semi-skilled whites with black industrial workers. After the war, due to falling productivity in the reserves, overpopulation and increased taxation, blacks were forced into wage-labour. The farmworker population was to double and there was a massive influx into towns. In the 1920s the African labour market was dominated by the mining sector. Because of the migrant labour system which subsidised the reproduction of the labour force the Chamber of Mines was able to keep wages very low. It was in this period that competition between white and black labour came to a head with the 1922 Rand Revolt. The revolt was the reaction of a white working class to the Chamber of Mines' attempt to counter-effect the rise in production costs and falling gold prices with an attempt to replace comparatively highly paid white labour with cheap African workers.

The formation of black working class organisations dates from this post First World War period. In the 1920s there developed the most massive African organisation that has existed up to the revival of Inkatha — the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union. The history of this movement and that of the Communist Party of South Africa was as important as that of the ANC in determining the course of black opposition.

CPSA

Let us look at the origins of the Communist Party first. Out of the first two decades of the

twentieth century there had developed a small radical group of white labour leaders. White workers were mainly recent immigrants, many with experience in their countries of origin of militant trade unionism. However, most workers were to react adversely to contemporary socialist or marxist strategies. This was scarcely surprising in a society where colour, rather than relationship to means of production, appeared to be the crucial factor in deciding questions of status, wealth and power. Heroic as white trade union action could sometimes be, it was not essentially revolutionary: it was a struggle for power within the existing hierarchy, not an attempt to overthrow it. These two trends within the white labour movement were to be expressed through two organisations: the increasingly racist Labour Party which was founded in 1910, and the International Socialist League. In 1921 the ISL applied to the newly formed Comintern for membership and became the Communist Party of South Africa. The CPSA was never a racist organisation, but from the outset there was a failure of imagination among its leaders. Racial discrimination was to be combatted — not because it was inherently dehumanising — but because it retarded the growth of an inter-racial class solidarity. The preoccupation with what was held to be the objective unity of interest between black and white workers had two consequences. First, there was mistrust and reluctance to fully co-operate with any expression of African Nationalist consciousness. Second, radical socialists were to devote considerable energy to trying to create some feeling of solidarity between black and white workers: an example of this was S. P. Bunting's leaflet issued during the 1920 black miners' strike calling on white workers not to blackleg:

White workers! On which side are you?
When the Native workers are on strike we are all thrown idle. Thus they prove that all sections of Labour are interdependent: white and black solidarity will win!

Ironically it was the African working class and not the white which was to provide a response to this call for inter-racial class action. In the 1913 white miners' strike, African miners were to come out after calls by labour leaders: at Kleinfontein mine production was completely halted by an almost total walk-out by black miners. Needless to say, such gestures were not reciprocated: in 1915 striking Africans were to receive no support from their white fellow workers.

Yet it is easy to sympathise with the white radicals' desire to encourage a united black and white class front for the 1920s were to witness two parallel reactions to economic exploitation: the uprising of a section of the white working class increasingly composed of Afrikaners forced into the cities by agricultural depression, and a wave of black strikes from which there grew a labour movement of a quarter of a million men.

The early African strikes were weak isolated affairs. In 1918 there was the 'bucket boys' action in which Johannesburg sanitary workers refused to remove any more sewage until they were paid another 6d a day. The 150 strikers were arrested and sentenced to two months' imprisonment under the Masters and Servants Act. While serving their sentence they were forced back to work under an armed guard. The court ordered that those who refused should be flogged. Two years later there was a strike involving 40 000 miners. Here again the isolation of the strikers was to be their undoing. The compound system was to demonstrate its real nature: each compound was surrounded and the men within were told that their comrades had betrayed them and returned to work. Even so some had to be driven into the mines with police bayonets, and in one mine, Village Deep, the police were unable to enter until they had shot six miners.

ICU

It was in these conditions of isolated but increasingly fierce black working class resistance that the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union was founded in 1919. The ICU was started in Cape Town by Clements Kadalie, a Nyasalander, who worked in the mines before becoming a docker in Cape Town. The ICU's origins lay in a dock strike for higher wages and a ban on food exports (it was a time of famine in rural parts of South Africa). The strike failed, largely because of lack of support from white dockworkers but nevertheless the extraordinarily rapid growth of the ICU in the years that followed is an indication of how receptive black workers could be to organisation and how eager they were for leadership.

The ICU swiftly spread all over the country. Its membership was to exceed 200 000 in 1928. Yet massive as it was, the ICU was to undertake no strike action after the initial dock strike that marked its formation. It seemed to suffer from a strange paralysis: the strength was ostensibly there, but there was a reluctance among its leaders for confrontation. Rather than providing a cutting edge to the frustration and desperation of black workers, the ICU was to dissipate their strength.

What were the reasons for this?

- First, and most important, there were the structural features of the organisation. It grew far too swiftly to evolve an efficient bureaucracy. Then, despite its claims, it was not an industrial organisation: it was a heterogeneous workers' union and its influence even spread to rural communities for which it could achieve little.

- A second factor involved the response from sections of the white community. The Joint Council movement, the Bantu Men's Social Centre, the welfare organisation, were all elements in a general liberal response to African social distress

in the 1920s. This was often highly motivated. Liberals were not in a cynical conspiracy to betray blacks, but such people were hardly suitable allies for a militant trade union movement. Their concern was genuinely humanitarian but also rested on certain political assumptions, one of which was the undesirability of confrontation. A good example is provided by an incident in the career of the missionary Ray Philips. In his biography he relates how he defused a miners' riot by showing Charlie Chaplin films. Philips probably saved a few lives that day but neither he nor other liberals of that time were to forcefully urge mine-owners to abolish the compound system and replace it with something better. Joint Council leaders had considerable influence on Kadalie and helped to persuade him that what the ICU needed was some measure of institutional respectability — such as affiliation to the International Federation of Trades Unions — to strengthen its hand with employers. And much of Kadalie's energies as a trade union leader were geared to attempts to gain this sort of acceptance: there was the pathetic occasion in 1927 when Kadalie pleaded unsuccessfully with the Mayor of Durban to come and open their annual congress.

