SELBY MSIMANG AND TRADE UNION ORGANISATION IN THE 1920's

Compiled by Sheila Hindson from Interviews with Selby Msimang.

I have, throughout my life, been associated with many groups, amongst them the African National Congress, the Joint Council of Europeans and Africans, the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Liberal Party. These activities have been well documented by others. People often ask me about my activities in the period just after the First World War, when I was organising workers. I have chosen to speak about this aspect of my life because it is perhaps the least well known, and perhaps the most interesting from many points of view. Perhaps, too, it will throw light on and dispel certain myths and misunderstandings about the early days of the ICU, and my relationship with Clements Kadalie.

My consciousness of exploitation came to me when I started working on the mines. I had had a good missionary education at the Wesleyan Institutions of Kilnerton, Edendale and Healdtown. At these places I had learned Sotho and some Xhosa. With the advantages of my education and these African languages, I became interpreter to a mining inspector on the Rand. His job was to enforce mining and labour regulations, collect taxes, and generally see that the mine workers carried out their work properly. If workers had complaints they would come to our office to make a statement. This was at no small cost, for they lost labour-time, for which they were not paid. But the workers grievances were seldom dealt with satisfactorily. This was the beginning of real understanding for me. Of course I had experienced many of the indignities and iniquities of the South African social system, from personal insult to pass laws. But for the first time I began to see the chain that linked the mines to the poverty of the reserves.

I saw how a man recruited from his home would already be in debt to the local trader, who was usually also the local recruiter. He would supply the worker's family with food before he left home. The cost of this, and of transport to the mines, would be deducted from his pay. The scale of pay was so low, that a worker could not even make £3.00 in three months. In fact, some would wait for up to four months before being in a position to send even a small remittance home. When we speak of the poverty of the reserves, we must remember why. With this situation, my job was most painful, for we, the tax collectors, would then come along and claim £1.00 for tax. It was the intolerably low wages on the mines that first set my mind thinking along the lines of organising workers for better living and working conditions.

As a result of the devastation of the Natives Land Act of 1913 and our treatment by employers during the First World War, I was further convinced that our salvation as a race lay in the harnessing of our power as workers. The operation of the Natives Land Act in 1913 forced great numbers of Africans off the land. Our people had truly become victims of a devilish conspiracy to destroy our economic independence and compel us to submit to a pernicious form of slavery. It should be remembered that the Anglo-Boer War had left many Boers in a state of dire poverty and many of them had abandoned their farms to take up employment in the gold mines. They had left their farms in the hands of Africans on a half share basis. Many Africans had seized the opportunity to make good profits. There developed among them a healthy competitive spirit. All this was taken away from them. Africans were deprived of the right to lease or purchase property on the free market, or in any way to have an interest in land. The Act made squatting and share cropping by Africans illegal. Most of the evicted families drifted into urban and industrial areas having lost their livestock and means of subsistence. The suffering was immeasurable. The First World War ended in 1918, and was immediately followed by a most devastating influenza epidemic. I felt that the time was ripe to organise the people on a number of fronts.

During the whole period of the war, African wages had remained static in spite of the rising cost of living. White employers seemed unaware of the discontent that was building up amongst workers. Families were unable to make ends meet. Unrest might flare up at any moment. I was living in Bloemfontein at this time, and decided that the only way to remedy the situation was to organise workers in the town for higher wages, particularly those in municipal employment. By this time I was beginning to make a name for myself in the location, because I had managed to expose the maladministration of location funds. The matter had been corrected

to the advantage of the location accounts. So when I called a meeting early in 1919, people came to listen to me. Existing wages were two shillings a day; hardly enough to maintain a man with a family of five, when the cost of living was so high. My plan was to put pressure on white employers by means of mass meetings. All our meetings were attended by a reporter from "The Friend", who gave us a very good press. The town thus became aware of our agitation.

Our demand was for an increase of 2/6d a day, to bring wages up to 4/6d. This figure was not arbitrary, it had been arrived at by computing the necessities of life. The City Council's response was to call a meeting of the Advisory Board, consisting of nominated and elected members, to ask them to outline their position in the affair. The Advisory Board refused to support us and accepted a rise of sixpence a day on existing wages. I was incensed and wrote to "The Friend" saying that Board members had no right to make agreements for the workers, whose interests they did not represent. I rejected their suggestion outright. The next development was that I was invited, with my committee, to meet councillors and employers to discuss the matter. I invited some members of the Advisory Board to join the committee, thus swinging some of them over to our side. The meeting was inconclusive, with employers failing to agree with one another abour a fair wage.

