Supplement to

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THE TROTSKYISTS OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1932–48

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PROVIDING AN economic background, a discussion of the working class movement of South Africa, and a history of the groups that were formed. There is also an essay on the organization of trade unions, pen-pictures of some of the leading members of the groups, a bibliography of works on the Trotskyists and the movement that grew out of their activities in the Cape.

Finally there is a review of three books that are apposite to this study.

Caption: Top: Workers of the World Unite. Bottom: The Inauguration of the Lenin Club (Left Opposition), Cape Town 29 July 1933.

From the family album of Anne (Averbach) Bloch.

A Note On The Primary SOURCE MATERIAL USED IN THE ESSAYS

THE HISTORY of the South African Trotskyists during the 1930s and into the next decade was never made available or discussed with new recruits. There were vague stories, but no hard facts. No former member of the groups wrote about his experiences, and there was a silence that was so extensive that some comrade's names could not be mentioned. I learnt in the 1940s that there had been a one-time nun in the leadership of the Workers Party of South Africa. But no details were available, even though she had died (as I later found) in 1942. The leading member of the WPSA, if mentioned at all, was always referred to as 'Mr B'. That was all. Even when we learnt in the 1970s that he was Mr Burlak we were never told his first name.The other main group, the Fourth International Organisation of South Africa (a pretentious name), was open, but we learnt little about its members or what they did. There was perhaps little to conceal about their activities, because they did so very little.

The history of the groups in Johannesburg was also unknown. Nobody in Johannesburg had kept any records, there were no letters or minutes, and the names of most of those who joined the Trotskyist groups were not recorded. There was nothing, until the documents of the liberal Institute of South Africa became available and Lynn Saffery's files were opened. Only then did the story of Max Gordon become available. There were a few later discoveries, but like the tale of the three monkeys, nothing was seen, said, or heard.

Then, in a deserted house in Cape Town, once the residence of Clare Goodlatte, a box of documents was found in the early 1980s. There is still a mystery surrounding this discovery. They apparently came into the possession of a 'stroller' (a person who lived on the proceeds of materials taken from deserted or demolished properties) who sold them in two portions. I was able to get copies of both sections. After maintaining absolute secrecy over five decades, the documents disclosing the inner working of the major section was hawked and sold. The papers included draft articles for the journal **The Spark**, minutes of meetings, documents, letters, membership forms and minutes. These documents (totalling a thousand or more), once unravelled, provided an unique picture.

This collection was complemented by letters written by Clare Goodlatte (the 'Red Nun') to a former student, found in the South African Library and supplemented by a search in the Department of Education at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, where she had once sat as principal of the teachers training college.

I have found no documents of FIOSA. But when I visited the Library of Contemporary International Documents at Nanterre in 1991 to look at the papers of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, I found a card referring to the papers of FIOSA. These cannot be viewed until the late 1990s without the permission of the unknown depositor. This continues the politics of madness. Even public papers in Europe only have a 30 years rule, and that is absurd. I had no time to wait for permission, nor was I interested. If some historian wishes to investigate these documents at a later date, that gift to man- or woman-kind will be available to them. Except for the material in the WPSA collection, and a few documents in the Trotsky archives at Harvard, nothing else has been found.

The documents of the WIL were largely destroyed when its rooms were burnt by arsonists. The papers and printed publications I salvaged at the time were placed in the care of the University of the Witwatersrand, and these were photographed at a later date for the Hoover Institute. I copied other materials from the collection held by Nachum Sneh in Beer Sheba. Nobody, other than myself, has written about the activities of the WIL.

THE ECONOMIC BACKGROUND TO SOUTH AFRICA

THE HISTORY of Southern Africa stretches back over millennia. It is a story of peoples who occupied lands before meeting with, and being conquered or incorporated by, peoples who moved from their original lands near the Cameroons across Africa and down the east coast. Some time after 300 AD the forebears of the African people entered the region now known as South Africa. Crafts were developed, metals mined, trade conducted and then seemingly abandoned until the predominant occupations became hunting, cattle herding and/or cultivation of crops.

This was the position when the first whites arrived to set up a refreshment station for the ships of the Dutch East Indian Company (DEIC) in their passage to the East Indies. In the seventeenth century merchant capitalism, assisted by the growth of shipping fleets, was the prevailing form of enterprise, and it was the might of the Heeren 17 (the directorate of the DEIC), not to mention their arrogance and aggression, that allowed the Dutch to take control of the Indies, and subsequently the Cape. The men who arrived at the Cape were servants of the DEIC, and were required to stay within the jurisdiction of the Dutch-appointed governor. Their task was to provision the passing ships and to feed and protect the local settlement. Men came first, and because there was a dearth of Dutch women, the earliest marriages or liaisons included many with the women of the local Khoi or San clans (known derisively as Hottentots and Bushmen respectively).

The story of the region was of the dispossession of the local inhabitants: of their cattle and their land, of their decimation and their reduction to servitude. The DEIC also sent prisoners from Malacca and the east (described later as Malay people) who were reduced to slavery. These people provided a labour force that was otherwise not available, and in time they rose to become the artisans employed in the Cape. More workers became available for the white settlers when the Khoi were subjugated and the African peoples conquered.

Ethnicity divided the growing Cape settlement, and yet, at first, the colour barrier was set aside for those who were converted to Christianity, and 'free' men and women arose from the baptismal font. Even at the topmost levels colour was a matter of small concern; one of the appointed Governors being of 'mixed' blood. Only later were rigid ethnic boundaries defined and hardened, and religious conversion was no longer a passage to 'freedom'.

The Governors at the Cape could not, or would not, control the outward movement of the settlers, and extended the colony's boundaries to maintain

their control. Nor could the Governors stop trading, cattle rustling or clashes on the ever-moving borders, as the settlers met with African peoples, themselves moving down the coast. When the Xhosa people were confronted by migrating settlers in what is now the eastern Cape, they were defeated in frontier wars. This was the beginning of the subjugation of an entire people and their absorption into the settler economy as a servile class. The possession of the Cape by the Dutch prevailed until Britain, during the Napoleonic wars, claimed that its sea route to India was in danger. It occupied the region and added the Cape to its Empire.

Marx has written in purple prose of the disastrous effect of the expansion of capitalism on the people of the colonies, and this needs no repetition. However, he argued that capitalism, with all its faults, transformed the world, established a single world market and undermined, if not destroyed, archaic social systems. This was the way of progress, and, concerned as Socialists might be for the colonised people, the sweep of capitalism across the globe was necessary and inevitable.[1] The task of the colonies was to supply raw materials for the European countries, act as military or supply bases, and trade with their 'mother' countries.

The settlers at the Cape were able to supply passing ships, but had little to trade, and they found no minerals to mine. This meant that the region that was to grow into the Cape colony was poor and remained poor, despite the development of its farmlands. Ostrich feathers, wool and hides and an inferior wine were not the basis for large-scale capital accumulation.

The first significant change in the nineteenth century occurred in or around 1836, when groups of Dutch in the eastern Cape, rejecting controls imposed by the new British administration – particularly on slavery and the status of Africans – crossed the coastal mountain ranges and moved into the interior of the country. Current research suggests that the interior had been emptied by slavers (of Portuguese or of Cape origin).[2] This revisionist view, still hotly denied by historians who maintain that the people of the interior had scattered because of Zulu expansionism, has still to be proven. But whatever the reason, large portions of the interior were desolate, and the trekkers occupied the land in what became the Orange Free State, carving out huge areas for themselves as farmland, and incorporating previous occupants as labourers or labour tenants.[3]

The Dutch also moved into Natal, where they came into conflict with the Zulu people, who were ultimately defeated in battle. The British followed, and there were further battles to secure the subjugation of the indigenous peoples. The control by white settlers led inevitably to the opening of the interior to trade. Sugar cane was tried in Natal, and its success led to the importation of labourers from Asia. First there were indentured Indian labourers, introduced to work on the sugar fields in 1860 in the colony named Natal. After serving their time they were repatriated unless they chose to stay, either to work their own plots of land or to move into the towns as labourers. Then in 1905, after the South African war, when Africans were reluctant to work at

lowered wages, Chinese labourers were imported to work on the gold mines. This complicated the race question in South Africa even further, until they were repatriated after agitation in South Africa and Britain.[4]

This is jumping ahead. In the mid-nineteenth century there was a thin sprinkling of whites in the interior of the country, and a British administration and British police or troops in the Cape and Natal colonies. This was in keeping with the British policy of protecting the sea route to its imperial treasures in the East. The interior region was less important, although the Boer republics, named the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (SAR, later the Transvaal), were annexed and then freed. It is not always certain whether such moves were the result of local administration initiatives or were ordered from London. The Treasury in London wept crocodile tears every time more money was requisitioned for troop movements – but the money was always forthcoming.

Yet, it must be stressed, there was no unity in the subcontinent. Even the South African Republic consisted of semi-autonomous communities who policed their own regions and owed minimum allegiance to the central government. There was even less contact with scattered African peoples, and there were three regions, Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland, that gained autonomy outside the white controlled regions and maintained a tenuous independence by accepting, or appealing for, British trusteeship. The subjugation of those people who fell within the borders of white settlement was achieved through skirmishes or wars, and over several decades they were incorporated into the labour force for the whites. Ultimately everyone fell under the control of one overarching economy – but inside this economic control, local African peoples maintained aspects of their past social structures and their original polities. These ossified and were converted into branches of administrative control.

The Mineral Revolution

In 1868 diamonds were discovered at Kimberley inside the Orange Free State. In a diplomatic move that was little less than criminal, the region was annexed by the Cape. There was a massive injection of labour from across Southern and Portuguese East Africa as the digging commenced for these precious stones. With the discovery of diamonds the economic prospects of the country were transformed. These stones provided a sudden and instant source of finance for diggers, the diamond buyers and the Cape administration. The railway, which had not previously exceeded 10 miles in and around Cape Town, was extended to Kimberley, 500 miles away.

People from across South Africa, together with adventurers from around the world, flocked to the diamond fields, and although black labour was used to dig the extensive fields, there was a place at one end of the diggings for a small group of African and other entrepreneurs who mined on their own account. Most significantly, the diamond buyers, who concentrated this opera-

tion in fewer and fewer hands, acquired wealth on a scale not previously seen in South Africa.[5] Some of this money was to be used for opening up the gold mines in 1886 in and around Johannesburg (or Goli, the city of gold) on what became known as the Witwatersrand (the Ridge of White Waters). The discovery of gold brought in foreign finance capital, and transformed the subcontinent. This was the money commodity, and there was no shortage of investors. Yet there was a paradox in this new activity. The shaft sinking, which eventually took the miners a mile below the surface to the low grade ore, together with the equipment to recover the gold, required investments of millions of pounds. It was because gold was being mined that investors were attracted. This was because the demand for this commodity could not be exhausted, and dividends, low as they were, were assured. Yet this was capital accumulation with a catch. The low grade ore on the Witwatersrand had to compete with gold that was panned with little capital outlay as nuggets and with the store of gold that stretched back to antiquity. Consequently, the price set for gold coming onto the market was far below its value, that is, the price that would have been charged for any other product requiring the same amount of work. Also, as in all colonies (whether physically or economically dominated), dividends had to be shared between local entrepreneurs and foreign finance houses. More importantly, the price of gold was internationally determined and fixed with little regard to local conditions. Because the price was pegged at a level that would not upset the world's money exchanges, the price per fine ounce was kept well below its value (measured in hours of labour required for its extraction) in South Africa.

The mineowners protested that the price was too low, and so did the government, but they were not going to stop production. Consequently, the one factor in production that could be kept low, that of wages paid to African labourers, was pared. Every means was employed to ensure that workers were paid the lowest possible wages. This was managed at several levels: labourers was imported, the work force was divided, and the white labour sector paid at levels that were adjudged well above the cost of labour in any other working class occupation. The African labourers, a large part recruited from outside the country's borders, were employed for fixed short terms and then sent back home. The workers were housed in single sex compounds which were sealed to outside organisers. Even the African workers were divided, with specified tasks assigned to men of different ethnic origin, the division bolstered by separating dormitories, the heads of which were ethnically-based by installing tribal sub-chiefs. The many-faceted means of dividing the workers extended from the differential use of men from different tribes in selected mines to the fostering of tribal dance teams and the weekly open air competitions sponsored by the mines.

There were historic factors that allowed for the division between white and black workers. There had been a large importation of skilled workers from Europe and a much larger number of unskilled African labourers from local territories. The whites were housed separately from blacks and were

paid 15 or more times the rate received by Africans. Even the work skills were defined on ethnic grounds, excluding Africans from certain tasks. There were also differential tasks given to tribesmen and these came to acquire a particular status. Quite how this evolved is uncertain, but the effect was clear: there was intense intertribal rivalry.

The opening of the goldfields led to a further expansion of the railways, and with them the docks. The railroad carried goods, both exports and imports, across 1000 miles from Johannesburg to Cape Town and 500 miles to Durban, displacing dispatch riders and wagons alike. As the system expanded and reached Portuguese East Africa and Rhodesia, the labour force grew, bringing in thousands of men. Once again, segregation was imposed. Engine driving and even stoking was reserved for whites, whilst blacks were relegated to permanent way repairs or cabin services.

Originally the mines were in the hands of Uitlanders (foreigners), but the sites were in the South African Republic (SAR), a Boer territory. This led to the infamous Jameson raid in 1895, with the minefields as the target. Backed by Cecil Rhodes and Joseph Chamberlain, in the best tradition of age old pirates, this failed. That left only one option for the gung-ho imperialists: the SAR was conquered and annexed by Britain in the war of 1899-1902.[6] It is one of the myths of the time that the war of 1899 was waged across an ethnic divide of Boer against Brit, in which blacks were excluded. But this is a gross oversimplification. Several European powers gave moral backing to the Dutch, and a section of the more militant white workers supported the Boer government, whom they saw as their protectors against the mine magnates. Blacks intervened at various levels. However, the crucial fact is that the British army prevailed in the war even though the cost in men and money was high. Britain gained firm control of the territories and also of the source of gold – the money commodity of the era in which sterling (linked to gold) reigned supreme.

The war between Britain and the Boer republics has been a centre of historical attraction for many authors. That is understandable. However, the description of military action in 1900, interesting as it may be and important for an understanding of the origins of trench warfare, does not provide any insight into the events leading to that war, or of its social consequences. There can be little doubt that the war was fought in order to gain control of the country which contained these crucial gold fields, and that after the conclusion of hostilities political power over the country was replaced in the hands of the Boer leaders. The bitterness left by the war, however, led to the unfolding of an Afrikaner nationalism and a legacy of hatred of the British and foreign financiers. It was during the war that JA Hobson developed his ideas on parasitic rentier capitalism. It was Hobson who wrote vitriolic attacks on imperialism, and the message was taken up by some Afrikaner leaders. It was thus no accident that Dr DF Malan, future leader on the National Party, spoke in 1913 in favour of Socialism and praised Marx for his insight into capitalism.[7]

The single greatest factor that motivated the mineowners was the need to depress the wages of the black workers, both before the war and in the construction of the subsequent state. They saw that a movement of black workers between mines allowed them to bid up wages, and they consequently set out to minimise competition among themselves and stop the free movement of the workers. It was for this reason that the Chamber of Mines and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (Wanela) were formed. The latter had recruiting agents at every main centre to find labour, and obtained an annual levy of men from the Portuguese.

The Chamber imposed an internal pass (the notorious pass law) on a reluctant SAR administration. This was the basis of the law that restricted black movement until revoked in recent years. There were other factors that motivated the mineowners in their attacks on the Boer states. The mines needed a unified state, both for the recruitment of labourers and for their control, and for a unified transport system. The Boers, predominantly farmers, had little interest in supplying black labour to the mines – in conflict with their own needs – and their resources were too slender to allow them to police the pass or the liquor laws as demanded by the mine management.

The British state was called in to clear out Boer obstacles, and Milner, an agent of the state, created the centralised unified bureaucracy to enforce the regulations required by the mineowners. He and his imported officials (Milner's 'kindergarten') laid the foundations of the modern South African state, and imposed some of his own racist laws on the country, in particular the discriminations against Indians that were to trouble that community through the coming years.

The population of South Africa was always small, estimated at four million at the end of the nineteenth century (one million of them white). The country attracted few immigrants, and the local growth rate was small. To the Dutch were added French Huguenots and German immigrants, British settlers (after 1814), and a trickle of immigrants from Europe. Separately at first, and then together, the whites – whatever their internal differences – reduced the colonised people to an inferior status. Even growing class divisions among the whites that came with the development of the economy only reinforced ethnic divisions as each group specialised (or indeed, had no option but to take on certain trades).

The importation of skilled craftsmen and miners from Europe led almost automatically to the importation of trade unions, with many of the original sections being branches of British unions. This right to organise which helped to advance the workers' rights and allowed for strike action stood in vivid contrast to the illegalisation of black strike action and a refusal to grant them state recognition under (much later) industrial legislation. If there had been no colour bar in employment this would have opened up that differential anyway. As it was, the already existent racial differences (in wages, housing, social and sporting activity, and so on) were buttressed by the protection or advances of white living standards relative to those of Africans.[8]

Even more significantly for the period that followed, the capitalists who owned the gold mines made one crucial concession over labour policy. Though the white miners were defeated in two strikes in 1907 and 1913, and bombed into submission in the general strike of 1922, and had their claims negated in a subsequent court case, they were allowed to retain their privileged position even when it was no longer justified economically. This helped bolster the new form of racism that was associated with the control of a sector of the labour market.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, there were three main centres of economic development: on the white owned farms, and in the two mining areas: Kimberley for diamonds and the Witwatersrand for gold. Elsewhere, the economy of the country was stagnant. The internal market was small and relatively poor, with the African population unable to purchase anything but essentials.[9] There was a small expansion of manufacture during the First World War, and then stagnation again until after the lifting of the depression of 1929-31.[10] The finance houses associated with mining capital saw little reason for investing in manufacture. It was cheaper to import goods from Europe, including materials for building, bricks excepted. Consequently, African men who came into (or were allowed into) the towns were employed generally as domestic servants and gardeners, and even as washermen. Only a small number entered trades, and then merely as unskilled workers, the main occupations of whom consisted of carrying tools and materials, digging trenches, storing or distributing goods, or making tea and running errands. This was the beginning of a workforce but not yet a working class. When the African working class was being formed in the 1930s, it was concentrated along the Witwatersrand and in small pockets around the ports of Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth. The workers in the western Cape were predominantly Coloured, and Indians were a significant force in Natal, although here too they were dominant as waiters or barmen in the hotels.

African women played almost no part in the early industrial period. Where they came into town (and they were restricted both by regulations of government and control by African tribal chiefs), they were confined to domestic service, replacing the African men. Others brewed beer illegally, and some were full or part time prostitutes.

There was a growing informal sector. Africans became hawkers or even shopkeepers, craftsmen who made furniture or offered services in the black townships. A small number entered the church (and in particular the independent churches), became teachers (with a primary school plus two years teacher's training qualification), or found some place in the police force, prison service and so on. This was barely a petit-bourgeoisie, and there were never more than a handful that could be called well-to-do.

If the mines and later the industries constituted the crowning heights of the economy, agriculture was always a source of exports, earning a large portion of foreign exchange, and also growing food for the population. Furthermore, the white agricultural region was collectively the largest employer of

labour in the country. However, as in all colonies, the pattern of farming activity was not simple. Until 1936 Africans were allowed to own land – mostly on a communal basis – on about seven per cent of the land area of the country. Legislation in 1936 provided for the doubling of this area, but only as Trust Land under tight government control.[11] An African peasant class, supplying produce for the market, had come into existence at the end of the nineteenth century, but had been squeezed out by the white farmers. Thereafter, only a minority, mostly associated with chiefly families, acquired wealth. Most of the rest (about one-third of the African population) were reduced to subsistence farming, and lived in the Reserves only when they were not seeking employment in the towns. An even larger number of Africans were squatters on the white farms, in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, providing labour in exchange for the right to farm plots for part of the year, or they were farm tenants or labourers. Among the latter were men removed from the towns after breaking segregatory laws, and who were used as cheap convict labour. In the western Cape Coloured labourers were employed, paid in part by the notorious tot (liquor) system. In Natal Africans had largely replaced Indian labourers in the cane fields.

The demands of the rural population were diverse, but most demanded the enlargement of land holdings in the Reserves, or in the white controlled farms, and the return of what the tenant farmers and squatters saw as their own land. The complaints of the farm labourers and the people on the Reserves took in the need for better social amenities, for schools and health, for more time to tend their own plots, and for the right to leave the farmer or indeed the rural areas.

I have concentrated attention on the black population, because they were in the majority, and because they alone could form the mainstay of an opposition to the ruling class. But there were obviously other people who filtered into industry, both from abroad and from the whites already resident in the country. The latter included large numbers of young women, and some men, who left the rural areas and sought work in the towns. They came from families of white labour tenants who were the first victims of the depression in the late 1920s.[12] When they entered the towns they were employed as domestic workers or as waitresses, in the sweated clothing trade, and in sweet, canning, tobacco, chemical and other burgeoning workshops. The men found employment on the trams and the railways, and in the trades. They were small in number, but they played a significant rôle in the working class movement in the 1930s, and were among the more militant white workers.

White immigrants came to South Africa throughout the twentieth century, always in smaller numbers than those who went to the Americas or Australasia, but they arrived and included in their ranks entrepreneurs and workers. They brought with them some capital or their ability to work, and among the latter there were many with experience in the European labour movement. There were others, particularly Jews, who brought with them a tradition of Socialism. Many immigrants joined the impoverished white farm

workers in the newly established manufacturing plants in the early 1930s. Their work conditions were miserable and their wages were low. These establishments were dwarfed by the mining houses and state enterprises, which now included the railways and docks, the water and electricity industries, the state steel enterprise, and the enterprises controlled by municipal, provincial and state bodies. But it was the small industries that provided the base for a new and militant trade union movement. However, with few exceptions, the workers were indelibly divided by colour, and the few instances of collaboration across the colour line are noteworthy as exceptions to the rule.

