

J.S. Scott, black artists and the cultural politics of 1920s Johannesburg

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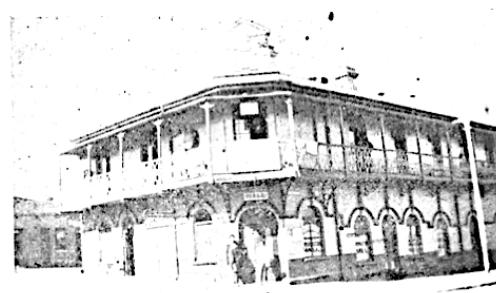
Figures 1 & 2: J.S. Scott's Black Samson, from R. Phillips, *The Bantu Are Coming* (Johannesburg, 1930); J.S. Scott, 'J. Scott (A Black Man): Cartoonist to the Workers' Herald', *Workers' Herald*, 27/01/1927

J.S. Scott, one of South Africa's first known black artists, was at the forefront of the fight against segregation in 1920s Johannesburg and intimately connected to Southern Africa's first major black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU). Throughout the decade, "Scotty" - as he signed his pictures - drew numerous cartoons for the ICU newspaper, *The Workers' Herald*, and produced a number of dramatic paintings that adorned the walls of ICU institutions. The political and economic significance of the ICU and its unprecedented mass membership of up to 250,000 workers in 1920s Southern Africa are relatively well known.ⁱ But the trade union also had a dramatic cultural impact. Through black artists like Scott, the ICU was at the forefront of a cultural renaissance in 1920s Johannesburg, encompassing art, poetry, jazz, choral music, dance and comedy.ⁱⁱ The ICU supported numerous black artists financially, and they in turn actively supported the trade union. Through this cultural collaboration, the idea of a radical 'New Africa' emerged, defined by the ICU and a new confident, race conscious black identity.ⁱⁱⁱ Central to this shift, artists like Scott got "their own paints and brushes and were painting their own angels black and their own Satan white."^{iv} Building on Victoria Collis-Buthelezi's analysis of Scott's cartoons, this blog gives a brief insight into Scott's life, his work and the context in which he produced his art.^v Any further information on his life and art would be greatly appreciated.

Scott was born to a coloured family in Durban, but by the mid-1920s he was living and working in Johannesburg.^{vi} It is likely that he was a commercial painter and decorator, a semi-skilled industry that had a high proportion of coloured workers. Clements Kadalie, the general secretary of the ICU, recalled in his autobiography that Scott was key to the trade union's refurbishment of a newly acquired Workers' Hall at 16 Market Street in the Ferreirastown district of Johannesburg during 1925.

A young Coloured man named Scott, small in stature, was in charge of the artistic paintings, which attracted many leading Europeans to visit the 'ICU Hall', as it was commonly known to many on the Rand. On its walls were painted artistically an African miner, as well as international slogans of the labour movement, such as 'Workers of the World, Unite!' etc. [...] At night, dances or concerts were arranged. Men like Dr Gow, of the AME Church from Wilberforce Institution, gave us first-class concerts in the hall. The Chinese population of Johannesburg used our hall for their bioscope shows twice a week. In its minor hall, the ICU fixed its library as well as a first-class tea room. In a word, the ICU revolutionized the life of the African proletariat of the Golden City through its Workers' Hall.^{vii}

The ICU ploughed a considerable amount of money into renovating and maintaining the hall: new floors and carpets were fitted, Scott was paid to decorate the hall's doors, windows and walls with murals and multi-coloured slogans, a full, all-black staff (including a manager, chef and librarian) were employed, and rent cost £30 a month. Scott's painting of a black Samson (figure 1) dominated the hall, the "broken pillars representing the twin pillars of colour prejudice and poverty", and, once finished, the space soon functioned as the main venue for ICU meetings, conferences, concerts and dances.^{viii} Regular events included gramophone recitals, night schools and fancy dress balls featuring bands such as the Rayneth Big Four and the Merry Mascots.^{ix}



"WORKERS HALL,"

JOHANNESBURG.

Centre for Black Trade Unionism on the Rand, where the I.C.U. trains African proletarian leadership. It is situated right in working class quarters, Ferreirastown.

Figures 3 & 4: The ICU Team Room and ICU Workers Hall, from C. Kadalie, A.W.G. Champion & H.D. Tyamzashe, *Economic and Wages Commission: Evidence of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (Johannesburg, 1925).*

In turn, at ICU mass meetings, Scott's cartoons were used to attack the 'Pact' government's new segregation legislation. After being elected in 1924, the Pact coalition of James Hertzog's National Party and Frederic Creswell's South African Labour Party swiftly introduced a raft of new repressive measures, entrenching "colour bars", removing Africans from employment on South Africa's docks and railways, and threatening to take away their limited voting rights. Police reports capture how ICU provincial secretary, Alexander Maduna, used Scott's January 1927 cartoon 'Awaiting Their Fate' (figure 5) to illustrate the situation at a Port Elizabeth rally:

Before going into the Bills let me show you the cartoons of General Hertzog, and, his three lieutenants, Messrs Tielman Roos, Beyers etc, and Messrs Kadalie, Dr Abdurahman and Mahatma Ghandi, the three latter representing Natives, Coloureds and Indians respectively [...] Within a few days the Union Parliament opens, said Mr Maduna, and it will be a Native Session, and, that this cartoon depicts the actual position. In it General Hertzog holds in his hands the document containing the 'Higher Status', and the three non-European leaders are shown as prisoners on trial for murder, awaiting their fate.[...]^x