The strategy we adopted in trying to achieve our demands was fairly simple, but required co-operation amongst the workers. There was to be no hostility and all employers were to be approached during tea break on a particular day with the demand for a daily wage of 4/6d. This went according to plan. Only the washerwomen, interestingly enough, were a bit aggressive. They refused to do the washing unless they were paid 4/6d. Confused housewives telephoned their husbands, only to find that their workers were demanding the same thing. That is how things were in Bloemfontein in those days.

I had no notion of calling a strike. We were not organised enough, nor did we have any strike funds to see us through such an eventuality. But some of my men, influenced perhaps from outside, thought otherwise. They demanded a strike. I pointed out that if they could go from house to house in the location, collecting £1.00 from each household, to establish a fund, then we could consider a strike. The matter rested there, for at this point I was arrested and charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act. Though I was not long in jail, when I came out martial law had been withdrawn and the local situation had altered. I tried to reorganise the workers, only to find that the municipal employees, the largest proportion of our members, had been persuaded by the white municipal trade union, to join them. They were enticed with the offer of better benefits. I warned the workers that they were making a mistake. The motives of the municipal trade union were self-interested: to control African wages in order to increase white wages, and to cause divisions within our ranks, and so weaken our ability to combine successfully for higher wages.

I began to realize at the same time that one of the major causes of our weakness as a community was lack of funds. This was so not only in the case of trade unions, but in all aspects of our life. So I devised a scheme for setting up a sort of self-help fund in every Free State town as a means of fighting discrimination. I printed a thousand cards and travelled from town to town, holding public and private meetings in the locations, urging the people to organise themselves. When I left Bloemfontein, I had enough money to reach Thaba'Nchu. All I required was to be reimbursed for the cost of printing and my travel expenses; hospitality was accorded to me in each town. Most towns took the idea seriously and were able to raise huge sums of money. Frankfort alone was able to assist Sol. T. Plaatje with £100.00 when he was stranded in England with the second ANC deputation after the war.

The work of setting up these funds, and organising committees to administer them, was entirely independent of the ANC. My plan was that in each town and district, vigilance committees would be set up to look after the interests of the people in the district. Once the committee and fund were set up in each town, I did not keep track of what happened to them. It was to be an exercise in the organisation of self help schemes. Only later, when I was living in Johannesburg, did I learn from Keable Mote, a member of Kadalie's Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, that the ICU had reaped where I had sown. Most of these embryonic organisations set up to protect communities, were captured by the ICU, and their funds appropriated and dissipated because of lack of control. The people were left stranded.

After I had been arrested under the Riotous Assemblies Act in March 1919, Clements Kadalie started communicating with me. I was invited to address a meeting of the ICU when it was first launched in Cape Town in August 1919. I spent ten days with Kadalie, in which time I got to know him well. We decided to call a conference of all workers and existing worker organisations in Bloemfontein the next year. I reported these moves to the ANC conference, but it decided to hold aloof from these activities, and as a result suffered declining popularity. In July 1920 the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union conference convened in Bloemfontein. The Cape Town delegation attended in full force, led by Clements Kadalie, who was acting secretary of the conference. The draft constitution submitted by the Cape delegation was adopted. Though they wished to abbreviate the name of the organisation to ICU, the majority opinion at the conference chose ICWU, the full initials.

At the election of office bearers, I was chosen as President. The office of General Secretary, surprisingly, went to a Kimberley teacher, Mr Mache, in spite of Kadalie having the full backing of the Cape delegation, as well as my own support. In protest they left the conference with Kadalie, who took with him all the conference papers, including the draft constitution. I did not wish to confuse the issue for workers and thereby split the movement, so over the next few months I tried to negotiate a compromise with Kadalie. He was unwilling to work with me or come to a compromise, so towards the end of 1920 I decided to resign. I handed the Bloemfontein group over to him and left for Johannesburg.

Immediately after the July conference, events occurred in Port Elizabeth which were to advance support for the new organisation. Samuel Masabalala had left the conference to begin organising in Port Elizabeth among both Africans and Coloureds. The response was tremendous. He called on workers to demand 10 shillings a day. The City Council tried to counter this by inviting Dr Rubusana, a noted African leader from East London, to use his influence against Masabalala. At his first meeting, Rubusana was assaulted by some of Masabalala's followers, but it was Masabalala

who was arrested and charged with assault. At this, a large group of workers marched on the Court House to demand his release. It was met by a fusillade of firearms, and twenty-three people were shot dead.