Although the number of black workers grew, and there was significant organisation during the 1930s, their position in production only altered appreciably during the Second World War when they replaced the whites who had volunteered for service in the army. There was an increase in the number of small workshops to replace previously imported goods, road building was accelerated for potential defence purposes, and gold production was increased to pay for Britain's war machine. Indeed, some of the specie was shipped direct to the USA on Britain's account. Agriculture also expanded to feed the troops in Africa, for export to West Africa and for the local market. These were all areas of increased black employment.

An urbanised black working class, as distinct from a labour force (and migrant at that), was coming into existence. The time for organisation had arrived, and among those actively engaged in organising the trade union movement in the Transvaal were Trotskyists. Some of that story is told in the pages that follow.

Notes

1. Marxists got it wrong. The 'archaic' social systems were undermined and transformed but survived to become instruments of colonial control. Rosa Luxemburg in her **Accumulation of Capital** was particularly faulty on this issue.
2. If correct, this will replace earlier beliefs that the country had been left desolate by a warring Zulu people.
3. Families who had to work for the farmer in exchange for small plots of land which they could work on their own account.
4. It seems most likely that the factor leading to the repatriation of the Chinese was their increasingly militant protests – a factor that is not mentioned in most texts. White workers were in the forefront of the agitation for the removal of the Chinese. This helped protect the privileged position of the mineworkers by removing potential competitors.
5. The concentration of buying, ultimately in the hands of Cecil Rhodes, kept control of the market supply. This maintained the price of gem stones at an artificially high level.
6. This was not the first such annexation. The British had annexed the Orange Free State and the SAR in the late 1870s, and had relinquished them after an inconclusive war, with clauses that were a constant source of irritation.
7. Malan, a doctor of theology, was a publicist and Afrikaner National Party leader. He served in the government in the 1920s, and was Prime Minister in the National Party government in 1948 – hence the use of the name Malanite to describe narrow white nationalism.
8. The system was made more complex in the 1920s by the government's policy of promoting the employment of whites during the periods of economic stagnation and depression, and the use of such policies to replace Indian workers on the railways.

9. This included manufactured goods like primus stoves, oil lamps, candles, bicycles and suitcases, gramophones and records, foodstuffs like condensed milk, cigarettes and, illegally until the 1970s, wines, beer and liquor.
10. In the 1930s South Africa was able to get out of the depression by going off the gold standard and benefitting by the rise in the price of gold. The fact that in the current depression South Africa has not been able to repeat its past practice is an indication of the changing role of gold within the world monetary system.
11. The extra land was only partly acquired, and there was no relaxation of land control despite the growth of the rural population and evidence of gross overcrowding.
12. The depression in the countryside started in South Africa, as elsewhere, about two years before the Great Crash in 1929. This was the final straw for most farm tenants, and in the first instance young Afrikaner women, who did not earn money in the rural areas, left home to earn money in the towns. Their wages were miserable, but part of what they received was remitted to their families on the farms. They became the mainstay of the militant unions in the light industries.

RESISTANCE AND SOCIALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE HISTORY of working class struggle in South Africa, which extends back to the nineteenth century, matched the bitterness and the ferocity of class struggles elsewhere. However, the conflicts in South Africa were more often noted for the manner in which the class struggle was subverted and converted into racial clashes.One of the first campaigns fought by white workers was on the diamond fields in the 1870s when the men rebelled against body searches for hidden gem stones. These men, supported by black workers, won their battle with the mineowners. But the co-operation was one sided, and only the whites won release from this obnoxious procedure.

This victory only served to separate blacks from whites, and set a pattern that persisted, with few exceptions, throughout the history of working class struggles. The struggles continued and became fiercer and bloodier, reaching a peak in the general strike of 1922, when General Smuts brought out the bombers to subdue the workers.

The history of black labour struggles, which did not often converge with the struggles of the whites, extends back to the first master-servant relations. The fullest accounts are of local resistance to tyrannical land owners or whites who misused their labourers, but there is no satisfactory overall history. Some are chronicled, and it is quite clear that there was no support from the white workers. In this colonial society the fight against racial oppression was to become inseparable from the struggles for 'liberation', the class lines being blurred by colour differentiation. In the light of state power and national oppression, it was inevitable that disaffection expressed itself in religious separation, of appeals to spirits to assist their people, and of chiliastic hopes that the local oppressors would be smitten by some foreign agency.[1] The historical accounts include cattle killing by the Xhosa people in 1856, and the many incidents in which it was believed that magic water could protect people from bullets.

These important instances of resistance fed into the myths of nationalist movements, but, at the time, they were local and community bound.The discrimination embedded in legislation and social practice, together with the gross inequalities in living standards, led each community to develop its own forms of struggle.

The earliest Socialist groups seem to have been established at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were all white, and were often confined to particular communities. The ideas expressed in these groups ranged over the spectrum of Socialist thinking elsewhere. Syndicalists, Social Democrats and ethnic separatists intermingled, some members belonging to more than one group – and there were changes of affiliation over time.The Jews brought with them methods of organisation that were rooted in Eastern Europe. In particular, they formed branches of the Bund, the specifically Jewish working class movement that had built some of the first trade unions in Tsarist Russia. They were also immersed in a particular Yiddish culture, and combined this with their Socialism. Similar groups, whose history has not been recorded, were built by German and other immigrant communities. None of them seem to have established links with the Social Democratic Federation that was strongest in the Cape, and which took its inspiration from the British movement of the same name.

There was one other significant early group, strongest on the Witwatersrand, that grouped itself around the *Voice of Labour*, with a strong Syndicalist tendency. It is known more particularly for the activities of 'Pickhandle' Mary. The name was acquired when Mary Fitzgerald led a band of strikers against mounted police who wielded the infamous pickhandles. Picking up batons which the police had dropped, Mary and her followers wielded them against their original owners. Thereafter her cohorts broke up meetings of their opponents with the now notorious pickhandles, and she was always to be found when demonstrators were needed during strike action. Yet even Mary Fitzgerald, who created a living myth around her activities, who worked with the miners' union and then organised the first general women's trade union, appeared after the war as a highly vocal racist. When she died many years later, an alcoholic recluse, her passing went largely unnoticed.

The South African Labour Party (SALP), with its strongest section in the Transvaal, was established in the image of its British counterpart, but was openly racist, and its members could justly claim that they had been the first to call for complete segregation. By that means, they said, they hoped to protect the interests of the white workers from unfair competition, and maintain their standard of living. The SALP was from its inception a parliamentary party, claiming, as in Britain, to represent the (white) working class and the trade unions. But there is little evidence of the trade unions providing the kind of support that was apparent in Britain.

In sharp contrast to this, a small band of white, mainly Jewish, professional men and women gave their fullest support to Gandhi in his campaigns against

discrimination in South Africa. They were Tolstoyans rather than Socialists, but they mixed with and influenced others who had Socialist sympathies. Among these was one of South Africa's most original thinkers, the novelist and essayist Olive Schreiner, whose ideas were partly rooted in the newly emergent Socialist movements in Europe. It is still not possible to estimate her influence on Socialists in South Africa. Her messages were inspirational, but always 'from afar', because she was never a joiner of groups. From Schreiner came a militant feminism and adherence to the suffragette movement (but only if the vote was extended to all women), a strong antipathy to discrimination on grounds of colour or ethnicity, a desire to right the wrongs of women workers (following her writings in *Women and Labour*), and a rationalism that bordered on agnosticism. Acquiring some of her values from radicals in Britain, Schreiner also condemned the Tsarist regime in Russia for its oppression, and in particular its anti-Semitism. This made her an early champion of the Bolshevik regime in its fight against the White generals. In the latter period of her life, she inspired a number of radicals, mainly attached to the University of Cape Town, but they, too, remained outside formal organisation, and the extent of their influence on the Socialist movement is a matter of conjecture.[2] Among the whites there were other radical thinkers in the country: Harriet Colenso (daughter of the apostate Bishop Colenso), who gave her support to the formation of the ANC; Ivon Jones, who came to South Africa as a devout Unitarian and ended his life as a Bolshevik; Clare Goodlatte, a nun in the Anglican community and principal of their teacher's training college in Grahamstown, who retired in 1920, shed her religion and ended her career as editor of the Trotskyist journal, *The Spark*. But the effect of their ideas, and the extent of their influence, has not been fully explored.

It is still arguable whether the majority of white workers, and particularly those who came from Britain, were ever involved in the Socialist movement. They did join trade unions, and some were associated with the Labour Party, but, except for a few obvious exceptions, their activities were not ostensibly Socialist. Afrikaner workers, who had their own political agenda, also organised and used the strike weapon to improve their work conditions. Although some seemed to be moving towards the SALP before the First World War, they were seduced by the call of Nationalists to close ranks against foreign overlords when war was declared. Whether their joining the Labour Party would have altered that movement is an open question, but their commitment to Socialism was not very strong, despite the appeal of the anti-imperialist slogans of the time. Like the English speaking workers, they gave no support to the struggles of other communities, and although there must have been some for whom colour was not an issue, most were probably as racist as the rest of the Afrikaner community.[3]

This racism, or at least indifference to the problems faced by other communities, was not one sided. The leaders of black movements, and many of their constituents, were also locked into conflicts with those who were ethni-

cally different. But, like all generalisations, there were exceptions. There were differences inside each ethnic group, some class based, that need examination to understand the complexity of the situation. For example, the Indians, a pariah community in the eyes of the government, were far from homogeneous, and were split in their methods of struggle. And the differences were based on the sharp class divisions in the community. The middle and lower middle class followed Gandhi in his use of 'passive resistance' and boycotts to remove discrimination (and racism), but the farm labourers on the sugar cane fields, living at subsistence level, ceased work or rioted during the Indian passive resistance campaigns in 1913, against the wishes of Gandhi. In like fashion the Coloured leaders demanded incorporation into the white dominated society, whilst the Coloured and African women of the Orange Free State, with a different set of objectives, marched in unison in 1913 to stop the application of passes to women.

There were some expressions of solidarity across the ethnic divide and some blatant examples of racial indifference if not antagonism in those early years of struggle. In 1914, for example, Gandhi suspended his marches in order not to embarrass the government when it was confronted by a strike of railway workers, and the ANC in conference turned down a motion of support for the white miners in their strike action. This was but the mirror image, even if understandable, of white working class attitudes. Despite the call of a few white working class leaders for class solidarity, the whites involved in strikes in 1913-14 stood apart from their black fellow workers, and in one instance, on the Jagersfontein diamond mines, helped the police suppress black workers who rioted after one of their number had been killed by a white worker.

The few trade union leaders who publicly expressed support for the Indians in struggle were condemned by their own rank and file. It was, therefore, not exceptional for the Coloured and African leaders to condemn the white miners in the general strike of 1922, and for white and black workers to be involved in racist clashes during the strike.[4]

The South African Native National Congress (later renamed the African National Congress) was not the first ethnically organised movement, nor the largest. Yet its potential constituency led to its later predominance in the country as the representative of the African people. It was launched in 1912 by a small group of Africans, many of them professional men. The Congress had little formal organisation outside a national conference that was convened annually. It confined itself to appearances before commissions, to delegations and to petitions. The Congress ignored the early strike movement of 1913, and it was only after the First World War that its leadership was involved in some of the urban protests, both at the workplace and in an anti-pass campaign on the Witwatersrand. But their involvement was short lived, and the leading figures withdrew from activities when their followers took to the streets.

The closest that the white workers came to class struggle was at a trade union level. These too had a strong ethnic base, aiming in part to keep the ratio of white to black miners constant. The miners' strikes, repeating in 1913 a struggle that had been taken up in 1907, were a matter of life and death. The main demand was for a reduction of the number of drills (used by Africans underground), and a shortening of the time spent at the ore face. Although there can be little doubt that there was a racist element in the demand which would have cut the ratio of white to black employees, recent research shows that the primary concern of the miners was to prevent the spread of miners' phthisis which reduced the working lives of miners to four years, and actual life to seven years. Although a reduction of time at the ore face and a reduction of the number of drills at work would have resulted in only a slight improvement, the demands were rational and reasonable. The result, however, was a brutal suppression of the white miners' strike in 1913, including a massacre of white citizens who had gathered to hear a call for a general strike.[5]

There were some expressions of solidarity with black struggles from a minority of white miners' leaders. They urged African mineworkers to join them in strike action, and some spoke publicly in support of the Indian struggle. Yet, as mentioned above, this was not reciprocated by leaders of the Coloured, Indian or even African movements. Reasons were not always given, and some of the motives are suspect, but white workers, who showed few signs of class solidarity, did nothing to bridge the racial gap.

The struggles of the white workers followed the trade union tradition that workers had brought from Europe – but only at the lowest level. Their racism (whether overt or covert) was even more rampant than that of their employers. But the class struggle did not need examples from abroad, and many confrontations were due to bad working conditions and an intransigence on the part of the ruling class. The government, in alliance with the employers, were prepared to shoot unarmed citizens, and mowed them down in 1913. It was a brutal suppression, and this was followed in 1914, when the railwaymen came out on strike, by a declaration of martial law, the investment of the Trades Hall where the strike leaders were in session, and their illegal deportation. It was this action by the government that led to the radicalisation of men inside a very tame and segregationist Labour Party, and took them eventually into the Communist Party.

The First World War was the dividing line between small-scale local groups and attempts at building a Socialist movement on a national level. Taking their stance on the resolution of the International Socialist Bureau against the war, and already angered by Smuts and the government after the strikes of 1913-14, a group in the Transvaal broke away from the Labour Party to form the International Socialist League (ISL), first as pacifists and then as international Socialists. They were isolated from the English speaking workers, who supported the war, and from the Afrikaner workers who opposed Britain and the Allies. This was one of the factors that led the leaders of the ISL to turn to the black workers. To them goes the credit of having been

the first to create a black workers' union, the International Workers of Africa. Yet there was doubt about the role the black worker would play in the transformation of the country. The issue received publicity in 1919 when municipal workers in Johannesburg paralysed the town by cutting the power supplies, and established a 'Board of Management' which they called a 'soviet'. Meanwhile, their supporters attacked African workers who were involved in an anti-pass campaign, and the 'soviet' leaders made a gratuitous offer to the government that they were prepared to form defence groups to protect white women and children. SP Bunting, one of the three leaders of the ISL, rounded on the white workers for the pretentiousness of their use of the word 'soviet' and for their racism. Jones, probably the most outstanding of all the early Socialist leaders, used the pages of the journal to criticise Bunting, and came to the defence of those 'on strike'.[6]

But Bunting was also unable to chart the possible evolution of the African working class. In a statement that is reminiscent of the Narodniks of Tsarist Russia, he said that after the Socialist revolution (by whites!), Africans would be given back their land and saved from their miserable existence in the towns. Jones also thought that the white workers would overthrow the capitalist regime, but added as a corollary that the white workers could not sustain their revolution unless it was spread to the blacks within 24 hours.

It was the ISL which formed the central core of the Communist Party when it was launched in 1921, incorporating groups in Cape Town and Durban. Their conception of South Africa must be understood in terms of the class forces they could see at the time. The white workers seemed to constitute a force that could spearhead a Socialist movement. Africans might need sympathy, but were too far removed from the industrial proletariat that might take power. In their internationalism was nurtured the sympathy they felt for the revolution from its inception in February 1917, and they gave their allegiance to the new state in Russia. Ivon Jones had stated soon after the news reached Johannesburg in the local press, that the revolution in this advanced period of capitalism could not stop at this stage, and that the workers of Russia would take it further.

This loyalty to the Russian revolution was cemented when Jones went to Russia. He translated and publicised some works of Lenin from the Russian. He worked for the Comintern and the Profintern (the Communist and Red Trade Union Internationals), called on the Comintern to organise an international conference of Negro toilers, and was placed on the Executive Council of the Comintern as a delegate for South Africa. Jones was seriously ill by this time and died in mid-1924. Those who remained in the CPSA lacked his critical ability, and became blind followers of Comintern policy. Even when part of the leadership disagreed fundamentally with Comintern policy, as SP Bunting did in 1928, they accepted the line laid down by the leaders of the USSR.[7]

There are indications that black mineworkers on the Witwatersrand tried to form African trade unions as early as 1912, but these early attempts failed.[8]

There are slightly more details about an strike of 9000 miners in 1913, parallel to the white miners' strike – but a warning that they could be prosecuted for breaking the law led to the men returning to work. Then came the war, and Africans faced increasing privation. There was rampant inflation, and conditions in the Reserves worsened, with more demands on the men from their families for money. Strikes during the war were sporadic, but from 1918 to 1920 tools were downed in the towns and the mines, there was a boycott of the stores on the mines, which held a monopoly on trading and raised their prices ahead of inflation, and an anti-pass campaign on the Witwatersrand. And finally in 1920 an anti-pass campaign in the towns coincided with the biggest walkout on the mines prior to 1987. Initially, the ANC leaders supported this action, but they withdrew when the crowd grew more militant. This was taken by men like Bunting as confirming their view that the Congress was led by men who could not and would not lead their people in militant action.[9]

There was news of rural disaffection in the eastern Cape soon after war was declared, but this, too, was smothered by strong administrative pressure. It was only after 1918 that a wave of action in the towns and in the countryside provided evidence that the African workers were not prepared to accept their lot passively. Besides the strikes on the mines and among municipal employees, and an anti-pass campaign on the Witwatersrand, there were extensive foci of unrest across the country. Although some of these have been described and the incidents well known, there is still no overall picture of the many events of the period of 1918-20. Where there was armed intervention, as in the case of Bulhoek, the events were notable for illustrating the depth of oppression in the country, and also for the first protests by Socialists against such action.[10]

The small group of whites who had left the Labour Party to form a more radical organisation were isolated in the white community. Their candidates were soundly beaten in local and provincial elections, and there was little support from white workers. The English speaking white workers rallied to the support of the Empire; the Afrikaner workers tended to support their Nationalist leaders in opposition to the British. It was this, in part, that turned this small group to the organisation of a black general workers' union, the Industrial Workers of Africa. The IWA was involved in some of the strikes of 1918, but heavy infiltration by police and a court case after the bucket workers' strike led to its demise.

The leaders of the ISL were ahead of their followers in many respects, and there were many resignations. There was further discontent over policy following the dispute over the Johannesburg 'soviet', and finally there were splits over the decision to support the general strike of 1922. It was in this struggle that the workers raised the slogan: 'Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa.' This Orwellian style banner, which many black workers at the time found unexceptional, was both anti-capitalist and racist, with different factions in the struggle stressing one or other interpreta-

tion. Ultimately, the strikers were bombed into submission, some of their leaders were killed, and others were hanged by a revengeful government. Whether the party was right or wrong in the strike is still a matter of dispute, but the consequences were disastrous, and the members of the CPSA emerged even more isolated than previously (see below).

Independently of any other organisation there was an attempt, at the end of the First World War, led by Selby Msimang, a Nationalist leader, to form a general workers' union, known as the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union. This was a name appropriated in 1920 by Clements Kadalie and popularised under the name ICU (I See You, White Man).[11] Members of the CPSA joined the ICU, and some were elected to senior posts on its Execuive. In 1925, following a riot over beer brewing in the Bloemfontein location, the town officials came to the conclusion that the riot was the result of the low wage structure in the town. In a daring move the civic authorities appointed a commission of six whites and six blacks, three of them drawn from the local ICU leaders. The outcome was a minimum daily wage of 3/6d set for the town. This was the year in which the ICU first established a branch in the Transvaal – but few noted then or subsequently that there was no organisation in factories, railways, or even shops.

The ICU groups that came into existence were either based in the rural areas, in small villages, or in the townships. There was an internal logic in this move that most histories ignore. There were no industries large enough to sustain a trade union except for the mines and the railways: unions were not allowed access to the former, and the government would not recognise a black railway union (the white union being effectively a company union). Consequently, following the success in Bloemfontein, the ICU organised in the townships but not in the workshops. Then, in a separate set of campaigns, they went into the rural areas, calling for liberation and the right to own land. They ended by collecting money from their members for the purchase of land – and, as in all such ventures, the money vanished into the pockets of the collectors.

The ICU was not a trade union, but (in the towns) a community based organisation. Its constituents in the townships were mainly workers, but the form of organisation was not directed at the scene of production. It campaigned for township rights, and in at least one case (as noted above) helped secure a minimum wage for an entire township. It was a notable victory, although the wage was still miserable. But the movement did not succeed as a trade union.

The ICU faced harassment and persecution, but that was only one of its problems. Urged by conservative whites, like the authoress Ethelreda Lewis, the ICU expelled members of the CPSA, thus depriving itself of its most dedicated and efficient members. The arrival of WG Ballinger, a member of the Cooperative Society in Motherwell, to act as an adviser to the ICU, could not help, and his presence only speeded up the disintegration of the ICU. Corruption was also rife in the ICU. Officials dipped deeply into union funds,

committee meetings were disrupted by members who were too drunk to stay awake, there were expulsions, counter-expulsions and splits, and the ICU, after a last burst of activity in which it was involved in strikes in the eastern Cape and near Johannesburg, faded out of existence.

In the wake of the defeat of the general strike in 1922, the CISA was isolated and reduced to a small handful of mainly white members. It was under these conditions that it debated the possibility of affiliation to the Labour Party, in line with Lenin's suggestion that the small parties in the English speaking countries try an entryist tactic. An application for affiliation in 1923 was rejected by the SALP, and the CPSA decided in December 1924, by a small majority, not to try again. The party was split on the issue, and among those who resigned were Frank Glass, and he was supported by Bill Andrews (later Chairman of the party during the Second World War). It seems that a group in Cape Town, led by Manuel Lopes, also resigned, and like Glass joined the Labour Party. This move could not be sustained, particularly in view of the Labour Party's segregationist position. Individually or together, these former members of the CPSA left the Labour Party in the late 1920s.

The CPSA, manipulated by Comintern apparatchiks, was forced in 1928 to accept the Black Republic slogan during the notorious Third Period, which was supposed to signal the onset of world revolution. In the squabbles that followed leading members were expelled and pilloried under the most disgraceful conditions. At times it was apparently expulsion for expulsion's sake (because that was the only way to keep the party on its toes!). It was at this point that some former members gathered together as supporters of the Left Opposition. Glass (who was the first to have a letter published in *The Militant*, organ of the American Left Opposition) left South Africa in 1931 for China, where he worked with the Trotskyists under the name of Li Furen.[12] Others helped to form the Independent Labour Party in Cape Town in 1932.[13] Only a few of those expelled from the CPSA entered the Trotskyist groups. Most dropped out of all political activity.