- Third, Kadalie's reformism should also be seen in the light of his relationship with Communist Party leaders. There was until 1925 an essential conflict between ICU and Communist Party policy which kept the two movements apart. The conflict was over the question of the white working class. S. P. Bunting went so far as to claim that the repeal of colour bar regulations in the mines would 'not benefit the native worker, rather the reverse' for it would depress skilled wages and do nothing to raise unskilled pay. ICU attacks on white labour policies during 1923 and 1924 were not reciprocated by CPSA leaders. All this was to provide ground for the feeling that the Communist Party was a white man's party. On their side the communists were becoming increasingly exasperated with the ICU leadership.

There was, therefore, considerable tension, and the break came at the 1926 Congress when communists were expelled. With them the ICU lost the more radical element in its leadership. The responsibility should not simply be attributed to Kadalie or his liberal friends, but also to the Communists with their schizophrenic attitude to white workers.

- The fourth explanation for the failure of the ICU can be sought in the character of Kadalie himself. Kadalie was no coward. He was a powerful orator and in many respects a gifted leader, but an unstable and confused personality. In three years he had become a major political leader in the country, but the power that was represented by the social force behind him was potentially revolutionary: to have fully mobilised it would have brought the movement into stark conflict with the state. Perhaps Kadalie realised

this; in any case he was ready to be influenced by those who told him that he would not have to exercise the potential power he presented. It was this uncertainty about its function that was to be the downfall of the ICU and by 1929 membership was falling away.

Had the ICU achieved anything?

Arguably it may have contributed to increasing black working class consciousness. In a sense it also functioned as a political party and so perhaps heightened mass political awareness at a time when the ANC did not seek to mobilise a mass base. At times there was some antagonism between ICU and ANC leaders. Nevertheless, it may also be contended that it reinforced tendencies that Congress represented. Like the ANC, the ICU was a force for integration rather than racial separatism.

Despite its impact at the time, the ICU's legacy was a disappointing one. Its failure, its inadequacies as an organisation were to provoke a feeling of apathy and disillusion in the black workforce. Its squandering of their hope and energy was to make future efforts to mobilise the masses more difficult.

But the ICU was not the only organisation to be guilty of a failure of consistent leadership. The Communist Party from 1928 to 1937 suffered a period of internal crisis which detracted considerably from its ability to exploit African social unrest during the 1930s.

In part one of this article it was related how, in 1928, the CPSA adopted its 'native republic' slogan which reversed its previous equivocal attitude to the white working class. The removal of racial discrimination was now perceived as an essential pre-condition for any advance to a classless society. It was to take priority over any work within the white labour movement.

To this end, as we have seen, the CPSA began to work with such ANC leaders as Josiah Gumede. However, the Comintern was highly critical of this association: the ANC, it said, was dominated by an embryonic 'native bourgeoisie'. Comintern reaction was to despatch to South

Africa two British Communist Party officials, Douglas and Molly Wolton. Douglas Wolton took over the position of party secretary from S. P. Bunting and then began an orgy of expulsions and purges in which most of the party's experienced trade unionists were forced out. Comintern in its wisdom supported this action, labelling Bunting and his colleagues 'chauvinist agents of imperialism'.

A second turn in party policy developed in 1933-35 when the accession of Hitler to power caused Comintern to call upon its sections to form united fronts with social democrats and liberal groupings opposed to fascism. This was to involve a sharp reverse in CPSA policy: white communists turned once again to white labour to build an all-white popular front against fascism. The resulting disenchantment with all these convolutions was evidenced in the dramatic drop in party membership: from 1 750 in 1928 (of whom 1 600 were black) to 280 in 1940.

The pity of it was that the 1930s, like the decade before in the case of the ICU, offered substantial opportunities for a well-organised African labour movement. The depression was followed by a rapid expansion of the manufacturing sector as South Africa came off the Gold Standard. The black urban population doubled. A workforce was employed in increasingly sophisticated industry and now, because manufacturing did not prefer migrant labour or a compound system, it was considerably easier to organise. Despite their internecine conflicts, the communists were able to achieve some remarkable results. During the early 1930s, 'native republic' notwithstanding, Afrikaner unemployed marched alongside blacks calling for bread, work and wages. While on the whole white workers evoked sympathy from the authorities whereas blacks were beaten up, there were occasions when genuine working class solidarity was shown. One such was a Christmas Eve march to collect food for the unemployed: Afrikaners insisted that the food should be shared equally 'for they also came with us'. But in general the 1930s were wasted years.

Part III follows next issue.

David Ngubeni of Soweto, also 13, sells newspapers from Wednesday to Saturday. He says he is collected at 4 am and is taken home at 8 pm. He is paid 5c for each newspaper he sells. He takes home about R6 a week.

He left school in Form 1 as his parents were too old to work. 'I pay the rent and buy some food. I hope to find another job where I can earn more money.'

Mr Ronnie Webb, president of the Trade Union Council of South Africa, has looked at the problem and feels it would be difficult to find a solution.

'Do you push for child labour to be abolished and deprive them of their sole source of income or do you accept it as a fact of life?'

Mrs Ina Pelman, regional secretary of the South African Institute of Race Relations, says the little they earn is better than nothing.

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