I was urgently called to Port Elizabeth by the Secretary of the ICWU branch. Upon my arrival I heard that the workers were planning a strike. I realized that here was a very delicate situation, feeling was running high, and the least mistake might end in a bloodbath. My reception amongst the workers was favourable, and I announced that on the Sunday morning we would hold a service at the graves of the 23 victims, and in the afternoon we would meet to discuss our strategy. Meanwhile I met the Mayor, the Magistrate and the Chief of Police, all of whom I assured that I had no preconceived plans and wished to settle the matter fairly and peacefully.

A white Presbyterian minister held the church service, attended by 30,000 people, men and women, African and Coloured. It went off without incident, except for one tense moment when two white youths appeared. The crowd started shouting at them, so I quickly told them to go away. That afternoon, on a hillock just outside Korsten, I faced the same huge crowd on my dais, a packing case on the back of a lorry. There were Xhosa and Coloured interpreters scattered around the great concourse. You could see the mounted police in the distance. It was a trying time for me. I, a complete stranger, had to win the confidence of the people. It must have been a moving speech, for there were tears on many of the faces before me. I urged for an opportunity to meet employers and present the workers case, and hence I asked for a reversal of the strike resolution. My pleas were unanimously accepted. I promised, too, to try and secure Masabalala's release.

The Mayor and employers met me with my committee the next day. The Mayor congratulated me for averting trouble. Almost to a man, however, the employers blamed Masabalala for the upheaval amongst the workers. I argued that if Masabalala had not raised the voice of the workers, some worse crisis might have occurred. There was already in existence a smouldering volcano of dissatisfaction, which was on the verge of eruption. To meet the workers demands might avert this. The Mayor urged us all to negotiate. A committee composed of five representatives from each group was appointed to discuss the matter. It decided to recommend a minimum wage of six shillings for inexperienced, unskilled workers, while a sliding scale for more experienced workers in different categories would need to be negotiated. The wage had been 2/8d per day. I thought we had achieved something of a success.

Masabalala's case remained to be settled. Dr Rubusana agreed to settle the matter out of court, and Masabalala was released. I briefed him on the developments that had taken place. To my surprise he rejected the compromise, and announced that he was prepared to fight for a minimum wage of 10 shillings a day. But his stand did not win the support of the workers. Negotiations with employers were not yet complete, we still had to negotiate the sliding scale for more experienced workers. When Masabalala opposed this, he lost the support of most of the people. I remained in Port Elizabeth for another month trying to consolidate the work begun by Masabalala.

On my return to Bloemfontein, when it became clear that Kadalie would not contemplate working with me, I resigned

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from the ICWU. The Port Elizabeth affair was the last time I participated in ICWU activities. I felt we could not run two parallel organisations, it would confuse the issue. Some years later, when the ICU had a large membership in Johannesburg, and Kadalie was on a visit to England, A.W.G. Champion approached me to help once again in the movement. Champion had decided that he wanted to return to Natal and organise there, and he needed an organiser in Johannesburg. At this time I was aware that there was no control over the finances of the ICU. For this reason I declined to rejoin.

When I arrived in Johannesburg, I received a message through S.M. Makgatho, at this time President of the ANC in the Transvaal, to see Madeley, Labour M.P. for Benoni. Madeley had certain funds sent to him by an international workers organisation or union in England to use for organising African trade unions. A white man had been employed to do this, but had been unsuccessful. He had then approached Makgatho, asking him to recommend someone to do this work. He thought of me. When I went to see Madeley, he told me that funds had been exhausted, but he hoped to be able to raise more from his English sources. I had been working for a month, when, in January, the 1922 strike broke out. I could do little during this time. I saw Madeley after the strike, but he had been unable to secure funds for me, so the job fell through. I then became immersed in the struggle against the Urban Areas Bill and thenceforward had little to do with trade union activity.

Despite all our struggles, I have never felt the futility of our efforts. The belief I had in the 1920's in trade unionism and other community organisation has remained with me. I still believe that if we could so organise our people as to be ready and willing to withhold their labour when called upon to do so, it would be the most powerful weapon we have.