There proved to be one centre in which members of the new Trotskyist groups were able to seize the initiative. Members of the CPSA on the Witwatersrand had organised African trade unions, partly to overcome their exclusion from the ICU, and partly to create an active link with the Profintern. In accordance with Third Period tactics, the unions were led into ill-prepared strikes, and lost many of their members. The collapse of the unions was hastened by the expulsions of leading organisers, and it was in the political space left open that Trotskyists formed a network of African trade unions in the Transvaal. This is discussed below.

When the first Trotskyist groups were formed, they were confronted by a white working class, the most important of whom, on the mines and the railways and in heavy industry, had made their peace with their employers. The black workers were still small in numbers, but the political and trade union organisations had succumbed to inertia, to harassment, or to internal corruption. It was time to start afresh and the field was open to any dynamic group

– but the task would not be easy, and many of the earlier Socialists had been destroyed by their experiences inside the CPSA.

Notes

1. For example, thoughout the 1920s there was a belief that Americans would appear in the sky to emancipate the African people. This was based on the belief, brought over from the First World War, that all Americans were black, and this was combined with stories of the effectiveness of the Garveyite movement in the USA.
2. See B Hirson, 'Ruth Schechter: Friend to Olive Schreiner', **SSA** ,No 9.
3. This, despite the fact that in 1913 Dr Malan, the future Prime Minister in 1948, gave a lecture in praise of Socialism and of Marx. The circumstances that led to this peroration are not clear.
4. For Jagersfontein see B Hirson, Judy Jancovich and Julie Wells 'Diamonds are Forever but Gold is For Now: Whatever Did Happen At Jagersfontein?', seminar paper at Southern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London.
   The 1922 strike produced the slogan: 'Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa.' However, there was an ambiguity in the interpretation of that slogan, with many workers believing (correctly) that the strike was a defence against the mineowners' assault on their standard of living. Even the extent of the racial attacks is in need of reinterpretation. There were only a handful of these fights – and these were highlighted by the government to discredit the strikers. Some were started by whites, others by blacks, and in some cases the whites were incensed by the use of black workers as scabs.
5. See Baruch Hirson and Gwyn Williams, **The Delegate for Africa: The Life of David Ivon Jones**, forthcoming. General Smuts, who was Minister of Justice, Minister of Defence and Prime Minister in several governments, called in the (British) Dragoons during the events of 1913. He also used bombers to break the resistance of the Bondelzwarts in South West Africa, and to destroy centres of working class revolt in 1922.
6. Yet Jones was to change his approach, and stated in 1919, when he appeared in court as the first Bolshevik to be tried in South Africa, that the future of the revolution lay with the black working class, and the South African Lenin would most probably be black.
7. See the contributions of Bunting at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern when he spoke against the Black Republic slogan, reprinted in **Searchlight South Africa**, No 4.
8. These were reported in the **Voice of Labour**.
9. There was discontent in the towns, fuelled by the decline in real wages and a strike of 'bucket boys' (that is, night soil removers). The arrest of these men and the callous way in which they were treated by the court (they were sentenced to do their work under armed guard without pay) led to a general radicalisation of the urban Africans.
10. The Bulhoek massacre as described by Frank Glass at the time is printed in **SSA**, No 6
11. The ICU was associated initially with a dock workers' strike in Cape Town. The strike was successful, but only the Coloured workers gained a wage increase. The African workers gained nothing. Nonetheless, the smell of victory gave this new movement an impetus (and a myth) that sustained it over many years.
12. According to Wang Fanxi he was asked by Glass to coin a name. He decided on Li, because it was a common Chinese name and Furen because it was the nearest that he could get to Frank. In the old Wade-Giles system of transliteration, his name appears as Li Fu-Jen.
13. Those members of the CPSA who joined the Labour Party in Cape Town in 1925 found working in a colour bar organisation impossible. They resigned and helped form the ILP,

THE TROTSKYIST GROUPS IN SOUTH AFRICA:1932–48

A Retrospective View

THERE WAS a time when South African adherents of the Left Opposition (Trotskyists) were said to have made a substantial impact on the politics of South Africa, and having provided leading cadres for the Trotskyist movements in China, India, the USA and Great Britain.

Internationally, in the first decade of the movement's existence, Frank Glass (Li Fu-jen/Furen) moved to China and then the US, Murray Gow Purdy to India, Ted Grant, Max Basch (Sid Frost), Charlie van Gelderen, Ralph and Millie Lee, Heaton Lee, Ann Keen and others to Britain. There were also persons who joined, or were associated with, Trotskyist groups and received later acclaim for work in their own specialities. Among these were Peter Abrahams, the novelist, Frederick Bodmer, whose work in linguistics was widely acclaimed when his *Loom of Language* was published, Dorothea Krook, an acknowledged expert on the later writings of Henry James, and Joseph Sandler, currently President of the International Association of Psychoanalysis.

Less well known are those who joined the South African groups and built up a cadre. They published the most important Marxist journals in the country, distributed newspapers and published the *Communist Manifesto* in Afrikaans, participated in demonstrations against the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, joined in the struggles against the Greyshirts (the home grown Fascist movement), and were among the first to condemn the crimes of Stalin. From their ranks came members who, separately or collectively, helped to build the National Liberation League and then the bodies that made up the Non-European Unity Movement, a national liberation movement that attracted thousands of men and women in the Cape Province. Their leader, IB Tabata, is said to have exercised a powerful influence on Nelson Mandela and the men who were to become the leaders of the African National Congress.

In the Cape their members became the leaders of the (Coloured) Teachers League of South Africa and the Cape African Teachers Association; they dominated the intellectual left of Cape Town through the Lenin Club, the Spartacus Club and then the New Era Fellowship.[1] They recruited to their ranks academics and to a lesser extent workers, and could even count a former nun as a leading member.

The history of the groups in the Transvaal was different. There, the earliest members of the Left Opposition were involved in trade union work. They were succeeded by Max Gordon, a Trotskyist who had moved from Cape Town, and had built the first major black trade union movement in the Transvaal. At a later stage, after Gordon had returned to the Cape, a new

Trotskyist group, the Workers International League (WIL), entered into and had an influential position in the black unions. The WIL also won over men and women who played an important rôle in community struggles and (as in Cape Town) produced a number of newspapers and journals. The groups, in Cape Town and in Johannesburg, were always small, but they had an effect that was far greater than their number. Yet, despite the hope that they inspired with their message, the groups all disappeared, leaving no movement in the country. After a resurgent trade union movement was built, bringing thousands of workers onto the streets after 1973, a student revolt in 1976-77 that swept through South Africa and drew in entire local communities, and a further wave of revolts in 1984-86, there is no effective Trotskyist movement in the country, only a number of small groups, mostly affiliated with the many tendencies in Britain and Europe, but playing no prominent rôle in the events of the country.

Is there anything in the history of those groups from which lessons can be learnt so that a new vibrant movement can emerge? What was it that went wrong in South Africa to negate the work that seemed so promising before and during the Second World War?

The Early Beginnings

The Trotskyist groups in South Africa were born not in blood, but in confusion. They did not emerge in the wake of powerful working class or community struggles. They came into existence when the South African workers (or the small workforce that had recently come into existence) were confused and dispirited, clinging to their jobs during the massive depression that hit the country in 1929-31. They appeared when the international working class was still reeling from the victory of Nazism in Germany and massive defeats elsewhere, and when there was growing disillusionment in the Communist International and the local Communist Party. The groups that appeared locally drew their members from those Socialists expelled by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) or its front organisations, or individuals who sought a Socialist solution to counter a race-ridden and exploitative society.

In Cape Town the small band of revolutionaries were drawn from the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party, Communist auxiliary groups like the Gezerd,[2] cultural and literary groups,[3] or from new arrivals from Eastern Europe. They had a number of common positions on foreign issues, including an uncompromising anti-Fascism, an unconditional support for the USSR in the war that was anticipated, and a condemnation of the Comintern and its policies. One of the most important factors helping to precipitate the formation of Trotskyist groups in South Africa was the imposition of the Black Republic slogan by the Comintern on the CPSA – the issue that led Frank Glass and then Manuel Lopes to write to the American Trotskyist paper, *The Militant*.[4] Many were Trotskyists only in name. Like others in Europe and elsewhere, they knew little about the platform of the

Left Opposition or about the situation in the Soviet Union, but all were appalled by news of events in the USSR. It was only after copies of *The Militant* were received in South Africa that some issues became clearer, but there was much that remained opaque for the new adherents to the International Left Opposition.

The effects of Stalinist methods upon those who formed the first Trotskyist groups have not received sufficient attention from historians. Firstly, it must be stressed that the turmoil inside local Communist parties affected the entire Socialist movement. Expulsions, vicious attacks (verbal and physical), or rapidly changing tactics to meet Moscow's demands, made it difficult for any Socialist group to attract large audiences. But the rot went further, and inevitably affected the operation of opposition groups. Despite all the repugnance against the methods used inside the Communist parties, those who had come from the CPSA were affected by the crude reduction of Marxism to clichés, the excessive idolisation of leaders, the aping of Comintern leaders in their use of invective, and the brutalisation of relations inside the party.

They brought with them from the CPSA, along with their disgust over Comintern policy, the infighting, bitterness and boorish mud slinging that had become the hallmark of Communist Party propaganda and meetings. Although determined to work along new lines, they had imbibed the very Stalinist features that they were committed to fight. Their world outlook had been formed inside the CPSA, and their theoretical framework had been shaped, to a large degree, by Comintern literature. As a result, the Trotskyists squabbled, they split, and they seemed at times, particularly in the Transvaal, to be little better than the Communists in their internal relations.

To their credit, they did break with the CPSA and the Comintern, but the consequences were all too obvious. They had to face, not only hostile right wing groups who were grouped into Fascist gangs, but also the bitter onslaught of members of the CPSA. They were beleaguered and isolated, and found it all too easy to retreat into self-righteous sectarianism. The defence of revolutionary positions was transformed into dogmatic assertions, and from there it was only one step to internal slanging matches, suspensions, expulsions and even fisticuffs. In this they were not unlike small groups everywhere who tried to retrieve what they could of Marxism from the callous counter-revolutionary activities of the Comintern apparatchiks.

The early Trotskyists also had to carve out a new programme and a new perspective for Socialism. They believed that they alone could be the defenders of the achievements of 1917, give a lead to the South African working class, and save Marxism from extinction. Their internationalist ideas were taken largely from the pages of the few journals that reached South Africa from the USA or Europe, and from the news briefings of the International Secretariat of the Left Opposition.[5] Their programme of local demands was hammered out in group discussions with the little that they could salvage from the Communist Party – although some of their formulations inevitably looked as if they were just the old ideas written anew.

The members of the new groups set out to fashion a position that would set them apart from the CPSA and become the basis for activity. They commenced by posing alternatives to the CPSA, particularly the position adopted by the Comintern in 1928, when world revolution was said to be imminent and every section had to adapt its programme to meet this eventuality. The CPSA was instructed to work for a Black Republic, and to adopt a trade union policy that involved control by the party, and used 'revolutionary' methods to raise the workers' consciousness. Initially the Trotskyists opposed the Black Republic slogan, but reversed this (at least theoretically) after seeking Trotsky's opinion. But on the trade union question they continued on the same lines as the Stalinists. In theory they wanted to gain control of the trade unions, or at least build a tight fraction in such organisations through which they could control activities. They also persisted in calling for direct action until Max Gordon, the most outstanding organiser in the Transvaal, resorted to the slow building of the black trade unions with minimum recourse to strike action and using state institutions to secure their demands.[6]

The Cape Town Experience

Groups in South Africa that adhered to the International Left Opposition were always minuscule and poverty stricken. There were only branches in Cape Town and Johannesburg, with a handful of supporters in Durban and Port Elizabeth. This was not very different from the spread of the Communist Party: it reflected the sparseness of population and the siting of transport, colleges and industry. The different social structures of the provinces inevitably affected the perceptions and activities of the groups; they had to find their constituents from the local population and had to advance ideas that would get a response. In some regions this proved almost impossible. The white workers were caught in a web of racism that made most of them unapproachable, and in Natal the Indian workers and students, if active politically, were strongly attracted to Gandhi, Nehru and the Indian National Congress.

In the western Cape, the groups also had to find ways of winning the Coloured people, a people caught by segregatory legislation in the chasm that lay between the whites and the Africans. Consequently, the Cape Town Trotskyists, after painfully recruiting individuals, concentrated on work in discussion clubs, organising the teachers (Coloured and African), and one group appealed to peasant groups in the Transkei and Ciskei in the eastern Cape.

Joe Pick, a foundation member of the CPSA, was the first to write on behalf of a group to the International Secretariat for affiliation to the Left Opposition. Written in 1932, his letter was brief and provided no details. It seems that the group consisted mainly of Jews, most of whom had been in the CPSA or in organisations associated with that party. The next landmark was the launching of the Lenin Club on 29 July 1933. Its members were overwhelm-

ingly Jewish.[7] This changed in 1934 when some members of the ILP merged with the Lenin Club, and academics were invited to lecture. Thereafter the club seems to have become a centre of serious Socialist discussion attracting sizable audiences, offering celebratory meetings on May Day or the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and staging Socialist plays.

Seeking avenues of political activity, the club members found several social problems around which to agitate and organise. Firstly, there was large-scale unemployment in the wake of the depression, which affected Coloured and African workers most severely.[8] This led to the formation of an organisation of the unemployed in which persons committed to the Left Opposition were active, including Dr Goolam Gool and Max Gordon – Gool being a future leader of the Non-European Unity Movement, Gordon of the trade unionists in the Transvaal. However, unemployed organisations are of limited duration. By the middle of 1935 this work had come to an end.[9]

A small group of Lenin Club members, intent on launching a political party, started drafting a programme in August 1934. This led to a split that dominated Trotskyist politics until all the groups dissolved themselves. Those who formed the majority called themselves the Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA). The minority took the name Communist League of South Africa (CLSA), but seem to have been known only as the Lenin Club. Four topics became the subject matter of 'theses': the political economy of the country, the expected world war, the nature of Socialist organisation, and the need to work in trade unions. These were drawn up, circulated and sent to the International Secretariat. Other issues divided the members of the contending groups, but these did not appear in the draft programmes. Foremost among these was the so-called entryist tactic, about which there was extensive discussion.

The differences that emerged among these early Trotskyists were both principled and personal. This led to vituperative attacks on the honesty, sincerity and ability of individual members. Some of the personal criticisms might have been justified, but the attacks did nothing to clarify the basic theoretical differences between the groups. As a consequence some members crossed from one group to another, and some crossed again. Others left the factions in despair. With each group probably numbering a dozen at most (although the Communist League was to claim a larger number), these were a series of storms in thimbles which were irrelevant to the political struggles in the country.

There are no documents to show why those who formed the Workers Party placed the land question at the top of their demands. Perhaps it came from a reading of Lenin's early work on Russia, or it might have been extracted from the Comintern's focus on the land issue in the colonial countries in the early 1930s. It could also have been influenced by the severity of the depression in the rural areas (which had preceded the slump in the national economy), or by the writings on the land question in South Africa by the liberal historian, W MacMillan. Whatever the reason, local or international,

or both, the draft that became the centre of all future discussion, as formulated by the majority group among the activists in the Lenin Club, was on the land question.[10] Burlak, who drafted the document (entitled *The Native Question*), produced government statistics to show that there was a heavy concentration of land ownership in the hands of a small number of white farmers. Alongside this, Africans could own land almost exclusively in the Reserves, which covered at that time about seven per cent of the country's land surface. It was the repossession of this land, they claimed, that would be the rallying point (the axis, the alpha and the omega) of the coming South African revolution. Paradoxically, they rejected the Black Republic slogan, which might have been an obvious corollary to their programme.

Contrary to all that was subsequently claimed by the minority, no formal counter-thesis on the Native Question was presented at the drafting committee, and the paper or notes prepared by MN Averbach (the leader of the minority) was deemed a counter-resolution rather than a thesis in its own right. The original paper written by Averbach and documents sent to the International Secretariat at a later date have not been found. However, an article that appeared in February 1936 in the *Workers Voice*, the organ of the CLSA, on the land question is obtuse. The 'mere cry for land', it argued, 'does not constitute an agrarian problem'. The Africans who were driven off the land suffered mainly from taxes. Their chief need was not for land, but relief from taxation. Averbach seems to have misunderstood the majority position. If the Africans got more land, he wrote, the peasant would still suffer from these pernicious taxes which were designed to drive them into the mines, industry and the farms.[11] But the majority position, sensitive as it was to land hunger, was not designed to provide more land for the African in an unchanged country, but to find a lever through which to overthrow capitalism. The minority position was so unclear on this point that it obscured their main contention: namely, that it was the struggle of the African workers that would be the key to change in South Africa. This position could have been taken without any recourse to theory, and, when it came to theory, Averbach and the minority had little to offer.

On a contentious organisational issue, the majority called for a tightly structured revolutionary party with a clandestine sector (a point rejected by the minority, who said that it was necessary to exploit every avenue of activity while conditions for legal work held). The consequences were obvious. The Communist League seemed to conduct its activities openly, and recruited with a minimum of enquiry into the background of its members. The Workers Party in Cape Town was highly, if not overly, selective, maintained a tight discipline and was secretive in many of its inner party activities. There were rules as to what documents could be read at branch meetings, and what was to be read only by Executive members. It was a regime that led to derisive comment from members of the League.[12] There was a certain logic to the majority's argument, not only because this was what Lenin had demanded for

Russia, but also because the future of democracy (whatever that meant in South Africa) was by no means assured.

The land question has been dealt with first because of its later significance, but the first division was over the coming war.[13] The theses of both sides opposed the expected war, but the minority believed that the white Afrikaners could be drawn towards the revolutionary movement because of their basic 'anti-imperialist' position. They therefore argued for a position of neutrality and collaboration with the Malanite (that is, Nationalist) opposition in parliament. Burlak's analysis of the war, firstly in the thesis and then in *The Spark*, ascribed the war threat to finance capital and condemned both the west and Germany for their war-like stance. There could be no support for either side, and Socialists had to call for revolution to remove capitalism, the cause of the war fever and ultimately war itself, he said.

Then, in a letter of 12 June 1935 to the International Secretariat, the Workers Party lambasted the Communist League. Its war thesis, they said, was the most deadly of documents, and one which was 'equal to suicide' because it would antagonise the Coloured and African populations: 'Under no circumstances can we support the most hated by the Bantu population, part of the white bourgeoisie, the Malanites.' The policy, they said, was opportunism of the worst kind and they added: 'It is regrettable that neither you nor LD [Trotsky] expressed an opinion about the war theses.' There was no response to this complaint. Instead, several letters from the IS urged that the groups were too small and the differences not important enough to justify the split. This was dismissed by the WPSA: they wrote that there could be no union with people who differed so profoundly on basic issues. There was one further thesis, accepted by all, on the necessity for work inside the trade union movement. Unfortunately, the members of both the majority and minority did nothing in this regard in Cape Town. Although the Stalinists set up numerous new trade unions in Cape Town, the Trotskyists were more notable for their absence in this sphere.[14]

Originally there were four so-called theses (two on the war) and one counter-thesis on the land question. All were sent to the IS and to Trotsky for comment.[15] There were two responses to the main thesis on the Native Question: one from Ruth Fischer (pseudonym Dubois), and one from Trotsky. Frank Glass in Shanghai, and Ted Grant and Max Basch in Britain were asked by the IS to comment. There were no responses, although Basch wrote long letters to the WPSA in support of their stand against entryism (see below).

Ruth Fischer's criticisms were crude and insensitive.[16] The original thesis was misquoted, and attention was drawn to this in the translated version that was circulated. Fischer said that statistics were not a substitute for theory (and in this she was correct), and then said, in effect, that the thesis was useless because it did not take as its central issue the struggle against British imperialism. The slogan 'Land for the Natives' was wholly correct, but inadequate. Then, arguing that national liberation was a correct slogan for

South Africa (because, as the majority claimed, there was no black bourgeoisie), she claimed that the white workers, whose support was essential, could only be won on the slogan 'Down with British Imperialism'. That would mean: 'Down with the privileges of the white race, forward the Natives, and also proclamation of the right of total separation from the British Empire.' And so the document went on. It was a document of the time, and could as easily have come from the Comintern. Imperialism was the enemy, imperialism had to be destroyed, and any document that did not start with this proposition was false. But Fischer had, in fact, read too narrowly. The members of the WPSA were nothing if not orthodox Leninists. The fight against imperialism was the theme of their thesis in all their documents, and more particularly in the document on the war, the issue that first divided the factions. Furthermore, its stress, correctly, was on the rôle of finance capital in South Africa. It can be argued that the WPSA's formulation, based on its definition of finance capital, was more accurate than that of Fischer. (Parenthetically, it must be added, the WPSA never again omitted to place the struggle against British imperialism at the head of their demands. Such was the authority of members of the Secretariat that they were not often opposed. Any resemblance to the way the Comintern functioned was not altogether accidental.)

However, at a later date the WPSA wrote:

> At that time we appealed to you, we approached you to decide on the basis of the documents written by the two factions. This is where the comedy begins. You sent back a document written by Comrade Dubois which was the laughing stock not only of the Cape Town comrades, but of all comrades everywhere who had studied the colonial question, who knew anything at all of the problems of South Africa. We appealed to you at that time and we received from you ... Dubois's masterpiece of ignorance.'[17]

Trotsky's contribution is probably still contentious. Although he claimed that he could not really comment on conditions in South Africa because he lacked the necessary information, he nevertheless accepted the thesis on the land (claiming however, that the agrarian revolution could only take place with the active participation of the advanced workers), and argued against the rejection of the Black Republic slogan. This latter was not a temporary aberration, but coincided with Trotsky's other statements on the Comintern's position on an independent Negro state in the middle belt of the USA. To reject the Black Republic out of hand, he said, arose from exaggerations in the polemic against the Comintern. The blacks would form the majority in a transformed South Africa, and the country would obviously constitute a Black Republic. He further said that under no condition could revolutionaries offer the smallest finger to white chauvinism.

