

**PART TWELVE:  
THE FIRST  
INDUSTRIAL  
UNIONS**

# The making of the **WORKING CLASSES**



*A workers' demonstration (Pic from D G Walton's White South Africa, published 1947)*

**W**E saw in part ten that during the 1920's towns grew in size and the number of factories increased. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers were needed to run the factories. At the same time the big landowners were pushing large numbers of black and poor white farmers off the land. They joined the working class in the towns.

Unskilled white workers brought their racism from the Platteland, but they did not have all the privileges of white miners. They were still workers, not supervisors. White women, in particular, took jobs in the factories at very low wages, and worked under poor conditions. But it was these workers, alongside African male workers, who built South Africa's first strong industrial unions.

We saw in part eleven that the ICU failed to consolidate organisation amongst African workers in the towns. In 1927, when African workers went on strike in Durban and Johannesburg, the ICU was unable to give assistance. Also, by this time, Clements Kadalie, had come under the influence of the liberals. He rejected militant trade unionism and expelled communist office holders from the ICU. He declared that 'strikes are wicked, useless and obsolete'.

The expelled communists went out and organised new industrial unions of African workers in the baking, laundry, clothing and furniture industries. The following year, in 1928, 150 delegates met to form the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU). By the end of the year FNETU claimed 10 000 members. FNETU elected Benny Weinbren, Moses Kotane and James La Guma as president, vice-president and general secretary. Other leading activists were T W Thibedi, the veteran socialist and member of the old International Socialist League, and Gana Makabeni, secretary of the African Clothing Workers Union. The number of new unions continued to increase — in the dairy, motor, food, metal, rope and chemical industries.

Black workers were taking the lead in militancy. In 1928, 5 074 black workers struck compared with 710 whites. The new unions were highly successful and used lightning strikes to protest over victimisations, conditions of work, wages and overtime. In May 1928, the African Laundry Workers

Union brought Leonardo's Laundry to a standstill, after the victimisation of one of their members. Although the strikers were forced back to work by the police, the worker was reinstated. During the same month, the Clothing Workers Union successfully co-ordinated a one-day strike in three Johannesburg factories to demand full payment for Good Friday. In September 1928, 170 African, Indian and Coloured workers at the Transvaal Mattress Company struck over wages. The newspaper reported: 'Before nightfall the employers had capitulated and advised the Mattress and Furniture Workers Union that the demands of the workers would be met'. FNETU combined trade union militancy with a clear political line, and was affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions.

Important progress was also being made amongst the white workers. The defeat of the 1922 General Strike severely weakened the old white mining and craft unions. When a new Trade Union Congress (TUC) was formed in 1924 the older, more conservative, unions withdrew allowing more radical unions to take the lead. The election of veteran communist, Bill Andrews, as secretary of the TUC was an important choice. He supported 'industrial unionism' — one union for each industry — against 'craft' or 'general' unionism. During the First World War, Andrews had worked in Sheffield (Britain) with J T Murphy, an engineering worker and leader of the shop stewards' movement and a leading writer on industrial unionism.

From 1924 to 1929, the TUC gave its support to a number of newly formed industrial unions in the furniture, leather, and canvas industries. The strongest new union to be formed during this period was the Garment Workers Union (GWU), led by Solly Sachs. The GWU organised mostly white Afrikaner machinists. The union took militant action to improve its members' working conditions. Between 1928 and 1932 the GWU led over 100 strikes, two of which brought the whole clothing industry to a standstill. The union also used the courts when necessary.

There was one general union which the TUC did support, the Women Workers Union (WWU), led by Fanny Klennerman. The union organised unskilled white women (there were hardly any black women

working in industry at this time on the Rand). The WWU held meetings outside shops and factories where women worked. It later formed separate industrial unions for sweet workers and waitresses.

Although white and black workers were organised in separate industrial unions, they sometimes combined against the common enemy, the bosses. The GWU provided money and support for Gana Makabeni's Clothing Workers Union. The registered and African laundry unions formed a joint executive committee. But even when there was co-operation, the registered (white-controlled) unions dominated the alliance. This was a result of the weaker position of African unions due to discriminatory laws and state repression. For a time, however, the Johannesburg Boot and Shoe Workers Union recruited all workers in the industry, without regard to race.

When it came to concrete solidarity action, the black workers were in the front line. During 1928-9 the black clothing, furniture and laundry workers' unions all struck in support of white workers who had been victimised. However, ordinary white workers were influenced by racism and often scabbed on fellow black workers. Even so, the registered industrial unions such as GWU, and later the textile, shop, tobacco, and food and canning unions continued to push for a non-racial policy, and called for full legal rights for African unions. At times this support was translated into action. After a successful sweet workers' strike in 1942, it was said that: 'One of the finest features of the strike was the unity and solidarity between European and African strikers, both determined not to return to work unless the wage demands of the others were agreed to by the bosses.'

FNETU collapsed after three years. The Great Depression, retrenchments, internal divisions and police repression all played a part. Individual unions survived, however, such as Gana Makabeni's Clothing Workers Union. These new industrial unions established a radical and non-racial trade union tradition. This tradition continued to grow in the left-wing of the Trades and Labour Council, in the Council of Non-European Trade Unions during the 1940's, in SACTU during the 1950's, and in the democratic unions of today.



Bloemfontein garment workers on strike for higher pay and three weeks' paid leave: A group of pickets outside their factory (1947).