Trotsky's remarks were set inside an international perspective. He stated at the outset that it could be assumed that the revolution in Britain would precede that of South Africa. In that case, it was essential that there be no

support for the bourgeoisie from the colonies and dominions. That made the struggle for the expulsion of British imperialism an indispensable part of the programme of the South African proletarian party. At the end of his letter, he spoke of a future in which Soviet Britain would exercise a powerful economic and cultural influence on South Africa through the medium of those whites who had shown their solidarity, through struggle, with the black workers. A Socialist South Africa, in turn, would exercise a profound influence on the whole black continent.[18]

Trotsky's remarks on the draft thesis, which were referred to repeatedly in the polemics inside the South African Trotskyist movement, were important in orientating the left towards the African people, but they also did a grave disservice to the Socialist movement. I discuss this in a paper presented in Aberdeen in August 1990, and do not wish to repeat the arguments here.[19] The one point that must be stressed is that Trotsky's major contention was doubly false. In terms of his own original work in Russia in 1904-06, he should have been aware of the impact of finance capital on a backward country. He knew from the literature on South Africa (or should have known) that investment in gold mining had played a crucial rôle in opening up the country to foreign capital, and he should have known (from Luxemburg and from Lenin, if not from primary sources) that this had given rise to a large concentrated workforce. Yet, in this too, he failed to provide direction. He spoke of the proletariat consisting of 'backward black pariahs and a privileged caste of whites', but failed to say that the black workers would one day provide the base for a powerful proletarian movement. He also knew that it was not possible to talk of ethnic groups as if they were homogeneous. As he had pointed out in his writings on China, there had to be a discussion of the class forces and the rôle that each class would play in any struggle for change. But his letter offered no hint of the need to develop such ideas for South Africa.

Despite their angry response to the tone of Fischer's letter, there is no full length reply to the substance of her remarks from the WPSA. However, in a letter of 14 May 1935 to the International Secretariat, they said that their thesis criticised the Stalinist slogan of 'Independent Native Republics as a step towards a Workers' and Peasants' Republic'. Their position, they stressed, pointing to the class nature of the struggle, dealt with the strategy of the revolution and not the tactics. In a further comment they said that the original differences had been on the war question. Only after the minority had faced opposition on their call for a future alliance with the Afrikaner Nationalists in a war, did they produce supplementary arguments to 'iron out contradictions' in their policy.[20]

The majority launched the Workers Party of South Africa at the end of January 1935. They felt vindicated by Trotsky's letter, and in their letter to him they said that his comments indicated that there was no disagreement in principle. They confessed to having written in exaggerated terms in opposing the Black Republic slogan because of their struggle against the pernicious national policies of Stalinism. Of course, the full liberation of South Africa

would lead to a black republic. They repeated their rejection of the slogan of a 'Native Republic as a step towards a Workers' and Peasants' Republic'. They were not pandering to white chauvinism, they said, or avoiding an open fight for full rights, but rejected the slogan which was based on the idea of a national revolution. In any future general strike and armed insurrection, the participation of the white workers was essential because they held crucial positions in heavy industry, electricity, water supply, communication and transport, and in all branches of the repressive apparatus. The active support of one part of the white proletariat and the neutralisation of the other was essential.

The letter then continued. They confirmed that the revolutionary party had to turn primarily towards the black workers. Their national self-consciousness had to be developed, but not by kindling and developing chauvinism. Both the national and agrarian questions could only find their solution through the social revolution. For good measure, they added that the central slogan was for 'The overthrow of British Imperialism and Colonial Capitalism', and for a Soviet South African Republic with the right of all races to self-determination, and guarantees for the rights of minorities.[21] It was probably this set of ideas that took their members, first to the All-African Convention, the body called to oppose the Hertzog Native Bills, and then several years later to merge with a Coloured organisation, the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department, or Anti-CAD (also in the hands of members of the Workers Party), to establish the Non-European Unity Movement, the NEUM. That was to become the almost exclusive activity of members of the Workers Party from 1943 until at least 1958, although the WPSA seems to have gone out of existence finally in the early 1950s.

There is some confusion about which group constituted the majority or minority in the preliminary discussions for a programme and constitution. Firstly, the Lenin Club was an open body. Those involved in the dispute were a fraction of the club. Secondly, it seems that Burlak, the writer of the main programmatic papers, was in a minority of one on the drafting committee of four, but then won a majority to his position.[22] The group that accepted the Burlak paper thereafter claimed to be the majority, and were called such by the IS.

But that is looking ahead. Both groups stayed inside the Lenin Club for at least six months, but the club no longer prospered. There were lectures, but no activity: no leafleting, no open air meetings. Differences on almost every issue were obvious, and a split could not be stopped. Finally, the WPSA members walked out and set up their own Spartacus Club in July 1935.

One other issue separated the majority and minority, the argument over the 'French turn'. That is the policy of entryism that had been accepted by the French Trotskyists in order to widen their ranks.[22a] The WPSA argued that it was necessary to build a revolutionary party untainted by reformism. There were long letters from Basch, who opposed entryism, and the issue was also raised with the IS. Besides the fact that the latter agreed with the French

group, they also said that they had no intimation from the theses that this was a matter of contention between the majority and minority.

The IS opposed the split, and appealed to the minority to join ranks with the WPSA. In so doing they also urged the majority to accept the Averbach group into their ranks. In response, and with reluctance, the WPSA said that they would accept the members of the minority on a personal basis, but not as a group, and they apparently meant to exclude some of the leading members. Purdy in Johannesburg also urged unity. He wrote for the *Workers Voice*, and his motives were questioned by Burlak et al. There was no unity, and the groups went their separate way.[23]

In 1935, when the groups in Cape Town had barely settled down, there was a new factor that was to prove far reaching in its effects on the Trotskyist movement. The Prime Minister, General Hertzog, had been pressing since 1926 for legislation that would finally demarcate the lands that African could occupy, and the removal of the small number of African voters in the Cape Province from the common roll. This required a two-thirds majority in a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament, and this became feasible when the National Party fused with Smuts's South African Party in 1934. The twin threat of land restriction and removal of the vote became a political issue that impinged on all parties at the time. This threat could not be ignored, more particularly in the Cape where the Cape Native Voters Association and rural associations (among others) were agitated over these issues.

The presentation to parliament of the Four Native Bills (as Hertzog's proposals were known)[24] in 1935 came shortly before the invasion of Ethiopia by the Italian army, and the groundswell of agitation over the latter, with the CPSA in the foreground, provided an outlet for the fledgling groups. The invasion was met by a refusal by black dockers to load Italian ships, and then, when the war began and the Ethiopian troops gained initial successes, there was widespread enthusiasm for the war. The Trotskyists joined in the protests and undoubtedly attracted some people to themselves, but the agitation died away, and, when the Ethiopian troops were turned back, the issue turned sour and the demonstrations stopped. In the campaigning the WPSA rejected an overture from the Communist League to work together because the latter's statements included an appeal to the League of Nations.[25]

There was a third issue in South Africa that generated more heat in the Transvaal than elsewhere, but impinged on groups everywhere. The pro-German Greyshirts (composed of Afrikaner nationalists and reinforced by white unemployed), emerged in the wake of Hitler's rise to power. An Anti-Fascist League, composed of the more militant white workers' unions, Zionists and members of the Labour Party and the Communist Party clashed with the Greyshirts in a series of battles. Some members of the WPSA in Johannesburg joined this front. Although the Cape Town group might not have approved of the front, the policy of the Johannesburg branch, which involved complete autonomy for themselves and any other participating group, was accepted.

There is no indication that the Cape Town groups had any plan for concrete activity. Their one intervention was to join the call to dockers to stop loading Italian ships, but there is little to indicate that they set out to organise workers or peasants. They were propaganda groups who held street corner meetings, used street theatre to attract audiences, and on a few occasions (illegally) entered one of the black locations to speak to residents. Members of the Communist League also confronted workers in some occupations, and urged them to form trade unions, but these were the result of individual initiatives rather than a thought out plan.[26]

Their most important task was the producing of journals. The WPSA published *The Spark*, a mimeographed journal with radical and theoretical articles, including reprints of articles by Trotsky and members of the American Socialist Workers Party. It remains one of the most important Marxist journals to have emerged from South Africa. Yet, except for reports by their members who were members of the National Liberation League or were present at conferences of the All-African Convention, there were few indications of activities in Cape Town, in the trade unions or in any community body. The Communist League's paper, *Workers Voice*, was agitational with little theory in its pages. It gave no indication of political activity, publication was erratic, and ceased, probably after the dissolution of the Lenin Club in September 1936.[27]

In March or April 1937 the one-time dispute over the French turn became real. The members of the CLSA, even more isolated than before, joined with Stalinists and Coloured nationalists in the Cape Town based Socialist Party, and temporarily abandoned their organisation.[28] The Socialist Party was a Cape Town centred group launched by Duncan Burnside, a parliamentarian and one-time member of the Labour Party, who resigned and formed the Socialist Party in April 1937. But the party collapsed when Burnside rejoined the SALP to contest the 1938 elections. When the members of the CLSA emerged from that dubious adventure, their numbers were said to have been little changed. But the Lenin Club had disappeared, the League had lost all initiative, and they had to start as from scratch. Initially, they regrouped as the Fourth International Club, met in a private house as a study circle, and sought unity with the WPSA. There were talks about talks, but the WPSA had no intention of agreeing. Several young Coloured intellectuals and a young student, Hosea Jaffe, joined the Club in 1939, and at some stage it was renamed as the Fourth International Organisation of South Africa (FIOSA). Sometime, probably in 1942, a mimeographed *Workers Voice* was published. It claimed to be Volume 1, and in so doing negated the journal of 1935-36. Its editor and main contributor was Jaffe, and he maintained this control wherever he went. There is no record of the group initiating any activity, although some of its members were involved in the protests of the Coloured people when the government threatened to remove their vote before the war. However, it is not clear whether these people acted as individuals or as members of their group.

The Transvaal Experience

Johannesburg was the only other centre in which the Trotskyists managed to form a group.[29] At first, there were only Frank Glass and his wife Fanny Klenerman.[30] Seeking activity, Glass went to Shanghai in 1931 where he played a more important rôle in the Fourth International than any emigrant from South Africa, but except for his letter to *The Militant* he does not belong to this account. Fanny Klenerman (who had once organised the trade union of women workers) took over the bookshop that Glass left behind, and, after a period of financial difficulty which affected the stock she had available, established a reputation as the finest bookseller in the country and a centre for Marxist books in Johannesburg. Without that shop, books by Trotsky and his co-workers, and other Socialist thinkers, would not have been available in that city. Her own role in the Trotskyist movement is unclear. She stood aloof from the WPSA, and besides providing support for Gordon when he organised African trade unions in the Transvaal, was effective mainly in being a known mine of information on events in the European Socialist movements.

The process in Johannesburg was very different to that of the Cape. From April to October 1932 letters were sent to the IS and the Communist League of America by WT Thibedi. He said he was writing on behalf of 22 Africans in the Transvaal who were or had been in the CPSA, and claimed to have several trade unions under his control. The Americans to whom this was written referred Thibedi to M Lopes in Cape Town. Nothing further happened, and without resources and with men who had little training, the group collapsed.[31] His importance lay not only in his being black, but in his claim to have brought with him several of the trade unions initiated by the CPSA in their Red Trade Union organisation. Thibedi's list included Alpheus Maliba, who was to become the most important peasant leader in the northern Transvaal during the early 1940s.[32] However, several of the men, including Maliba, who were said to have agreed with Thibedi's letters had second thoughts. They did not accept the need for a new party and several stayed in the CPSA.

Trotsky wrote a most enthusiastic letter when he heard that black toilers wished to work with the Left Opposition. The continuity between this first letter by Trotsky on South Africa with his later response to the WPSA thesis is obvious. Trotsky sought contact with workers untainted with the world of capital and free of racism. Who better than an African who claimed to have brought with him fellow revolutionaries and the nucleus of black trade unions?

However, Thibedi was a shadowy man. Despite his long membership of the CPSA and his period as a union organiser, he had not criticised events in the CPSA or in the USSR, and had not contributed any ideas of note to the left wing movement.[33] He is said to have produced one copy of a newspaper in African languages (no copy of which survives), but there is no record of activity in his new group, or of any trade union work. He disappeared after an

extended correspondence with the IS, in large part devoted to his requests for financial assistance, something the IS was unable to satisfy. Thibedi left the political scene for over a decade, and only reappeared in 1945 when he was introduced to, and joined, the Workers International League. His approach was narrowly nationalist, and, after being accused of chauvinism, he was expelled. He then melted back into the anonymity from which he had temporarily emerged.[34]

As in the south, the groups that came into being drew on those expelled from the CPSA. These included Ralph Lee (or Levy) but, in his case, hewas expelled after serving a jail sentence for cat burglary. Lee said retrospectively, in his own wry way, that he had been expropriating the bourgeoisie one by one! Except for the colour of his skin, Lee was not exceptional. A large number of Coloureds and Africans in the CPSA had spent one or more spells in jail on charges of petty larceny. Other members of the CPSA who had joined Lee in these ventures escaped arrest, and stayed on as loyal members of the party. The group that did establish itself was the Bolshevik Leninist League. Formed in April 1934, it affiliated with the WPSA just as the latter was about to announce its existence.[35] Its members (and in particular Ralph and Millie Lee) established contacts outside Johannesburg, but never founded a stable group in other urban centres.[36] Once again, there was the slow recruiting of members, but at the same time the group was involved in trade union work, concentrating on the unorganised African workers. After Thibedi, Purdy organised the laundry workers, with dubious results. Thereafter, the union was handed over to Max Gordon, who had left Cape Town in early 1935, and it was Gordon, more than anybody else, who made his mark as a trade union organiser. The activities in the trade unions are discussed in an accompanying article.

The work in Johannesburg was not confined to the organising of trade unions. There were the usual meetings, classes, establishment of branches (particularly in Alexandra Township, a black township on the northern tip of Johannesburg), open air meetings, and so on. Externally, at least, the group functioned as any small radical group might be expected to perform. But internally there was turmoil. Of the original group of nine or 10, there were seven expulsions or withdrawals in the first eight months. Thereafter, the rump was disbanded and the group reconstituted. The only members of the original group that remained were Lee and his wife. There were slanging matches, fisticuffs, accusations and counter-accusations, and a stream of complaints to Cape Town. But Cape Town would not, or could not, intervene. The group literally tore itself apart, and from this distance it is not possible to disentangle the rights and wrongs of what happened.[37]

Gordon withdrew from the Johannesburg branch, and, condemned for his non-participation by the Cape Town committee, continued his trade union work independently of the WPSA. His activities went unrecorded in *The Spark*, and his successes were not mentioned in further correspondence. The one matter of which the Trotskyists could have been truly proud, and the

one that the Stalinists found the greatest threat to their political hegemony, was written out of the Trotskyist annals. Several years later, a new generation of Trotskyists, who only heard stories of Gordon's work, sought to emulate his activities in the black trade unions.[38]

Developments in Cape Town

When the WPSA and CLSA were formed in January 1935, the International Secretariat maintained that the groups were too small to form a party, and called for further discussion on programmatic issues. But it was too late. The parties had formed themselves, and had declared their existence. Furthermore, the two groups were at daggers drawn, and could not agree on any issue. Letters from the Secretariat had antagonised the leading members of the WPSA, and they were not inclined to listen. Yet the situation was absurd. The WPSA had an initial membership of 11, only three of whom seemed to be active and able to contribute to its journal. By mid-year two of the 11 had resigned. The CLSA, starting with four members, seemed to have recruited another nine, but it is doubtful whether more than three or four were active. Also by mid-1935 there were two Clubs, giving a periphery of about 25 or 30 others, none of which engaged directly in political activity. The Johannesburg group was even smaller, more fractious and centred on one or two persons. Nor were they all committed to the majority's theses. Purdy was closer to the minority, but he was expelled from the Johannesburg group (for assaulting Lee), and his thesis was never formally discussed inside the WPSA.

The Communist League and some of those expelled from the Johannesburg group adopted the IS' line. They called for unification and for a looser structure. They also argued for more discussion on programme and on activities. To no avail: the leading members of the WPSA in Cape Town, and Lee in the north, were immovable. The leaders of the WPSA were accused of bureaucracy and of Stalinist methods, and they in turned replied with counter-attacks of 'Menshevism', of lack of principles, and so on.

Yet the time was not ripe for a centralised party, and it was absurd to believe that a finished programme had been formulated. On the contrary, it was a time for further discussion and study, and also for activity that would recruit new members and provide the experience which could lead to correction and amplification of earlier formulations. The Cape Town groups were mainly white and predominantly Jewish. Many were more familiar with Yiddish than with English, and their articles required rewriting. Initially there were few Africans or Coloureds, and recruiting was painfully slow. Aware of the problem, the Secretary of the WPSA explained in one letter that it was not possible to work legally with blacks. His reference, presumably, was to the few African townships where whites were not allowed entry without a visitor's permit. There were no full-time organisers, and it seems that nobody in the WPSA or CLSA was involved in trade union work.

The first crucial engagement in political work, although little more than attendance at a conference, was to move WPSA politics at a later date into entirely new channels. This came from the presence of Tabata, Jaineb Gool (later Mrs Tabata) and Goolam Gool at the All-African Convention, convened in 1935, to organise a campaign against the Hertzog Native Bills.[39] What happened at the conferences is still unclear. The official minutes of the conferences were written and published by the President, DDT Jabavu, a lecturer at the segregated college at Fort Hare, and he was highly selective in what he recorded.[40]

The Spark carried reports of the proceedings each year (1935-37), and was sharply critical of the tactics (or antics) of the self-appointed leaders. They lambasted the President, and criticised his policies and his autocratic behaviour. There is an even more caustic description of events in 1937 in the recently published diary of Ralph Bunche, at that time a radical left winger, who toured South Africa. He described caucuses, which included members of the WPSA and Communist League, where more radical policies were demanded.[41]

Yet the new organisation seemed to offer an ideal platform. The two issues at stake were land and the vote. The demand for more land and the ending of the reserve system were demands that fitted in with the WPSA's thesis. The question of the vote coincided with Trotsky's call to politicise the land question, and it also pointed in the direction of a Black Republic. Furthermore, the federal basis upon which the Convention had been summoned allowed left wing groups an autonomy within a potentially large organisation. However, it was an outlet which did not lead to the working class, and in which all reference to Socialism was silenced. The crucial intervention of the advanced workers in any solution of the land question, which had been stressed by Trotsky in his letter, was by-passed and never appeared in the contributions of Tabata et al at the AAC.[42]

The first conference of the AAC in 1935 called for a rejection of the Hertzog Bills, and a delegation was nominated to interview the Prime Minister. It was following the meetings with Hertzog and other members of parliament that a 'compromise' was announced. Instead of abolishing the Cape African vote, those already enfranchised would be placed on a separate roll. An advisory Native Representative Council would be elected, as would whites who would represent Africans in parliament and the senate. No one would confess to having agreed to the 'compromise', and this was to be a source of friction in the years to come.

In the first years of its existence, the impact of the AAC on the WPSA was minimal. The AAC was confined to an annual gathering (later biannual) with no intervening activity, and little was required of those who gathered at conference. The fact that leading cadre of the WPSA would assume leadership of the movement, and in the process become Nationalist leaders with a Trotskyist façade, was a caricature of Trotsky's meaning in his reply to the theses.

The articles on the Native Bills and the AAC in *The Spark* led to the first rift between Johannesburg and Cape Town. There was an exchange between Lee and Burlak on the factors that led to the 'compromise', Lee insisting that it was a ruse to win African support for the coming war, whilst Burlak maintained that Hertzog had made the concession in order to win the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament. The nature of the disagreement between Lee and Burlak is only of academic interest now. Nor is it clear why so much heat was generated by the Johannesburg group over the issue. They refused to sell *The Spark*, distanced themselves from the journal, and started their own publication *Umlilo Mollo* (*The Flame*). Then, at Lee's insistence, the debate was published in *The Spark*. Lee's arguments did not stand up, and no more was heard of the matter.

The distance between Cape Town and Johannesburg made joint work almost impossible, and the impecunious state of the groups meant that there was no money for train fares across 1000 miles. Consequently, there were no visits for consultations, no conferences, and no election of committees. Contact was maintained through the post, and many decisions were taken without full consultation. In Cape Town almost all the work was conducted by Burlak, Koston and Goodlatte. They handled the mail with groups in the US, the UK and Australia, translated documents from the IS, typed the monthly *Spark*, and maintained the work of the group in Cape Town as well as the Spartacus Club. It was an overwhelming load, but there were no full time party workers, and no indication that other members assisted in any substantial way.

At first the Editorial Board of *The Spark* was made up of the Cape Town trio and three from Johannesburg. This was to be Lee and two others. However, the constantly changing membership of the Johannesburg group left Lee as the only effective member. His contributions to the journal were spasmodic, and then, with the dispute over the Native Bills, the Johannesburg members withdrew from the Editorial Board, and for two months they did not distribute *The Spark*. Also, in April 1936 (prior to the dispute) when Koston resigned for personal reasons, Lee had been appointed National Secretary of the WPSA. It was an appointment that was more nominal than real. Little was altered by the Secretary being in Johannesburg, but the dispute placed the whole party in jeopardy.

African members seemed to leave as fast as they were recruited, and the training on offer was rudimentary. One new member who seemed to be different was CBI Dladla, a prominent member of the CPSA from Nigel, a mining town on the western edge of the Witwatersrand. His appearance as a Trotskyist was announced to the public in *Umlilo*. He was to became Secretary of the Johannesburg group.[43]

In all this there was more than a touch of eccentricity in Lee's activities. In one letter written by (an embittered) Gordon, Lee was accused of being inactive in the Laundry Workers Union, and of dissolute behaviour. Also, according to Heaton Lee, at one stage he was convinced that he knew where

the Kruger millions were to be found. For weeks he had members of the group digging at selected spots for this treasure trove.[44]

The withdrawal from *The Spark* was the politics of sectarianism, and it was followed in July 1937 by the decision of Ralph and Millie Lee, Heaton Lee and Dick Freislich to leave Johannesburg for Britain. There was no warning of the impending move, and the Johannesburg group was stripped of its leadership. The WPSA was left to find a new Secretary. It was reconstructed in Johannesburg with Max Sapire as secretary. The group, which was mainly white, had some involvement in trade union work, but its claims of success were exaggerated. That is, some of its members were rank and file trade unionists, and attempts to restart African trade unions were not successful. Then the group all but disappeared. At some stage other groups appeared. One was known as the Propaganda Group for a Fourth International, of which Gordon and Klenerman were members. Another was the Johannesburg Group of the Fourth International led by Saperstein (an original member of the WPSA who had clashed with Lee) and Leon Sapire. These groups left few documents, and little is known about them.[45]

Then a new group (or a reconstituted group), the Socialist Workers League appeared in Johannesburg in December 1938 after a split in the Johannesburg Group for a Fourth International. It had a programme and a constitution that ran to several pages. The programme took the WPSA to task on two grounds: i) because it gave no attention to the white peasant or white worker, and ii) because the WPSA, in calling for support for the All-African Convention (without one word on 'its treacherous rôle') had: 'Not one word of the class struggle of the oppressed masses. Just national struggle for liberation and ignoring the white workers.'

The SWL eschewed black national organisation or black chauvinism, whilst condemning the white chauvinism of superiority and segregation. They accepted parallel organisations until objective conditions made it possible for such bodies to draw closer. It seems that it was this group that produced three issues of *Socialist Action* in 1939.[46] The paper was in English and Afrikaans, but besides being anti-Fascist (which indicated a former association with the Anti-Fascist League), it gave no support to Gordon, although it called for work in the black trade unions. Then in September, when war was declared, the group scuttled and ran. Its programme and constitution were surrendered, and its anti-war stand forgotten. Some of its members were to reappear temporarily in 1944 before finally leaving the scene. None made any (known) contribution to theory, and none lifted a finger in practical political work.

In late 1937, with failing health, Clare Goodlatte relinquished her rôle as Secretary of the WPSA, but continued with her work on the Editorial Board of *The Spark*. At the end of 1938 she withdrew from all activity, weakening the group considerably. There were now far too few members to sustain the journal or to entertain the idea of embarking on new activity. By mid-1938 the strains were showing. Writing to Basch in London, Koston wrote:

About us ... not so good. Our *Spark* circulation increases slowly, now about 900 are printed monthly and 800 disposed of. We have more than 400 individuals on the mailing list. Recently we circulated about 400 questionnaires to Bantu readers ... The result has been disappointing, only about 15 bothering to fill it up and send it back ... perhaps three or four sound very hopeful.

Basically our trouble [in Cape Town] is this. None of us is in a position to give more than our evenings to the work that had to be done. Of course this is hopeless. We have given a certain theoretical training to a number of Bantu members here, but as they are wholly without practical knowledge and not in a position to go out and organise and learn by their mistakes, nothing much is done. If we had one good European organiser we could support him and our Bantu comrades, and if we could organise **one** trade union victory everything would change here. There have been in the last 18 months, a wave of spontaneous strikes started by the Bantu at such widely separate places as Durban, Piquetberg, Johannesburg suburbs, etc. Every one of them has failed, not only because the bosses realise that they mustn't let the Bantu win a strike, but also because the Bantu don't know how to run a strike. One victorious strike would mean a lot. It would show the Bantu that there is a way, some way, of bettering their lot, and they would be ready to listen to those who have shown them the way. After all, why should the Bantu or the workers anywhere for that matter listen to us and take us on our face value? The fact that we have successfully predicted the disastrous outcome of Stalinist policies is not enough: this effects only a few individuals, those who follow and study events...

The Spark is intended for the Bantu intellectual. From him its message should percolate down. But the Bantu intellectual, first of all is a very thin strata [sic] in the country, secondly very backward and ignorant (cannot in anyway be compared with Indian, Chinese, not to speak of European intellectual), feels so much better off (which he is) than the Bantu masses that he wants to lead the masses in his own way, which is naturally not a revolutionary way. The intellectual does not feel the full force of the oppression, he eats, and he hopes and believes in the rulers...'

In August 1939 the editors of *The Spark* announced that the government's imposition of controls on publications spelt the end of open discussion in the country. In fact, the triumvirate were tired and probably dispirited. Goodlatte, after a long illness, resigned form all positions in 1939. She died in 1942.[47] *The Spark* did not appear again, and the group published no leaflets or pamphlets. It seems to have continued through the first years of the war, making no new statement, but its members, Tabata, Jaineb and Goolam Gool, Ben Kies and others were the moving spirit behind the NEUM, the AAC and the Anti-CAD, and its main associated movements – the two teachers' organisations and the Transkei Organised Body. This was not entryism in the formal sense of the word, because the main bodies had either to be reconstructed or formed. But it was an inverted entryism in which

populist movements were established so that Trotskyists could enter them, and even be their leaders. In the process they ceased being Trotskyists, although these movements were called Trotskyist by their opponents.

The War

The war in Europe, starting in September 1939, was not unexpected. Both Stalinists and Trotskyists had warned that war would break out, but there was little agreement on where it would begin or what to do when it commenced. The Stalinists followed the USSR blindly, switching policy in line with changes in Europe, and, having been so involved in Popular Front, anti-war and anti-Fascist movements, vacillated when war was declared until 'the line' was made clear from Moscow. Until the invasion of Russia they were anti-war: then they switched immediately. The Trotskyists were anti-war but there was confusion on policy. Inside the WPSA there had been heated debate over where the war would begin. Burlak said that it would start as a war between Britain and Germany; others said that the opening shots would be against the USSR. All were agreed that they would oppose the war and, in line with Lenin's position in 1915, called for the defeat of their own government. At the same time, they supported Trotsky's call for the unconditional defence of the USSR.

There were no published statements from the WPSA after war was declared. The group withdrew from public sight, and, even if this was a move to covert activity, it was the underground action of the graveyard. There are stories that indicate that they continued to meet, but their self-imposed silence rendered them politically ineffectual. Even those connected with the AAC and, after 1943, with the NEUM, kept discretely silent on the war. They did not even refute the statement of the leaders of the AAC, together with the ANC, supporting the government in its war effort.

Through the first months of the war, the group that now called itself the FIOSA maintained its absurd policy: that it would be possible to form a front with elements in the National Party who were anti-war.[48] At some point, this was discretely dropped and never alluded to again. Jaffe wrote a 66 page pamphlet entitled *World War or World Socialism*. The chapter on the war occupies 11 pages, and in it Jaffe defined Fascism as the universalisation to which 'degenerate bourgeois society' tended, and as 'the completion of the merging of monopoly finance capital with the capitalist political state'. He also discerned 'the emergence of Fascism out of the threat of revolution'. This was in fact little more than the Comintern's definition. Then he added: the conflict was between two forces that were so much alike that he could see no end on a 'purely military plane' – 'only the Socialist revolution can finally end the war'.

Proclaiming the need for 'revolutionary defeatism', Jaffe had advice for everyone. For the German workers, this was simple. They had to sabotage the war effort. For South Africa, the prescription was also obvious – in the face of

a possible Japanese invasion the coloured people would be neutral in the battles between the government and the invader, and between the government and the pro-Axis Afrikaners. Once again, there was no reference to the previous stand of the Communist League. For workers in the Allied countries who feared Nazism, Jaffe recommended strikes, election fights against the war, mass meetings, demonstrations and 'other ways of open struggle'.[49] A far cry from 'revolutionary defeatism', and with no call for work on the armed forces, his call for such defeatism was obscure.

There are few signs of activity in the FIOSA group in Cape Town. They held meetings, they produced a paper, and they distributed leaflets. They also gave verbal support to the NEUM – and that seems to be all.[50] At a later date Jaffe produced a paper with the title *Militant Worker* which purported to represent a set of trade unions – but there is no record of these unions and no indication that they were anything more than a front for Jaffe's participation in trade union conferences.

All Trotskyist activity in Johannesburg ostensibly ceased after September 1939, although a group seems to have been formed at the University. Gordon had the distinction of being the only Trotskyist to be interned during the war, but the trade unions remained as a monument to his work. Then, in mid-1942 and again at the beginning of 1943, Jaffe moved to Johannesburg to start a group. He gathered together half a dozen members (including Fanny Klenerman and a few black trade unionists). This was a talking group, and besides assisting Jaffe in producing the paper, there was no other activity. In August 1943 the group was joined by half a dozen members of the left wing Zionist group, Hashomer Hatzair, and, in the absence of any other trained members, they soon assumed the leadership in Johannesburg.[51]

There was a malaise in the movement which grew ever sharper in the next few years. Members of the WPSA, Tabata, the Gools, Ben Kies and others, no longer wearing the mantle of Trotskyism, took the initiative in the Cape in 1943 in calling together the almost defunct AAC, organising the Anti-CAD and launching the NEUM. Henceforth, the Trotskyists acted as leaders of a national liberation movement, based their work on the vague terms of a minimum programme of democratic demands, and eschewed all class politics.[52] The members of the FIOSA followed in the shadow of their erstwhile opponents, and devoted most of their energy to promoting the cause of the NEUM, first as unwelcome guests, but later as part of the leadership. Yet, in effect, there was little to be done. The AAC, the Anti-CAD and the NEUM were all federal bodies, and all activity was left to the constituent parts to initiate. There were no national initiatives, no campaigns, and no directives – outside of the brandishing of the slogan of 'non-collaboration', the latter calling for boycotts of persons or institutions cooperating with government, provincial or local bodies. *Torch*, the newspaper of the NEUM, was vituperative in its attacks on all collaborators (the 'quislings' as they were called), attacked the white ruling class as 'herrenvolk', and declared its organisational superiority in having a programme that demanded the vote, and the policy of

non-collaboration. Socialism, the rôle of the worker and internationalism, were verboten words.

The AAC leaders, and Tabata in particular, turned their attention to the rural population. In the Reserves, but most particularly in the Ciskei and the Transkei, they mounted a campaign against the implementation of the rehabilitation scheme, a government policy of resettlement of homesteads, cattle culling, and an enforced system of crop rotation. The problem, said Tabata and his followers, was not overstocking, but of too little land. For this they won support. In this they were only continuing a position that can be traced back to at least 15 September 1938. In a letter of that date, from the WPSA to MS Njisane in the Transkei, the writer said that:

> The problem of overstocking is the problem of overpopulation, and this in turn is the problem of insufficiency of land. This is the crux of the matter, and any "solution" that does not touch this fundamental problem – the land problem – is sheer hypocrisy and can solve nothing.'

The letter continued, citing the number of landless homesteads in the region, and the lack of money to improve stock. It was a long letter which then went on to say:

> The Reserves are for the government nothing but a reservoir of cheap Native labour for the mines and for the farms, and the misery in the Reserves is fostered towards this end.

The government would not give the African sufficient land to plough, and an additional burden was imposed through the poll tax to force Africans out of the Reserves to work. The letter concluded by stating that there could be no solution under capitalism. Socialism provided the only solution with its plans for 'a scientific distribution and use of land' in a system 'which will be concerned with the needs of the people and not with making profits'.

However, the NEUM had done nothing beyond issuing rallying calls, it had no plans for action, and there was no more talk about Socialism. Forgotten was the concluding words of that letter of 1938 which said that the motto of the society they wanted was 'from each according to his ability; to each according to his need'. When finally there was an armed peasant revolt in Pondoland in 1960, the AAC was split – with the central leadership refusing to be involved in a campaign that, they said, could not possibly succeed.

However, the issue is not what these erstwhile Trotskyists were doing – or not doing. By becoming the leaders of a national movement they behaved as nationalists. It can be argued that it was permissible to enter such a movement, participate in its activities, and even be elected to its committees, and equally, when required, to leave its ranks, criticise it and even condemn it for its false policies.[53] However, when revolutionaries establish such movements and put themselves at the head, they are tied in spirit and ideology to such movements – and in that they mix the rhetoric of radicalism with the conservatism of nationalist policies.[54]

Meanwhile, the FIOSA group in Johannesburg, unable to make progress before Jaffe's return to the Cape, persuaded Lee, who had returned to Johannesburg, to join them. He grew impatient with a set of amateurs, tried to galvanise them into action, and he also planned some active position for himself. This alarmed Jaffe, who revived old accusations against Lee, although they had been shown to be false in Britain. In a manner reminiscent of the prewar days (but unknown to the newcomers), Lee was expelled in 1944. The procedure was both reckless and corrupt, but perhaps it was fortunate. Lee, stung by this event, contacted many of the former Johannesburg Trotskyists, and, launching the Workers International League (WIL), initiated an ambitious programme of activity, and, most important of all, he found some of Gordon's old trade union organisers. This provided the WIL with a means to work with and to influence the African trade union movement. Jaffe had returned to Cape Town, and for several months the Johannesburg group survived.[55] But it could not last. The *Workers Voice* became increasingly remote, and when the paper arrived at the end of June 1944 with blazing headlines 'Why The Second Front Will Not Be Opened', the group said they could not sell the paper: the second front had been opened on the 6th. Jaffe's response was that the prediction might have been wrong, but the analysis was correct. That opened a gap that finally led the Johannesburg group to make their peace with Lee and join the WIL.

Lee proved remarkable in providing the means of approaching the trade unions, and also of finding the means to print a newspaper at minimal cost. The group was alive and found the means to influence events. Their anti-war position, which was more a matter of rhetoric than of activity, nonetheless meant that they were prepared to encourage and engage in strike action, and although the Africans were not interested in the politics of the WIL, they responded to the militant trade unionism that the WIL encouraged.[56]

The members of the WIL had few illusions about their work in the unions. They knew that they were not getting their political message across to the workers, were meeting only the needs of the trade union bureaucracy (militant as they sometimes were), and could not hope to gain immediate converts from these quarters. Yet, the impact of WIL activity resonated there and elsewhere. At the time of the Alexandra bus boycott in 1944, a section of the boycott committee, impressed by the activities of the WIL, joined the group and gave it a presence in that township. It also gave the WIL a fillip by bringing to its ranks Vincent and Lilian Swart, two talented intellectuals with a wide circle of contacts.[57] But there were also casualties. The old-timers had mostly dropped out, and Lee, in a repetition of the behaviour that Gordon had noted in 1935, stopped coming.

The group grew to over 50. Its activities extended to assistance for the African teachers in their campaign for higher wages, intervention in townships where persons were in conflict with the administration, and the usual run of pamphleteering, calling meetings, and so on. The WIL's influence in the trade unions extended to nearly half the existing organisations, and its

members (or sympathisers like Koza) played a significant rôle in the unions and at the conferences of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions.[58] It was soon after this event that the Swarts met with David Schrire of the old Spartacus Club. He apparently persuaded them that trade union organisation was a waste of time and that they would be better occupied in studying Marxism. They concurred, and basing themselves on the spurious argument that local industry was a wartime bubble, and that the black working class would be dismantled when the armed forces were demobilised, called for the abandonment of the WIL's trade union work. Instead, they called for study and a retreat to community organisation. Factions were established, with Hirson leading a minority of eight, opposing the abandonment of trade union work.[59] The Swart group, firmly established in the Alexandra group, won overwhelmingly, and apparently hoped for the resignation of the minority.

However, the minority stayed, protesting that they would accept group discipline and would be shown to have been correct. Shortly thereafter, members of the majority, including the leaders, announced their joint resignation by letter. They had not even bothered to call a meeting or inform their supporters, and left behind them a majority that was completely demoralised. Within two months, in April 1946, the WIL ceased to exist – just before the African mine workers' strike, an abortive event which was poorly organised and was a miserable failure. This could have given the WIL a golden opportunity in the trade union movement if it had not self-destructed.[60]

With the war at an end, the Trotskyists, who had believed that they would emerge locally, as well as internationally, with a mass following, lay shattered in the Transvaal, had a tiny group (FIOSA) in the Cape, and the leadership of a nationalist movement in the Cape. The latter still seemed to have promise as the nucleus of a liberation movement. That was the promise, although it did not mean that the Trotskyists would have prospered – even if its opponents (and some of its friends) all referred to the NEUM as a Trotskyist movement. That promise turned out to be empty, but that belongs to a different study. In 1947 or 1948 the FIOSA group decided to disband. Jaffe and some others joined the leadership of the NEUM, and made this the centre of their work. Averbach joined his family when they went to Israel. There he was apparently isolated and unable to find a place for himself in a land he found alien. The WPSA is said to have continued its underground activities in the early 1950s and then dissolved. By this stage (in 1950) the government had passed the Suppression of Communism Act (which defined Communists as those who followed the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky), and the groups that were formed after this either existed as clubs, or worked covertly.

For the coming period little groups appeared in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In Cape Town some were offshoots of the FIOSA, and others were made of new recruits. Most had disappeared by the late 1950s. In Johannes-

burg there were several small and ephemeral groups, mostly existing as study groups. It is a tortuous story of regrouping year after year until at last there seemed to be some success. The Socialist League of Africa was formed, and some of its members worked inside the Congress alliance (that is, the groups allied to the ANC). After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the state of emergency that followed, this group allied itself with several other groups to form the National Committee of Liberation, and embarked on a campaign of sabotage, preceding other similar groups. It was a false move, generated by a mood of desperation as the state machine clamped down on all political opposition. It ended when most of its members were arrested in 1964 and given long jail sentences.[61]

Notes

1. Many Socialist groups had associated clubs from which they recruited members. The Lenin Club was launched on 29 July 1933. Other groups, like the Independent Labour Party (or at least some of its members), merged with the Lenin club at a later date. The Lenin Club split in mid-1935 when the Spartacus Club was launched. There is less information on the origins of the New Era Fellowship, which attracted Coloured intellectuals, and from which the leaders of the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department emerged. There were similar Socialist clubs in Johannesburg but they were less successful.
2. This was a period of flux. Thus, the Marxist Education League, ostensibly a group that studied Marxist texts, was one of the groups that entered the ILP, itself a group that had passed through and been repelled by the racism of the South African Labour Party. The Yiddish speaking Gezerd (Gezelshaft far Erd) – Society for Land – was a pro-Soviet club which supported the settlement of Russian Jews in Birobidjan, in the far east of the USSR. When Gina Medem, a leading Stalinist, arrived from overseas, on an official visit to the Gezerd, she officiated over the expulsion of all those who were said to be critical of the Moscow line.
3. Cf B Hirson, 'Ruth Schechter: Friend to Olive Schreiner', **Searchlight South Africa**, no 9 (1992) for an account of the radicals at the University of Cape Town.
4. The controversy in South Africa is discussed in articles in **Searchlight South Africa**, nos 3 and 4 (1989/90). Frank Glass and Manuel Lopes were always in close contact and might have cooperated in writing these letters. However, I have not seen Lopes's letter and know of it only from a hostile editorial in **Umsebenzi**, paper of the CPSA, of 12 September 1930. There is little information on Lopes (or his brother), founding members of the CPSA and among the first critical voices from the left against events in the USSR. They later moved to the right, but there is little information on their activities.
5. The Secretariat, set up in Europe, consisted of former members of European Communist parties, all of them supporters of one or other of the Left Opposition tendencies in the Comintern.
6. This is a contentious position and is discussed in more detail in the article on trade unions. See also my book **Yours For the Union**, Zed, London, 1989, for details of union work in the Transvaal.
7. The members of the Club sent out postcards, announcing its inauguration, under photographs of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, in Yiddish.
8. This was exacerbated by the government's policy of promoting the employment of whites in national sectors of the economy. This included the railways, steel works and state institutions.
9. Reported at the General Meeting of the Lenin Club in mid-1935.
10. Although it seems that there were sharp boundaries between the two political parties that were formed, it is not possible to determine what influences were at play on individual members.ments. He then led the majority of members in the WPSA. The theses were

voted on at different meetings. The majority obtained between 15 and 19 votes. One or two abstained. Seven or less voted with the minority.

11. This was a simplistic view of the process forcing Africans into the labour market. African men were originally directed by the tribal chiefs to work on the farms and the mines to earn money for the purchase of guns. At a later date the Rhodes government at the Cape introduced taxation to increase the supply of men and to keep them at work. But the bulk of the workers came from outside South Africa: from Mozambique, Basutoland, Nyasaland and elsewhere.
12. Averbach wrote to the IS criticising the WPSA's conception of the party (see letter of 24 April 1935 from the IS to Averbach). But there is no reference to other criticisms of the WPSA's theses.
13. Letter from WPSA to the IS, 14 May 1935.
14. In one letter (WPSA, 12 April 1935) C van Gelderen was criticised for being 'too close' to Ray Alexander, the leading Stalinist trade union organiser. I know too little of the circumstances, but cannot believe that Alexander would have allowed an avowed Trotskyist to work inside her unions.
15. Those who joined the Trotskyist movement in 1943 were told by the minority leaders that their theses were never received by the IS. This was maintained through the subsequent years. Yet the minutes of the IS of 7 May 1935, sent to both groups, show that 'counter-theses from the minority' had just arrived. It was said further that they would be seriously studied, but there is no further intimation of any deliberations or discussions.
16. There is a full (typed) literal translation in the WPSA papers. A part translation, sent to me by Ian Hunter in 1990, differs in tone. The WPSA version is printed below.
17. Letter to the IS, 8 February 1939. Continuing, they said that Trotsky's contribution on the Native Question had clarified the whole position. No more was heard from the IS on the political differences.
18. This was a plausible appraisal in 1935, but, in line with other predictions that were not borne out, does not seem to have been noted, or, if noted, has not led to any critical comment from Trotskyist groups.
19. See Terry Brotherstone and Paul Dukes (ed), **The Trotsky Reappraisal**, University of Edinburgh Press, 1992, where I discuss Trotsky's acceptance of the Comintern's call for an independent Negro state in the middle belt of the US, and his support for the Black Republic in South Africa. His reasoning, although obviously different to that of the Comintern, was nonetheless faulty.
20. It is not possible to comment on this because the minority documents have never been found.
21. Letter to International Secretariat, 26 July 1935.
22. Details about the drafting of the theses are contained in a report to the IS. The minority theses were drawn up by M Averbach, J Pick and C van Gelderen. J Burlak drafted the minority docu
23. Yet strangely, in all the arguments that I heard in South Africa about the split, this issue was never mentioned. See also the polemical article written by A Mon – that is, MN Averbach – in the **Workers Voice Theoretical Supplement**, 1945.
24. Purdy's thesis, a copy of which was sent to Cape Town, has not been found. A letter from WG Duncan of the Communist League (June or July 1935) to GJ Lambley claimed that this document was in basic agreement with the League's position, but was more detailed. According to Duncan, Purdy also said that the Native Problem and 'poor white' elements were problems to the ruling class only, and should not be treated as such by Marxists.
25. Although four measures were foreshadowed only two Bills, on the franchise and the allocation of land, were presented in 1935. These measures were to be taken together with the extra land that was promised acting as a sop for the proposed removal of the vote.
26. The two groups protested separately, unable to reach agreement on policy, the WPSA accusing the CLSA of pandering to liberal ideas by calling on the League of Nations to intervene.
27. In an unpublished memoir, Bernhard Herzberg says that members of the Communist League set out to convince African distributive workers that they should join a trade union. However, the workers were afraid that they might be deported if they were involved in an organisation, and theproject ended in failure.

28. The few remaining members of the Lenin Club then attended meetings of the Spartacus Club.
29. This entry into the Socialist Party was never alluded to in South Africa in the 1940s. The **Workers Voice** during the war years always said that their group had an unbroken record since 1935. It was only in the late 1980s that I heard about entry into the SP from Herzberg. He states in his memoir that it was on his initiative that the group entered the SP. The only available documents of the Communist League, besides their irregular publication, consists of the letters that the Secretary of the WPSA filed.
30. Initially there was at least one supporter of the Trotskyist movement in Durban, and some individual supporters elsewhere. There was apparently a small section of the Communist League (or the later FIOSA) in Port Elizabeth, but I have no knowledge of their activities. When Gordon was invited to organise trade unions in that town in 1941, he was unaware of their existence. He handed the unions that he formed to members of the CPSA.
31. In an interview in Los Angeles in 1986, Glass said that they only had contact with one intellectual, whose name he could not recall. This might have been his close friend, Manuel Lopes. I discuss Glass's life and work in my forthcoming biography.
32. Thibedi, trained as a teacher, was one of the first Africans to join the CPSA and one of its first trade union organisers. He wrote to say that he was assisted in his new rôle as a Left Oppositionist by V Danschen. Although Danschen was on leading committees of the CPSA, there is no record of his activities, nor of his involvement in the Trotskyist movement. I met him only twice in 1946 in a short-lived study group, but he revealed very little.
33. See my chapter on Maliba in **Yours For the Union**. I was unaware at the time of Maliba's possible connection with Thibedi. The relation is still opaque.
34. Thibedi was expelled from the CPSA for misappropriation of funds. Such accusations, true or false, were often used by the CPSA to remove dissidents. It is not possible to verify this charge.
35. This is not a justification for the expulsion. Such moves were too easily resorted to in Trotskyist groups. But Thibedi aroused suspicion at the time (over occupation and financial resources), and his nationalist sentiments were not in accord with the policies of the WIL. Nathan Adler came to his support and left with him.
36. The first information about the establishment of the group is in the **Bulletin** of the International Communist League of America, in September 1934. Its members included several blacks, but most were untrained, and most did not stay long. Its early members included Ralph and Millie Lee, J Saperstein and Murray Purdy.
37. There are reference to their activities in Pretoria in Naboth Mokgatle, **The Autobiography of an Unknown South African**, University of California Press, 1975.
38. This is all chronicled in the letters found with the papers of the WPSA.
39. I was only able to rediscover in the mid-1970s the work done by Gordon, Dan Koza and others. Until then, except for brief and distorted accounts in works by Stalinists, it was almost forgotten.
40. Tabata and Jaineb Gool were members of the Spartacus Club or the WPSA. Goolam Gool, Chairperson of the Lenin Club, joined the WPSA, left it to join the CLSA and later returned to the WPSA.
41. Tabata, who became de facto leader of the AAC after 1943, does not refer to the conflicts at theconference in his history of the AAC, **The Awakening of a People**, 1950, Johannesburg, and presents a roseate account that is totally misleading.
42. See Bob Edgar (ed), **An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J Bunche, 28 September 1937-1 January 1938**, Ohio University Press, 1992.
43. In **The Awakening of a People**, Tabata did not associate social change with the intervention of the working class, advanced or otherwise.
44. Information on Dladla is scant, but it seems that he was a leading member of the CPSA in Nigel. At some stage he left the Transvaal and reappeared in Durban, the gadfly of the Non-European United Front (a Stalinist dominated movement), and was soon at loggerheads with the local leadership. What happened to him thereafter is unknown. Only two copies of **Umlilo** have been found in the newspaper section of the British Library. It is not known whether other issues appeared.

45. The gold that President Kruger was said to have buried before he fled the South African Republic during the Boer War (1899-1902). I was told this story by Heaton Lee in 1975 in Merthyr Tydfil.
46. Little has been discovered about the Johannesburg groups of this period. I have found one (incomplete) typed document that opposed the launching of the Fourth International as premature. Gordon, for the Propaganda Group, printed a four page pamphlet on GPU (Soviet secret police) terror in Europe, but that was all. Leon Sapire, writing in December 1937, said that the WPSA branch, led by his brother, had one member, and he had been out of town for the past three months. However, three months later, five members of the Saperstein group transferred their allegiance to the WPSA, as did two members of the Propaganda Group.
47. Copies of the programme and constitution are in the Trotsky papers in Cambridge, Mass (T216596). Copies of the newspaper are in the International Institute of Social Sciences, Amsterdam.
48. Goodlatte's career is recounted in **Searchlight South Africa**, no 2.
49. Bernhard Herzberg, who fled Germany and had been editor of the **Workers Voice**, says in his memoir that he was anti-war before September, but could not accept Averbach's contention that there could be an alliance with Afrikaners who were anti-war. Now that war had been declared he said, it was necessary to fight against Nazism. Jaffe accused him of being prepared to kill German workers.
50. The subject is obviously dead, and there is little purpose in doing a detailed analysis of this infantile political document. However, I point to some of these statements because they did determine the writings in the **Workers Voice** during the war, and did precipitate a split between the Johannesburg group and Cape Town.
51. I have little knowledge of FIOSA members because none have written about themselves, there are no details of their activities. Only after the dissolution of the movement and the formation of looser discussion clubs did some flower. The historical writings of Kenneth Jordaan, although surpassed by more recent researchers, are evident of a talent that never received organisational backing. He subsequently said that there were no Marxists in the groups he knew. See my account in 'A Question of Class: the Writings of Kenneth Jordaan', **Searchlight South Africa**, no 4.
52. Hashomer Hatzair or HH, (The Young Guard), was a left wing Zionist youth movement that trained its members for the kibbutz in Palestine. Its Zionist creed maintained that only by creating a Jewish peasantry and working class could the Jews become 'real' Socialists; until then they would practice Socialism on the collective farms. The mix of Zionism and eclectic Socialism led to internal strains,with members cleaving to different positions on the USSR, Spain, China and the coming war. The leaders in Palestine, despite their criticism of the western powers, were pro-war. Consequently, in August 1943, a dozen members in Johannesburg and Cape Town resigned and joined FIOSA – the only visible Trotskyist group. This included Baruch Hirson, Itzke Skikna, Shimon Joffe, Charlie Manoim and Bertel Hertz. Those in Cape Town were disillusioned by what they found, and dropped out of all political activity. In Johannesburg the members from HH moved into leading positions and remained in such until the demise of the Trotskyist group in 1946. When disagreements arose inside the FIOSA, or with the FIOSA, these comrades were referred to sneeringly as 'the ex-Zionists'.
53. The Anti-CAD (Anti-Coloured Affairs Department) was formed to oppose the setting up of government departments that would place further controls on the Coloured people. Leaders of the NEUM, many of them members of the WPSA, denied their Marxism until they went into exile in the 1960s and there proclaimed their true red internationalism. Yet even outside South Africa Tabata, who continued to act as head of the NEUM, proclaimed in an interview that the politics of the NEUM could be no other than petit-bourgeois. See extract in Julie Frederick's otherwise absurd book **Non-Racialism, The Unbroken Thread**, 1990.
54. In the 1930s Goolam Gool, a member of the WPSA, was elected to a leading position in the National Liberation League in Cape Town. He acted in his own capacity and, at WPSA insistence, kept his NLL activities separate from that of his WPSA functions. But he did not conceal his Marxist beliefs, and when he resigned, after disagreeing with the actions of the CPSA leadership, he published his reasons in the Coloured press.

55. Throughout the war years and into the postwar period, the top offices of the AAC were held by the officials who had been condemned by the WPSA before the war. Their policies continued unchanged, but, except for the treasurer, Dr Moroka, who was forced to leave when he refused to resign from the Native Representative Council – and then became the president of the ANC – there was no open criticism of the leading conservative members.
56. The main activity consisted of selling the monthly **Workers Voice**.
57. This did not mean that they eschewed the use of the Wage Board. They used any means to improve the living conditions of the workers. That also meant that they were not particularly interested in the revolutionary message of the WIL's paper, **Socialist Action**.
58. This had its own problems. Vincent and Lilian Swart, brilliant as they were, had all the traits of the rootless intellectual. They lived dissolutely on an inheritance, and combined radical action with an irresponsibility in their personal lives.
59. The events at the conference in 1945 are reported fully in **Socialist Action**, and in **Yours For the Union**. A brief summary would not do justice to an event that was one of the high points of the WIL's achievement.
60. The minority included four ex-members of Hashomer Hatzair and the two active trade unionists, Dick Mfili and John Motau. Skikne voted with the majority. The positions taken appeared in articles in the **Internal Bulletin** of the WIL. Letters sent by Hirson to the British WIL, appealing for assistance, have not been found. It is quite possible that they were intercepted by wartime censors.
61. Gordon's role in starting the union, the control exercised by the Stalinists who stopped several attempts by the workers to come out on strike, and the debâcle after the strike was called, are all described in **Yours For the Union.**
62. This will be described in my autobiography.

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As an historian, I was thrilled to get the documents for this essay. As a Trotskyist, I must confess that at times I would rather these papers had never been found. But the story must be told as it was, if we are to learn from what happened. I wish to acknowledge the receipt of documents and the assistance I received from many people and institutions. I hope that in so doing I have not excluded anyone or perhaps mentioned names of those who would have preferred anonymity.

For the papers of the WPSA, without which this could not have been written, Jaco Malan and Ciraj Rassool. For a complete copy of **The Spark**, Louis Sinclair. For papers of the WIL, Nachum Sneh. For documents, Bob and Renate Kamener, Myrtle and Monty Berman, Tony Southall, Jenny (Curtis) Schoon, Tom Lodge.

For accounts of events in the various Trotskyist groups, Shimon Joffe, D Stuart Linney, Bernhard Herzberg, Selim Gool, Ann (Averbach) Bloch, Charlie van Gelderen, Paul Koston, Heaton Lee, Millie Lee Haston, Joe Urdang and Hosea Jaffe (but I was told that this last conversation was not to be quoted).

The institutions that provided documents or microfilms: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London; the Prometheus Documentary Centre, New York; The Church of the Province Collection, University of the Witwatersrand; The South African Library, Cape Town; International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; the Bodleian, Oxford; Harvard University Library, Cambridge, Mass.

THE TROTSKYISTS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

THE ONLY policy document or thesis that was accepted by both groups in Cape Town was the one entitled 'The Trade Union Question'. It started with the claim that 'the problems and tactics of the trade unions are determined by the conditions and intensity of the class struggle'. Then it continued:

> As a starting point we take the irrefutable fact that capitalism is in process of decay. The economic crisis throughout the world for the past five years [1929–34], the enormous masses of unemployed, the decline in wages, the onslaught on the standards of living, the various developments of Fascism, the imminence of war, all this shows the impossibility of retaining the existing social and economic system, the deadly rule of oppression and exploitation. Against the background of this sharp economic crisis, the social struggle in all countries grows more severe. Strikes of unusual magnitude are breaking out, beginning in the United States, as the proletariat strives to maintain its standards of living under the heavy hand of capitalism.

The document then condemned the trade unions in most capitalist countries for their betrayal of the workers. They were in the hands of reformists and bureaucrats ('the direct servants of capitalism'), who were narrowly economist, and kept away from the political struggle. The task of the party was to oppose and 'unmask the treachery and slackness' of the reformist leadership, and set 'a steady revolutionary course'.

In South Africa, said the authors, the unions reflected the backwardness of the workers. The unions were hampered by reformist leaders, stultified by the existing industrial legislation 'which aims at settling disputes by mutual agreement instead of by direct action'. Furthermore, Africans were debarred or discouraged from entering the unions, and were left 'completely unorganised and helpless against the continual attacks on their meagre standard of living'.

The thesis condemned the policies of the existing trade union movements and the segregationist South African Labour Party to which, they claimed incorrectly, the white workers mainly owed their allegiance. Consequently, the SALP was largely responsible for the failure of past strikes. In fact, the trade unions were largely unaffiliated, and any political influence came from the position taken by union officials. In like fashion, but for different reasons, the document accused the Communist Party of sectarianism, of splitting the unions, and removing the more militant workers. What was required was a united militant trade union movement.

The new revolutionary party had to work to oust the trade union bureaucracy, by 'winning the confidence of the masses'. This could only be done by participating in the daily struggles, the main task lying 'within the

economic struggle'. This could be achieved by rejecting class collaboration and using direct action.

More specifically, the colour bar had to be abolished, and black and white workers were to be united in one trade union movement. Until this was achieved workers, who were debarred from the trade unions should be organised into separate trade unions. But they stressed:

> Under no circumstances... do we regard such purely Native trade unions as opposition trade unions or as a goal in themselves. They are only a step towards the amalgamation of all the trade unions, black and white, into one central organisation of trade unions of all the workers of South Africa.

The document concluded with a warning. The problems of the workers could not be solved under capitalism. Concessions could be gradually forced from the ruling class, but 'only the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat can solve the social question'.

This was a document which, except for the point made about the colour bar, could have been written anywhere, by syndicalists or radical groups. There were no new ideas on the rôle of trade unions in society, and the problems that would be raised by the separate organisation of ethnic trade unions was not spelt out. It was almost as a concession that the authors allowed for the possibility of building African trade unions, and the burning issue of the day, the use of the government-created Wage Board was not mentioned. That is to say, the statement gave no direction to the members of the group, fudged the main problems, and did not offer anything new in the way of theory. Perhaps it did not matter. None of the persons involved in formulating policy was engaged in trade union work, and few if any attempts were made in Cape Town to participate or to engage in trade union organisation.[1]

It was different in the Transvaal. This was the industrial hub of the country, and from the beginning members of the Left Opposition were engaged in trade union work. Frank Glass, one-time organiser for the CPSA, had been a trade union secretary. Thibedi, before he was expelled from the CPSA, had been active in organising the African Trade Union Federation, the section of the Red Trade Unions (or Profintern) in South Africa. In his letter to the International Secretariat, he claimed that he had with him the nucleus of several trade unions in which African workers had been organised. This included the Laundry Workers Union. But there is no information on what he did or what he achieved.

Then came Murray Gow Purdy and Ralph Lee. Whatever their intentions, their trade union activity, centred on the Laundry Workers Union, was not successful. Precipitate strike action (praised initially in the Communist press) was poorly organised and could not succeed. It led to hasty affiliation to the Trades and Labour Council (the TLC, the South African TUC) in order to get strike money.[2] Lee criticised the strike in an internal document, claiming that the union was not prepared for action, that there was no or-

ganised party fraction in the union, and that there was bureaucratic control of the body. Lee had taken over the organisation of the union, but it came close to collapse. Gordon, who took over in April 1935, wrote to Cape Town criticising Lee's inactivity over a six months period and the lack of organisation. Lee demanded that the letter be kept from the branch membership to save him the need to answer point by point. Unfortunately, this was acceded to, and Gordon's letter was dismissed by the Cape Town committee – leaving Gordon under a cloud.

The appointment of Gordon as Secretary of the Laundry Workers Union and its reorganisation was the turning point in the fortunes of the trade union movement in the Transvaal.[3] After the collapse, the reconstituted committee sought a way of getting higher wages, and the one solution seemed to them to request a wage determination from the government-instituted Wage Board. According to the minutes of the committee meeting of 9 April 1935, Purdy and Lee, in accordance with the trade union thesis, were completely opposed to the Wage Board. Purdy condemned it as harmful, and Lee, saying that the Workers Party opposed the Wage Board added, in patronising terms, that children sometimes only learnt that a fire would burn by being burnt. Therefore, he said: 'If the laundry workers burnt their fingers, they must not forget that we warned them.' The members of the committee were not impressed. If fingers had to be burnt, they said, so be it: they were prepared to learn for themselves. Appointed that evening to take Purdy's place, Gordon was instructed to approach the Board on behalf of the workers.

Arrangements by Gordon took time, and the workers were critical of him on that account. The whole issue became intertwined with personal feuding inside the Johannesburg branch of the WPSA. Letters were written to Cape Town with accusations and counter-accusations of inefficiency. Lee's letters were less than truthful. He said that he had favoured going to the Wage Board, but that Gordon had bungled the issue. Gordon said that he had received no help from Lee, and the matter had taken much longer than expected. In fact, all the work was left to Gordon, and any support he received subsequently came from individuals connected with liberal organisations. He even received a small grant for trade union work from the Institute of Race Relations, a body established with the help of the Carnegie Institute. This was the only money that Gordon ever received, and it was noted that he was always hungry when invited out to dinner. It was said that on those occasions he ate voraciously.

Gordon, as described in the main essay, left the WPSA and worked with the aid of a number of young African organisers. Thereafter, the WPSA in Johannesburg did little work in organising unions. What little activity there was stemmed from individual initiatives. One episode, which is referred to in a short typed document, was the discovery by a mine manager of an attempt to reach African mineworkers through the covert circulation of the paper *Umlilo Mollo* in September 1935, so it appears. This was the work of Heaton

Lee (no relation), a mine surveyor. Heaton was reprimanded, and his African assistant was repatriated to Mozambique.[4]

It was two years before Lee was once again involved in union work. This time he was seemingly invited to lead steel ceiling workers in an African Metal Trades Union. Scaw Works, one of the largest firms, refused to recognise the union or meet any of their workers' grievances. Once again there was precipitate strike action, the workers were defeated and the union collapsed. In this case, Lee said later that the Johannesburg branch had opposed strike action, but, once the decision had been taken, had given the workers their full support.[5]

Gordon found that the meetings of the WPSA were less and less relevant, and, after a further set of rows and expulsions, the Johannesburg branch was temporarily disbanded by Lee to remove some dissident members in mid-August 1935. Gordon wrote to Cape Town protesting against such manoeuvres, and then withdrew completely from the WPSA.[6] Henceforth, he relied on Lynn Saffery, a member of the staff of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) for legal assistance and secretarial support, on university students for assistance with office work, and on Fanny Klenerman (Glass) for political backing.

Gordon was further isolated when the Cape Town section demanded that he reapply for membership to the Johannesburg group. He did not, and he was cut off from the party.[7] There are no reports of his trade union work in *The Spark* or in the documents of the WPSA. The one Trotskyist whose work was of significance in the workers' movement was isolated and ostracised.

In her taped memoirs, Klenerman was to say of Gordon that his 'efforts were astonishing'. She explained:

> Max Gordon was a born organiser. It was his character and his friendliness which gave him immediate admission to the sympathetic hearing of large numbers of Africans who had not even known what a trade union was. He spoke badly, but he spoke from the heart. What he told them was of interest to them, and he made sure that they understood what he said. Better speakers, more fluent speakers, might present their message with more picturesque or literary expression. But he spoke basically to people who think in basic terms . . .

Thereafter, he organised an African Commercial Workers Union, and succeeded almost single handed in establishing an African working class movement. His success came from listening to the laundry workers who decided to use the government's Wage Board to press for an increase in wages. He sought the help of liberals, Social Democrats and even former members of the CPSA who were still Stalinist in their orientation, whilst maintaining his political integrity. By these means he was able, in the space of less than two years, to build the nucleus of the first industrial trade union movement in the Transvaal.

Gordon was also confronted at an early stage of his trade union career by a wildcat strike in one of the laundries, and the union was only saved from ex-

tinction when a court case against the workers was defeated on a technical point. I tell the story of Gordon and his principal assistant Dan Koza in my book *Yours For the Union*. It was a story of patiently building up a trade union movement from scratch, of finding the means to attract workers who had been repelled by the CPSA, when, in their Red Unions, they constantly called the workers out on strike, and found that their most militant workers were victimised.

In a conversation quoted by Peter Abrahams in *Tell Freedom!*, Gordon described his method of winning minuscule concessions in order to gain the workers' confidence:

> One day a vigorous and strong Native trade union movement will grow up. None of the government's prohibitions and restrictions and arrests will count for anything then. And that movement is going to play a key part in the political emancipation of all non-whites. So, for the present, I ask for a threepenny rise [which laundry workers obtained], for a recognised and proper lunch hour, and for decent and safe conditions of work. It's a small beginning, but it's a beginning. That's what was wrong with earlier efforts. They did not know how to start.

Gordon also made it clear (in other reported discussions) that his aim was to organise the mineworkers. This was in close accord with the WPSA declaration at the end of 1935, that it was essential that the mineworkers be organised.[8] Gordon expanded: he needed a well organised trade union movement to act as a spring board before he could move into the mines. He did penetrate the workforce on the mines by gaining the confidence of the African clerical workers. They emptied the waste paper bins at night, and brought him all the discarded papers, allowing him to build up a knowledge of the mine manager's plans. There was also a story that I heard from many sources and widely believed in Socialist circles, that he would blacken his face and gain entry to the mine compounds. Myth or otherwise, this was the kind of reputation he built around his activities.

Gordon used every legal means to gain improved wages and work conditions for his unions, and had built a movement, presided over by a Joint Committee, of over 15 000 members before war was declared.[9] His methods were not problem free. The unions he built could have been absorbed into the state structures or into the liberal SAIRR. However, Gordon was alive to such dangers, and would have warded them off, but he was never called upon to save the unions. Gordon was anti-war in 1940, in line with the WPSA, and was interned in 1940-41 for approximately a year. No satisfactory reason was given, but it was suspected that during the first year of the war, when victory was far from certain, the government cracked down on whites who might act as organisers of black opposition.

Yet Gordon's trade union activities were denigrated by the Johannesburg WPSA at the end of 1938. On 2 November 1938, in a letter to Cape Town, Max Sapire, without providing any evidence, belittled Gordon's trade union work as bureaucratic. By way of contrast, said Sapire, the primary work in the

WPSA was in the trade unions, and he claimed they had made significant progress, not only among black workers but also among whites. But no more was heard about this activity, and the white workers disappeared.

In reviewing Gordon's achievements, it cannot be stressed often enough that he succeeded only because he was able to enrol African organisers of ability, and of these Daniel Koza was the most remarkable.[10] When Gordon was interned, it was only the work of Koza and some of his organisers that kept the unions alive, although in so doing they turned against the use of white organisers.[11] Then the unions went on the offensive, led strikes, and during the early period of the war won some significant victories.

During Gordon's internment the only support he received was from Klenerman and Saffery of the SAIRR. But on release in 1941 he found that he had lost his effective position in the Johannesburg trade unions.[12] Gordon was invited by Socialists in Port Elizabeth (in the eastern Cape), in collaboration with the SAIRR, to assist in the formation of black trade unions. In a three month visit he set up half a dozen unions. Then, with no Trotskyist available to take the unions over, Gordon handed them over to members of the CPSA, who used the unions to advance their personal political ambitions. By this means his work was negated, but he had demonstrated the ease with which unions could be founded.

Gordon's internment by the Smuts government in 1940 brought his activities to a premature end. However, the unions he had established continued through the war years. With considerable success they secured wage increases and better working conditions, and the trade union movement grew in size, claiming a membership of 150 000 by 1945.

Gordon was not a theoretician, and he had no claims to originality. In a pamphlet on the need to organise workers, he commenced with a paraphrase of the WPSA thesis on the Native Question.[13] It is a document that makes little sense in the context of Gordon's work. He had set out to build a trade union movement, spoke (at the TLC Conference) on the fight against capitalism and against the coming war, and yet, writing about the trade unions, he commenced mechanically with a lengthy quotation about land from the WPSA thesis on the Native Question.

When finally, in 1941, he returned to the Cape after police harassment made continued work impossible, he did not recontact his old comrades in the WPSA. For the rest of his life he remained in isolation, although he apparently said that if he could find a group with whom he could work, he would return to political activity. He never did, and he died in 1977, barely known to a new generation of workers and trade unionists.

It was only when Lee launched the WIL that the resurrected Trotskyist movement resumed trade union work. They were able to link together some of Gordon's original organisers, and form, or rescue, ailing unions – although none of the union officials gave more than token allegiance to the WIL. What had eluded everyone except Gordon turned out to be amazingly simple. The work was done under the aegis of the Progressive Trade Union group that

was formed in 1944 to support the Milling Workers Union in its strike action. This re-established contact with Koza, who was by then the most effective black trade union official, taking the Commercial and Distributive Workers Union to its peak, and securing the highest wages for its constituents.

Thereafter, WIL organisers spent a large part of their time on trade union work, providing speakers, printing facilities and transport for union officials. Working under conditions at the edge of legality the members of WIL spoke at workers' rallies, helped in the organisation of workers, and attended the conferences of the African trade union movement. They helped elaborate policies calling for the recognition of the unions outside the crippling Industrial Conciliation Act (which stopped strike action during a lengthy cooling off period), and urged a minimum wage policy of three pounds a week. In this they clashed with the Stalinists, who controlled some of the unions and urged their members not to strike, wanted recognition under the IC Act, and would not countenance a demand for three pounds a week, despite evidence that this was at the edge of subsistence. In all this Koza played an outstanding rôle. He was the spokesman of the PTU, put their case at the conference of trade unions, and maintained an anti-war position at meetings. The antagonism of FIOSA to this work,[14] the self-destruction of the WIL, and the shameful desertion of the trade unions is told in part in the essay above. The history of that endeavour is told in greater detail in *Yours For the Union* and in my forthcoming autobiography.

Despite the advances made through the immersion in such activity, there were no recruits from the unions. Yet this was not the immediate objective. The building of a working class movement, which could form the base of a larger Socialist movement, seemed to several members of the WIL to be central to their endeavours. If this meant that the group had to work through a leadership that was bureaucratic and even corrupt, that seemed to be only a hurdle that would have to be surmounted. And when, after a conference of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions, at which Koza and other associates of the PTU put the case for a mobilisation of the unions to organise the unorganised, the WIL participated in the meeting of thousands of workers, it seemed to be at the pinnacle of its work. It was at this stage that leading members of the WIL were persuaded by an associate of the WPSA that this was not the work that revolutionaries should be doing.

There was a bitter struggle inside the WIL to save the work that had been done. Hirson, the organising secretary of the WIL, Mfili of the power workers' union, and Motau, a trade union worker, and five others fought the majority over a three months period. All other work stopped whilst the issue was debated, but the eight were defeated. It was thus, just months before the African Mineworkers Union called the strike that seemed to shake South Africa, that the Trotskyists pulled out of trade union work – not because they were forced to, but because a few leading members decided that this was unnecessary work.

There were bitter recriminations from the trade unionists who had been so abandoned. This was a betrayal that could not be forgiven or forgotten. This was amongst the most shameful episodes in the history of the Trotskyist movement, but as far as can be seen, those who were in the WPSA or FIOSA in Cape Town ignored the event. The abandonment of the trade union movement by the WIL negated all the work that Gordon had done, and brought the group into contempt. It was perhaps only right that with the collapse of the WIL, the Trotskyists in the Transvaal were eclipsed and did not participate again, except peripherally, in the African trade union movement.[15]

Nonetheless, the work that Koza and others had done, despite the collapse of many of the unions after the defeat of the mineworkers' strike, provided a base upon which future unions were built. The continuity was tenuous but should not be discounted. The great shame was that the work that had been put into their organisation should have been so wantonly thrown away.

Notes

1. See the letter of March 1937 from Cape Town to Lee, quoted in the main essay, saying that the WPSA in Cape Town had not yet undertaken any trade union work.
2. From the minutes of the annual conferences of the TLC. The delegates were furious at what they saw as affiliation to secure financial support.
3. Gordon's background is obscure. It seems that he spent one year as a medical student before working in the leather department of a Cape Town store. Although he was active in organising the unemployed workers in Cape Town, he was not taken seriously by the members of the WPSA, and, seeking an opening, went to Johannesburg where he earned money by repairing radios, and working in a big department store. He had set his eyes on trade union work, and this became possible when he was invited by Lee to take over as Secretary of the Laundry Workers Union.
4. I first learnt of this event when I interviewed Heaton Lee in 1975 in Merthyr Tidfyl. His account was very different from that in Ralph Lee's letter. Ralph, who always insisted that party publications must 'window dress' in order to attract attention, speaks of 'the authorities laying bare a great part of our organisation on the State Mines'. Heaton said that he and his assistant were the only two involved, and his account contradicted Ralph's fanciful statement that the African was subjected to third degree methods, severely beaten up and forced to point out his white comrade. Heaton did not claim that his assistant was a 'comrade', and said that after a confrontation he had spoken up and thus prevented such a beating.
5. There is an ambiguity in accounts of the strike. Lee in his letters to the Cape Town branch on 21 and 26 February 1937 claimed that there had been months of secret preparations prior to the demands being made by himself. A letter from Max Sapire, writing one year later, said that the union was only formed on 15 January 1937. When the workers' demands were rejected, the union members decided unanimously to strike the following morning. Sapire does say that Lee advised against strike action.
6. The Cape Town branch accepted Lee's reports of events in Johannesburg, and refused to hear what the dissident members had to say.
7. See **Tell Freedom**, the autobiography of Peter Abrahams, the South African novelist, for an account of Gordon's trade union methods. The WPSA statement appeared in the discussion of its aims in the All-African Convention (see main essay).
8. This comment, overheard by Nachum Sneh in the Vanguard bookshop, was told me in an interview in London in the mid-1970s.

9. Naboth Mokgatle, enroled by Gordon to organise unions in Pretoria, describes how impressed he was at the mass meeting when Gordon announced the pay increases obtained through his submission to the Wage Board.
10. Koza had started training as a teacher, but did not complete the course. It is not known why he withdrew, but one thing is certain, he was far too proud to accept the servile status and the miserable wage of African teachers at the time. He sympathised with the Trotskyist position and for a brief period belonged to the FIOSA, but did not stay. When the WIL was launched he was considered a friend of the movement, and he led the Progressive Trade Union group. He was also active in township protests, and in particular with the protests against the increase of bus fares in Alexandra Township.
11. This has never been satisfactorily explained. As I show in my book, Rheinallt Jones, director of the SAIRR, with the knowledge of government officials, tried to foist Saffery on the trade unions during Gordon's internment. His highhanded manner angered Koza, and Jones was forced to leave empty handed. None of this was Gordon's doing, and his exclusion when he returned remains a mystery.
12. Gordon had actually gathered together the nucleus of the African Mine Workers Union. Because of his internment, he had lost his contacts. When the union was relaunched, Koza and Gordon were elected to its Managing Committee, but it turned out to be a dummy body, controlled exclusively by the Stalinists. Meanwhile, Gordon had handed them all the documents of the embryo union.
13. 'The Scope for Native Employment', **Saamwerk Papers** (Work Together), no 2, (c1937), mimeographed. There is no indication of who published these papers, and there is no date or address given.
14. For reasons that have never been satisfactorily explained, Jaffe voted at the 1945 conference of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions with the Stalinists against the Progressive Trade Union group. This was reported in **Socialist Action**, paper of the WIL, and drew a hurt reply from Jaffe in a FIOSA internal bulletin, because the WIL had dared to attack him publicly.
15. In the late 1950s, Hirson, then a lecturer at the university and a member of the Congress movement, was invited to join the South African Congress of Trade Union's study group that was engaged in preparing a lecture series for trade union officials. However, his views were unacceptable to the committee, and he was excluded from the meetings.

PROFILES OF SOME SOUTH AFRICAN TROTSKYISTS

The following selected thumb-nail sketches of personalities is only meant to assist the reader in identifying persons named in this supplement

The Editors of The Spark

IF THE Trotskyists in South Africa had done nothing else, the production of *The Spark*, during the period 1935-39, would have marked them as worthy of attention. Without a doubt, it was superior to any other left wing publication in the country until the late 1980s. Although it was mimeographed and small in size, it carried theoretical articles on South African issues, together with reprints of articles by Leon Trotsky and members of the Left Opposition. By way of contrast, most other publications of the left in South Africa avoided serious theory.

The people responsible for producing and for writing most of the articles were Yudel (or Jacob) Burlak, Paul Koston and Clare Goodlatte. The South African articles bore no author's names, but to meet legislative requirements, Goodlatte's or Koston's name appeared in the journal as Editor. These three were also on the Central Committee, representing Cape Town, but they never met with the Johannesburg members. Consequently, they constituted the leadership for South Africa.

What is known about Goodlatte's life (1866-1942), with new details now becoming available, was published in *Searchlight South Africa*, no 2. Until she was 55 and required to retire, Goodlatte was a nun in the Anglican Community of the Resurrection in Grahamstown and was principal of the teachers training college. She moved to Cape Town, and, becoming increasingly left wing, she joined the Independent Labour Party and then the Lenin Club. When that body split, Goodlatte went with the WPSA, and played a central part in its work. In 1939, when she felt incapable of continuing, she resigned. Goodlatte was an ill person, but there was also a hint of disillusionment in her letters. The WPSA had not made progress, and she was obviously tired, politically as well as physically.

Paul Koston, who left South Africa in 1925, joined the US merchant marine. His movements are not clear, but it seems that in approximately 1930 he jumped ship in Cape Town and entered the Socialist movement. He was Secretary of the ILP, joined the Lenin Club and then the WPSA. For some time he was the party Secretary. Besides his work in the party, he also owned and ran Modern Books, the main outlet for Marxist books in Cape Town.

There are few details of the life of Yudel Burlak. It is known that he arrived from Poland in 1930, and he is said to have been involved in a strike of bank clerks before leaving Europe. In South Africa he worked as a bookkeeper. There is little doubt that all the WPSA's major formulations came

from his pen, and that the party's theses, the main political letters, and the editorials of *The Spark* were written by him.

Isaac Bongani Tabata, Goolam Gool and Ben Kies

These three members of the Spartacus Club or the WPSA are seldom mentioned in the WPSA papers. Yet they, together with Jaineb (often referred to as Jane) Gool, Halema Nagdee Gool, Cadoc Kobus and others, all members of the WPSA, were the driving force in the formation of the bodies that joined together to launch the Non-European Unity Movement in December 1943.

Gool's early involvement has still to be unravelled. He returned from Britain, where he was trained as a doctor, as an avowed Socialist. He joined the Lenin Club, and after the split he first joined the Communist League. At some stage he switched and joined the WPSA. He was a office holder in the National Liberation League, but resigned when he felt that leading members of the NLL, who were also in the CPSA, had deserted a demonstration near parliament against proposed legislation.

Gool was a member of the AAC, and was associated, together with other members or sympathisers of the WPSA, with the New Era Fellowship, formed in 1937 with a nucleus of students and members of existing Cape organisations. This club exerted considerable influence in and around Cape Town, and secured increasing influence among Coloured teachers and their organisation, the Teachers League of South Africa. The NEF played a leading rôle in opposing the formation of a Coloured Affairs Department, helped to form the Anti-CAD in 1943, and joined with the AAC to form the NEUM. After 1943 Gool and the others mentioned above devoted all their time to work in the NEUM, producing the *Torch*, and the newsletters of the AAC and the Anti-CAD.

A critical note on Isaac Bongani Tabata appeared in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 6. It was slight because the writer had so little information on his activities before 1943. In that year he played a prominent rôle in relaunching the AAC and the NEUM. In 1958 Tabata led one section out of the NEUM following a stormy debate in which he proposed that after changes in South Africa, the peasants should be allowed to buy and own land. His opponents, led by Kies and Hosea Jaffe, opposed the private ownership of land. A full length biography is being prepared by Ciraj Rassool in Cape Town.

Ben Kies's story has yet to be researched. A leading member of the NEF, Kies led the campaign against the Coloured Affairs Commission and then the Coloured Affairs Department. He was a teacher, and played a major rôle in the politicisation of Coloured teachers in the Teachers League of South Africa. He later resigned and entered the legal profession.

The independent radical journal *Trek* carried articles in July and August 1942, obviously written by members of the NEF, with proposals for a new

liberation movement, together with a programme that foreshadowed that of the NEUM. *The Educational Journal*, organ of the TLSA, had a series of 23 articles on black struggles in South Africa, commencing July-August 1977 and ending in June 1980. Its approach was nearest to that of the Kies-Jaffe group of the NEUM. The issue of April-May 1978 has a sketchy outline of the NEF, and the issue of June covered the formation of the Anti-CAd and the NEUM.

The Workers Voice Group

It is not clear who the members of the Workers Voice group were. The three members who first framed policy were Joe Pick, Moshe Noah Averbach and Charlie van Gelderen. They named their group the Communist League of South Africa. Then van Gelderen left for Britain. New members included Joe Meltzer, Max Blieden and Bernhard Herzberg, who edited the group's paper. It is not known which of the others played a prominent part, partly because the papers are not available, and also because the group dissolved itself and joined the Socialist Party.

When the SP was dissolved, the League reassembled, and several younger persons joined. However, it is not always clear when members entered. Arthur Davids was an early recruit, Zeid Gamiet entered at a later date, and Hosea Jaffe joined in 1939. The younger members, together with Averbach, were the mainstay of the group during the war years.

Joe Pick (1895-1968) came to South Africa at the age of 13. Apparently considered too old to go to school, he was apprenticed as a watchmaker. He entered the Socialist movement at the end of the First World War, and was a founding member of the Communist Party in 1921.

Active in the CPSA, he was on the strike support committee when British sailors walked off their ships in August 1925. But little else is known about his early activities. In 1931 he was expelled from the CPSA (see accompanying box) and joined forces with others who moved to the International Left Opposition.

Moshe Noah Averbach (whose initials form the acronym A Mon) went from Europe to Palestine as a Zionist and from there to Cape Town. Profoundly alienated from the Zionist movement, Averbach joined the CPSA and the Gezerd, and tried to earn a living as a Hebrew teacher. However, finding that his job was to train boys for the bar mitzvah, the religious ceremony when they reached the age of 13, he opened a small grocery shop in the predominantly Coloured area known as District 6, where he lived with his family. Averbach never made a success as a grocer, and devoted most of his time to the group he had started – but was always at a disadvantage because of his poor command of the English language. The articles printed under his pseudonym were always heavily edited, and it cannot be ascertained how much was written in by his editors.

The Johannesburg Groups

At the beginning there was TW Thibedi. He was followed by Murray Gow Purdy, Ralph and Millie Lee, and J Saperstein. They were joined by Max Gordon and others, mainly African recruits. But the groups never solidified. The story is told in the main essay above, and accounts of Purdy, Lee and Gordon appear in the discussion of trade unionism and the additional article on Lee. The roles of Gordon, together with that of Dan Koza, are described in greater detail in Hirson's *Yours For the Union*. There were at one time three groups in Johannesburg, but they all disappeared when war was declared. Gordon was interned, presumably because of his involvement in organising African trade unions, but no official reason was ever given.

Very little is known about others who joined the WPSA, nor of the Sapire brothers who joined the left in 1937–39. Six members, only four of whom had been active in Johannesburg (R and M Lee, Heaton Lee [no relative] and Dick Frieslich) played an important part in the reconstruction of the British Trotskyist movement, and both Leon Sapire and Saperstein tried to get to Spain during the Spanish Civil War as journalists. All activity seems to have stopped in 1939 or 1940.

After 1943 a Trotskyist group was reformed in Johannesburg. Its main force, alongside Ralph Lee who had returned to Johannesburg and launched the Workers International League, were six members of the left wing Zionist movement Hashomer Hatzair, who were to become part of the leadership. Among the recruits to the WIL were Vincent and Lilian Swart. Vincent had been a lecturer in English, and was a poet of considerable talent. He had gone to Britain as a post-graduate student just prior to the declaration of war, and had to return immediately. After returning he turned increasingly to the left, and was actively involved in the support committee of the bus boycott in Alexandra Township in 1943–44. When he joined the WIL he brought with him some leading members of the boycott committee.

Of the earlier Trotskyists who were enroled by Lee were Raymond Lake, Zina Blank, Issie Pinchuk and several others. Nearly all withdrew within the first year, and little is known of their personal histories. On the other hand, a few African trade unionists joined, or were associated with, the WIL. Except for Dan Koza, little is known of the lives of the black members.

WRITINGS ON THE TROTSKYISTS

There are few studies of the Trotskyist groups in South Africa, and most suffer from a dearth of original documents. Authors have used a limited number of sources and/or oral testimonies from the few early members who have been prepared to speak of their past activities. Unfortunately much of the oral evidence has been found to be faulty and many of the following cite the interviews uncritically. I know of no autobiographies (except that of Phylis

Ntantala Jordan which has just been published – a work that is not yet available in London) and there are only a few essays written on individual members. Much of the latter quoted in the essays above were written by myself.

The Non-European Unity Movement has attracted more historians but few have provided a satisfactory discussion of the connection between the NEUM and the WPSA. This is not surprising. IB Tabata, in his history of the All African Convention, does not mention the WPSA. Furthermore, without the archival material the link, even when mentioned, could not be elaborated.

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BOOKS ON THE UNITY MOVEMENT OR ITS AFFILIATED BODIES.

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THE CASE OF COMRADE PICK

In 1990 the CPSA issued an illustrated book entitled *The Red Flag in South Africa*. On page 20, veteran Stalinist, Ray (Alexander) Simons wrote a piece entitled: 'How and why we expelled comrade Joe Pick'. She explained: the Central Committee in Johannesburg sent a comrade to Cape Town to hasten the Bolshevisation of the party. He was a guest at the house of Joe Pick. Then nemesis struck:

> Under the bed he was sleeping in he [the comrade from Johannesburg] found three unsold copies of the party journal *Umsebenzi*. They were part of a batch given to comrade Joe Pick to sell. Pick had already returned in full the sum owing on the batch. The money for these three unsold copies obviously had come out of his own pocket. Nevertheless, he was expelled from the Party for failing to carry out his duty to the full. That's how things were in those days.

It is not certain why Ray Simons waited 60 years to tell this story. A search under the bed, three unsold journals, the money paid, but out he went: 'That's how things were in those days.' Ray Simons also gives the name of the man who went down to Cape Town. He was Lazar Bach – not an insignificant figure in the history of the CPSA. Lazar Bach went to the USSR, got mixed up with the wrong people, and was sent to the gulag. There he was shot or died, and, except for the Trotskyists, everybody said they did not know what happened. Even his lover said she did not know. Lazar Bach was rehabilitated in 1990, and his ghost did a little dance in heaven. So now the story can be told. You see, comrades, it can be said by comrade Ray, Lazar Bach was a bad, bad man. He was only being punished for expelling Joe Pick. Or was he?

What Ray Simons does not say is that Joe Pick opposed the Black Republic slogan. Is that not the real reason for his expulsion in 1931? Poor Lazar Bach, even after rehabilitation, his name is not safe in the hands of his one-time comrades.

Review Article

DISSECTING SOUTH AFRICA?

Robert Fine with Dennis Davis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa*, Pluto Press, 1990, pp338
Hillel Ticktin, *The Politics of Race: Discrimination in South Africa*, Pluto Press, 1991, pp115
Bob Edgar (ed), *An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J Bunche (28 September 1937-1 January 1938)*, Ohio University Press, Witwatersrand University Press, 1992, pp398

DURING THE past few years two books have appeared, both written by writers who are sympathetic to the ideas of Leon Trotsky, although differing in their political affiliation. Hillel Ticktin is editor of *Critique*, but does not belong to any political group. Robert Fine has been for several years an active member of *Socialist Organiser*.

The books are so different that this review will note the contrast in their approach and appraisal and is to be read as supplementary to the history of the Trotskyite movement in South Africa. Ticktin's work is couched in Marxist language, and he presents his analysis in terms of categories through which he claims to present a critique of the South African political economy. Whatever the merits of the book, this is a remarkably one-dimensional account, in which people appear as shadows, and events are selected to provide a backdrop for the chosen categories. Fine's work is steeped in the history of people and their working class organisations (although in this review I will concentrate upon his treatment of the Trotskyist movement). However, naming characters without trying to understand what motivated them renders this another one-dimensional work, albeit in a different dimension from that of Ticktin. Fine has looked at the history of the working class in South Africa, and he knows what people did. What he lacks is an understanding of the factors that drove them, and that leads him to judgements that might be formally correct, but show no empathy for persons who had to make snap decisions without the benefit of hindsight.

Starting first with Fine and Davis, I was struck by the approach found in the opening pages. This offered hope of fresh insights into the history of the struggles of the twentieth century. On page x they write:

> 'In the history of the liberation movement, nothing could be more erroneous than the image of black people as an undifferentiated mass united by a single political consciousness in their opposition to apartheid. The history of class struggle has been one of debate and dissent, sharp breaks and abrupt turns, competing political organisations and traditions, ad hoc alliances and unpredicted outcomes.'

However, this promise is not sustained. The authors had obviously wandered through existing literature, choosing bits and pieces to provide a background history of trade unionism, mainly African, from 1930 to 1947. Some sections were familiar, having come from documents, supplied or mentioned, during a joint course which I presented with Bob Fine at Warwick University. The use of original data is admirable, but Fine and Davis have their own agenda, and I found myself in profound disagreement with them as I read on. It was when I came to their final conclusions that I saw most clearly why they were seeing matters so very differently from myself. They had started out with the proposition that the black working class was inchoate and backward, and that the industrialisation after the depression of 1929-31 had produced a large working class, but it was immature and unable to stand up against a ruthless ruling class. With much of this I concur. But their reading led to the conclusion that the trade union movement, built and formed by Max Gordon and Dan Koza, could not have survived once the ruling class decided to clamp down. That was what the Smuts government proposed, and their argument sounds superficially convincing. However, the authors' treatment of the mineworkers' strike of 1946, tailored to fit into their thesis, indicates that they had missed the point made by Dunbar Moodie, and somewhat differently by myself, as discussed in *Yours For the Union*.

The period that is being dealt with here is that of the Second World War. During these years several of the unions, and the Mine Workers Union in particular, were controlled by members of the Communist Party of South Africa. The original impulse for their entry into this union was made during their anti-war period, and the object was to embarrass the government severely. By the time the union was formed, Germany had invaded the USSR, and the position of the CPSA had altered. Henceforth, strikes were to be discouraged and stopped if possible. Officially, the party's papers said that they understood the reasons for all the industrial action, but urged negotiations or even restraint. Wildcat strikes in the mines were deprecated, and everything was done to get the men back to work as quickly as possible. Eventually, the miners forced through a call for a strike, and the union officials, somewhat tamely, accepted a resolution that the men be called out within a week. Yet the union was completely unprepared. The Council of Non-European Trade Unions (which had previously pledged support) was not informed, and only heard of the decision from the newspapers. It was not even called upon to put into effect its promise of assistance. When the men came out in August 1946, it was not primarily because of allegiance to the union. In most cases the men, hearing of impending action, but not knowing who had called the strike, came out spontaneously. The union leader, JB Marks of the CPSA, carelessly got himself arrested, leading Communists were out of town, the sympathy strike never took place, and the miners were beaten back to work. Little of this is stated by the authors. Instead, Fine and Davis ask socratically whether the unions were not wise in avoiding strike action earlier, and in the same breath suggest that the strike 'highlighted the inefficiency of

the liberal model of industrial relations held by the union leadership in the face of the ruthlessness of the state and mineowners on one side, and the desperate rebelliousness of the mineworkers on the other'.

Obviously the union would encounter ruthless opposition; obviously it would be harassed and intimidated. But the union did little organising, and in its public posturing acted mainly as a body to restrain the workers. The strike might have failed, as Fine and Davis say it had to, but the workers never had a chance. They were driven to desperation, and they were provoked by members of the CPSA to take action after Churchill's Fulton speech, which opened the way for Truman's provocative acts in the Mediterranean, and 70 000 miners downed tools. This was less than 20 per cent of the workforce. These details, which provide a different perspective from that of the authors, are bypassed.

In the next chapter, the war that was barely mentioned in chapter one is discussed, but without any position being taken on the rôle of the left during the war. That is discussed in chapter three, and is used mainly to condemn the Trotskyists. And although they note the switch by the CPSA (in fact a double switch from pro- to anti-back to pro-war), there is little reference back to the discussion in the first chapter. The reader cannot fault Fine and Davis for their position. That is their prerogative. But it already seems by the time page 30 is reached that this is not a text that might develop a useful Marxist discussion.

Skipping to the third chapter, some of the faults of the book become more marked. Fine and Davis believe that the Trotskyist position was based purely on attacks on the Stalinists. This is not the place to explain once again the struggle against a worldwide movement that was throttling the working class movement. Nor is it my purpose to exculpate the South African Trotskyists for their failure to advance further. However, two interconnecting factors have to be grasped when historians view what happened. Firstly, they must have an understanding, if not empathy, for the persons and the organisations under discussion, and that also means that they must have the facts. Some of us have discussed the events in the South African left for years, but we only published articles or chapters of books when there were documents. Even then we had problems, because only part of the story was revealed in the documents we retrieved. Fine had only part of what has since been found, but it is a travesty of historical writing to proceed on the smell of a rag and write with so little documentation about groups like the Trotskyists.

Chapter three provides one further potted history that, correct as it is in some respects, bowdlerises the story, and gives an account that fails to understand what occurred. Fine did not have access to the theses sent to Trotsky, and, quoting the *Workers Voice*, he and Davis even date Trotsky's letter as prior to the thesis on the Native Question. Nor did they have the criticism of Ruth Fischer, or the letters that establish Gordon's position in Johannesburg as working outside of the Workers Party. Of Gordon they claim that he did not have a programme, and so on. They blunder along until they come to the

article on Palestine in *The Spark*, presumably one of the few copies they found. At last they are on solid ground, and they lambast the writer of that article, correctly, I think, but this tells us little about the group and its work in Cape Town.

The events in the Left Opposition in the 1930s are open to criticism, but this must be placed in some perspective. If, as the authors say, the working class was immature, the problem in Cape Town was the difficulty in forging an alliance between the Coloureds and the smaller African community. It was this that took Goolam Gool into the National Liberation League, but he resigned his official position when he believed that the struggle had been betrayed by leading members of the CPSA. What they did not know was that the Cape Town group had only three activists, only one of whom (Clare Goodlatte) was employed. They wrote and published a journal, they ran a Socialist club, were in financial straits, yet they sent money to a dozen appeals from oppositionists in Europe, and it seems, exhausted themselves over five years in trying to build a movement. The Cape Town Trotskyists made many mistakes, but no study of their actions can ignore the composition of the group. It is also difficult to excuse the early groups in Johannesburg. The fights and splits were execrable. Nonetheless, they did not ignore the white workers – as Fine maintains. They were marginalised by Sachs (an unreformed Stalinist) and those so loosely quoted by the authors. Their only sphere of activity was among the African workers, and it was there that Gordon made his mark. His efforts could have been afforded a less negative appraisal. In like fashion, the caustic comments on the work of the Workers International League could have been tempered, after further reflection, by some positive statements of its work. There were never more than half a dozen activists. They built up a considerable influence in the trade unions, and because of the fragility of the trade unions they were prepared to work with bureaucratic leaders; they cooperated with the teachers in their campaign for better conditions; they worked in community movements (negating Fine's claim that their policy was syndicalist); they even tried to get a toehold in the white unions, but were rebuffed. They also carried on all the functions of a Socialist movement, holding public meetings, producing a newspaper, pamphlets and journals, and so on. Yes, they made serious errors, and their implosion was inexcusable. But was there nothing they did that pleases Fine and Davis from their elevated positions in the universities, 50 years on?

If that was all, the book would be rather lightweight. The authors do have serious arguments against the all-too-muddled thinking on the national liberation movement, and in a later section of the book, a damning indictment of those (including myself) who became involved in sabotage groups. Theoretically they are correct, but once again it must be said that they do not explore the factors that took so many into the movements that espoused, and practised, violence. That requires a volume in itself, and will be discussed elsewhere. Readers who are prepared to walk warily (and wearily) through

the maze of errors generated by Fine and Davis, might wish to explore some of the problems of South Africa with them.

Hillel Ticktin was born in South Africa, studied at the University of Cape Town, and attended lectures by Jack Simons, the doyen of CPSA-SACP theoreticians and later tutor of Umkhonto We Sizwe commissars in Angola. Ticktin obviously believes that Simons represented a considerable advance on other Communists, but to describe Simons as belonging to the left of the CP, is only to call into question the meaning of the word 'left'. On the campus, Ticktin worked in groups that were sympathetic to the teachings of Leon Trotsky. This made him a natural rebel when he obtained a scholarship given by the ANC for study in the USSR. He emerged from the course convinced that there was no Socialism in the USSR, and no adherence to Marxism. His experiences are partly reflected in his essays in the journal *Critique* and elsewhere, and in his book on the Soviet Union. His writings illuminated a subject that was otherwise opaque, and he was able to cut through many of the past debates on the nature of that society.

Whilst in the USSR he presented a thesis, researched in the years 1961-65, which provided a comparison of racialism in South Africa and the USA. The thesis was not accepted, he says, because he would not accept the line on the USA demanded of him by his supervisor. This book is an update of the section he wrote on South Africa in the rejected thesis.

This book follows a different path from most other writers on South Africa. Firstly, he makes no concession to the reader's ability to follow his arguments. He uses language like a bludgeon, assumes that his readers can follow his logic, does not stop to define key concepts, and, when he refers to persons or movements, seems to believe that his readers should know to whom or what he is referring. He is not overconcerned by dull historical facts, the book contains no accounts of class struggles, except for the 1922 general strike, which he needs to buttress his arguments, he says nothing about trade unions or community struggles (which he ascribes, incorrectly, to Stalinist influences), has peculiar ideas of what happened historically, and has only a crude conception of what happened inside the Trotskyist groups. Instead, Ticktin sets his eyes on unravelling the categories through which South Africa should be understood. Only then, he argues, can the nature of the problem in South Africa be explained.

The introduction of new categories in Marxist analyses is a standard procedure, and fruitful if they allow for new, more incisive, interpretations. That is, categories used in a critique of a social structure are invaluable if they allow the investigation to produce new understanding, and uncover hitherto unsuspected connections or contradictions which provide an insight into unfolding events. Such categories should be consistent with the existent corpus of Marxist theory, and if they are new or relatively unknown they must be well defined. If, however, they do not lead to new insights, then, in line with Occam's razor, they must fall away, because simpler concepts can do the same work more expeditiously. It is my belief that the insights that Ticktin of-

fers in his book, new and perceptive as they are, could have been made without the introduction of his new categories. In fact, these only serve to obscure his analysis, and make his text even less readable.

Requiring a critique of political economy in South Africa, Ticktin introduces, or redefines, four categories. These are abstract labour, declining capitalism, class and surplus product. From these, Ticktin claims, a better understanding of South Africa can be developed, and the nature of racial discrimination can be explained. These categories cannot be discovered empirically (a virtual swearword in his lexicon) and he uses empirically discovered facts sparingly.

One of the hallmarks of *Critique*, recognised by its readers, is that we live in an era of declining capitalism. This assertion can be found in Lenin's writing on imperialism, and in a speech (and a later letter) by Trotsky in which he presented a graph indicating the period of growth followed by the period of decline of capitalism. Trotsky linked his curve to specific historical turning points. Readers of *Critique* will have been acquainted with Lenin and Trotsky's ideas, and have had the opportunity of deciding on their veracity. By starkly asserting the notion of 'decline of capitalism' as a category, it is made unquestionable. This has now to be accepted as given, and Ticktin offers no further elaboration in this work. Despite its primacy in Ticktin's argument, the new reader will find no argument to support this claim.

Thereafter, Ticktin's thesis depends on his peculiar use of the category 'abstract labour'. In the first volume of *Capital* Marx pointed to two components of labour, that which is termed 'concrete labour' because it makes use values, and 'abstract labour' which produces exchange value. Marx notes later in the volume that Ure, a champion of the new system of production and a rabid anti-trade unionist, envisaged a de-skilled working class in which workers could be used interchangeably anywhere in the factory. That is, the work process would allow for homogeneity, and no workers could halt production by going on strike. It was a fanciful picture, more useful for a Charlie Chaplin production than reality, even if the work process in some sectors of production was increasingly de-skilled.

Ticktin adopts the latter aspect of the work process to define abstract labour. He says of it that 'specifically it refers to the social reduction of labour to a common form' (level of labour time, intensity of labour, etc) (p5). For purposes of his critique he then states that in South Africa 'abstract labour has necessarily to be fractured to maintain the system', but this has 'only delayed and hindered but cannot prevent the formation of a black working class' (p6).

This is quite ingenious. Ticktin, by introducing the word 'fractured' has laid the way to introducing 'racial discrimination'. At the same time, he foresees the future formation of a 'black working class' – but why this has still to take place, and why it must be black, is not specifically discussed. This seems more like verbal sleight of hand than the basis for new insight. The nature of capitalist production everywhere, despite Ure, rests on the atomisa-

tion of the workforce. The class, says Ticktin, depends on the workers banding together as a collectivity – once again with little explanation. But a barrier to this coalescence is the atomisation that is intrinsic to the relations of production. The workers are divided along lines of gender, age and skill. In various countries there are further dividing lines, of religion, ethnicity and colour. These are all exploited in order to weaken the exploited class, and in many societies one or more of these sectors is (or are) coopted into the ruling group. To create a special case for South Africa seems unnecessary.

The foundation for Ticktin's thesis has been laid. By adding his concept of 'surplus product' he can move to the assertion that the white worker extracts surplus value from the black workers by exercising a limited degree of control over its extraction (p9). The thesis is almost complete. It is only necessary to add that:

> 'Capital accumulation in South Africa has been regulated by racial discrimination, a term which has therefore to be understood as a special category of political economy and not just a particular politics of a particular group. It regulates profits, it assists the development of capital in particular directions, it forms the nature of that capital itself... it contains and directs in particular ways the political economy...' (p36)

This Ticktin expands, referring to the response to the general strike of 1922 as the 'watershed' when racism (which is ubiquitous) was transformed into racial discrimination, and became government policy in response to the strike. His claim is that:

> 'A specific division of the surplus product which leads to particular forms of capital accumulation can lead in turn to specific legal and political forms to enforce that particular division. Such is the case in South Africa... The political forms, in turn, are used to maintain the specific relation... [that is to defend] the particular form of extraction of the surplus product.' (p49)

Or again:

> 'The division of the working class is not an empirical and arbitrary action. It is a considered action under conditions of capitalist decline.' (p13)

This is a remarkable assertion. Racial discrimination became a fact in South Africa when it was put on the statute books. Was there indeed no racial discrimination in the housing of labour on the diamond fields, or in the body searches? No racial discrimination in the divisions created on the gold mines, or in the Chamber of Mines' agitation for a pass law in the 1890s? No racial discrimination in housing, jobs, pay, health protection, pass restrictions and so on? Was it not rather necessary to put the date forward to fit the assertion that racial discrimination 'is a modern response utilising forms and doctrines of an earlier period... [which] can only be appreciated in a context where a **declining capitalist class** [my emphasis] accepted a policy to which they were opposed, rather than lose all' (p9). The category is extended. In this short review only a few passages can be quoted:

> 'Racial discrimination divides the workers, so preventing the formation of a class under conditions when industrialisation tends towards the formation of a relatively homogeneous mass of workers. It performs this act by paying the discriminated workers below the value of their labour power.' (p3)

From this it follows that the difference between South Africa and other countries is that the majority is discriminated against, permitting the white workers to get much higher pay (cf p3).

There are other categories like 'superexploitation', but they are undefined in the text and are ancillary to the argument as a whole.

How this makes the analysis any more penetrating is not easily determined. Ticktin's predictions are not any more acute than those of other Marxists who do not find it very valuable to introduce the categories he favours – and do not make it any easier to operate inside the political arena of South Africa. Even more important is the lifelessness of the writing. There is no discussion of the changing structure of the country, nor of the political struggles, nor of the political organisations. But then, as Ticktin stresses, this is not a history book. For that the reader should perhaps rejoice. When the author does use historical facts he is so often at fault that one becomes appalled at his slipshod carelessness. To draw up a calendar of errors would be tedious. But some should be noted.

Ticktin's knowledge of the Trotskyist movement is rudimentary. He claims, on the basis of a conversation, that Trotsky's letter was an answer to a letter from Burlak (p2). He also maintains that the move to organising blacks on a community basis was the fruit of the CPSA's policies (which he abhors). There is no doubt, that in the violent move to the left in the early 1930s, the CPSA organised in the townships. In the late 1930s they repeated this in the Cape. But it was the Trotskyists who worked in community organisations after 1943, and never stopped working in such areas. There is no good reason to condemn either movement for so doing. Why, then, twist the facts?

He claims that peasants had no desire to immolate themselves in mines, and that draconian measures were required to secure them (p22), unaware that the first such workers in the diamond and gold mines were sent by the chiefs to earn the money to buy arms and ammunition, or came from Mozambique where large numbers welcomed work in the mines to escape the forced labour imposed by the Portuguese. Rhodes only introduced his oppressive measures to maintain the flow of workers from the Reserves to the mines.

Ticktin fails completely to differentiate between workers in the mines in the 1920s, who wanted a black labour force to do the drilling underground, and workers in transport and industry who wanted the black labourers forced out of town (p24). This is not an aristocracy of labour issue, nor of declining capitalism – but of alterations in the nature of the urban economy and the specific interests of white workers.

The short description of the 1922 strike in the book is highly contentious. It is not true that the CPSA took a leading rôle, although some of its members controlled the initial committee. There was no Johannesburg Soviet in 1922. This body (which was called a soviet but did not vaguely resemble one), was set up in 1919, and is discussed in *Searchlight South Africa*, no 1.

The list can be extended, taking in errors and dubious generalisations. Ticktin presents 'facts' that he wants to use in his thesis. In order to condemn the Stalinists, and they were to blame for many things, he decided that they were Browderites after the war. To buttress this he said that Earl Browder was the postwar leader of the CPUSA (p60). This is quite absurd. Browder was the party Secretary during the war, and called for the dissolution of the Communist Party after the Teheran conference in 1943. If Stalin could join with Roosevelt and Churchill in laying the foundations of a new world, he said, then the Communists could work with the American financiers. Many South African Communist leaders agreed with him. Then, in May 1945, after Jacques Duclos, Secretary of the French party, condemned Browder's liquidationism, the latter was removed from his posts. The South Africans followed suit. This did not reverse the reformist rôle of many Communist leaders, but Browderism was officially dead.

There is a third book, rescued from the travel notes of Ralph Bunche in 1937, part of which has bearing on the history of the Trotskyists. Because of the later rejection of Bunche by the left (and this is mentioned in Bob Edgar's epilogue), it is necessary to quote briefly from the introduction. In this Edgar indicates that Bunche was radicalised in the depression years, and moved towards Marxism, but was wary of the CPSA, and never became a party member. Addressing the problems of the blacks in the USA, he claimed that their problems were an outgrowth of class exploitation. That is, 'racialism is a myth, albeit a dangerous one, for it is a specific stalking-horse for selfish group politics and camouflages economic exploitation' (p7). He saw that black leaders would not change because their positions depended on appeals to race, and because they could not comprehend how blacks were sidelined by the broader economic and social conditions at work. Consequently, he rejected appeals for self-determination (as decreed by the Comintern) or for advancement through business enterprises. In his early writing, Bunche viewed colonisers in Africa as manipulating race as an instrument of domination and exploitation...

Bunche's notes on his journey through South Africa consist largely of accounts of his meetings with personalities from the trade unions, the Communist Party, and with leading liberals and leaders of the national movements. His visits to the townships provide us with vivid accounts of the lives of the urban blacks, of their traditions (both tribal and modern), and their living conditions. It is an account that provides a witness' survey of poverty, squalor, and oppression. It is from such accounts that the historian can partly reconstruct life as it was – and one that should be compulsory reading for would-be authors.

This is not the place to offer a review of a volume of nearly 400 pages, but there is interest for those who want to read about another side of Trotskyist activities. Bunche attended the third conference of the All-African Convention in 1937 at which Tabata, Janub Gool and Goolam Gool were present. His account contradicts that presented by Tabata's history of the AAC, and comes close to the criticisms printed in the WPSA's journal, *The Spark*. Bunche's diarised entries speak of wasted sessions spent in trivialities, of disorder, and the side-tracking of any serious suggestions made by the 'radicals'. Many delegates left the gathering in despair, with the feeling that there was little purpose in the AAC surviving.

Bunche was even-handed. From the conference of the AAC he went on to the gathering of the ANC. His account of that body was, if anything, even more scathing than that of the AAC. Quite obviously, the petit-bourgeoisie was timorous and self-serving. The only time they came alive in either of the two conferences was when the question of blacks in business was discussed at the AAC. Even that was more a matter of anecdotal discussions of those Africans who had failed in their enterprises, and those stories led to uproarious laughter! It is salutary to note that these were the people with whom the members of the WPSA had to work.

Bunche met few Trotskyists – but there were few to meet. The Johannesburg group had collapsed in the wake of the departure of Lee and his friends, and Dladla, former Secretary of the Johannesburg branch, said to Bunche there were no revolutionaries in South Africa. When he met Gordon, it was to hear about trade union progress. As for Cape Town, the Communist League was just about to reform after their stay in the Socialist Party, and the WPSA did not often meet with people outside their ranks. Consequently, Bunche met them only at the conference of the AAC. The comments on the gathering of the AAC will have to be taken seriously by those who want to understand the politics of black nationalism in the 1930s.

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