Meanwhile in Pretoria, local ICU secretary Thomas Mbeki held up copies of the July 1926 *Workers' Herald* and described how Scott's front-page black Samson sketch (figure 6), a replica of his Workers' Hall painting, showed the black worker "breaking into freedom".^{xi}

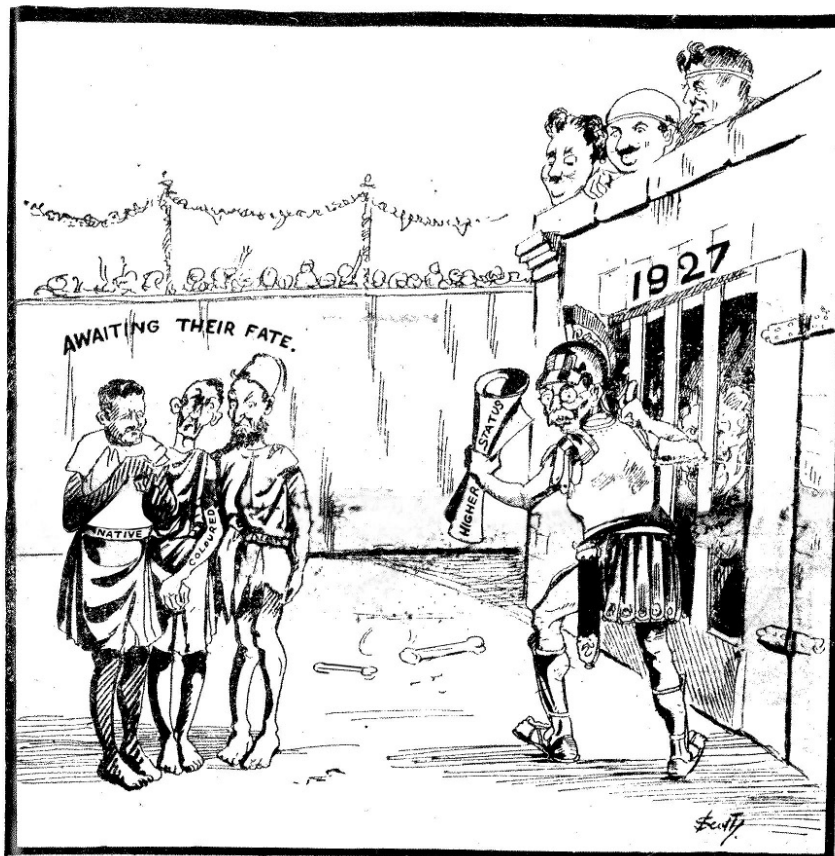


Figure 5: J.S. Scott, 'Awaiting their fate', *Workers' Herald*, 12/01/1927



Figure 6: J.S. Scott, 'When He Awakes', *Workers' Herald*, 28/07/1926 [reprinted in *Workers' Herald*, 10/08/1929].

As segregation policies hardened over the course of the 1920s, Scott's artwork vividly captured the contemporary politics of race and class, as well as the ICU's key arguments. For example, a key thrust of ICU speeches and articles was a radical new conception of race consciousness. Rejecting colonial categories of race, nation and "tribe", the ICU unified coloureds, Africans and Indians, South Africans and non-South Africans, Basotho, Shangaan, Xhosas and Zulus into a single black trade union. Scott captured this new sense of consciousness in his 1927 self-portrait (figure 2) which depicted him working on the portrait of an African. Coloured artist and African subject both conformed to contemporary ideas of what coloured and African people should look like. But Scott explicitly described himself as "A Black Man", adopting a common, heterogeneous identity that was aware of, and deliberately transcended, racialised difference.

In another image of South Africa's contemporary race politics, Scott captured the ICU's disdain for Johannesburg's organised white workers, who initially did little to support the trade

union. In the August 1926 cartoon 'African Worker Undergoing Persecution' (figure 7), a white worker keeps his hands in his pocket and blithely smokes his pipe, while the 'Pact' policeman bundles two ICU agitators in jail at the behest of a Randlord. It was at this moment that ICU leaders were first being arrested on trumped up sedition charges.



Figure 7: J.S. Scott, 'African trade unionism undergoing persecution under the Nationalist Labour government', *Workers' Herald*, 14/08/1926.

After the local white labour movement refused to support the ICU in its campaign against segregation and anti-sedition legislation, the ICU increasingly sought out solidarity from organised labour in other sections of the world. From 1925, ICU leaders were in regular contact with the All-India Trade Union Congress in Asia as well as the American Negro Labor Congress and Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in America. The most concrete instance of socialist internationalism, however, came through the ICU's connections with European workers, particularly the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) based in Amsterdam. In October 1926, the ICU formally affiliated with the IFTU. Scott commemorated this in his March 1927 cartoon 'African workers received recognition' (figure 8), which once again critiqued "indignant white South African white workers" for their ambivalent attitude, in explicit contrast to "overseas white workers". 'Coming Events', meanwhile, emphasised how "victory" and socialism were dependent international unity and inter-racial co-operation.



Figure 8: J.S. Scott, 'The African workers receive international recognition through the affiliation of the ICU to the International Federation of Trade Unions: The South African white worker is annoyed at the victory of the blacks', *Workers' Herald*, 18/03/1927.



Figure 9: J.S. Scott, 'Coming Events: Socialism can only be brought about by unity of all Workers, irrespective of colour or creed', *Workers' Herald*, 14/10/1926.

Perhaps more subversively, Scott also produced a series of images that mocked South Africa's leading white politicians - most notably the prime minister, James Hertzog - and the racist legislation they were putting through parliament. In 'General Hertzog's Proposed Solutions' (figure 10), Scott depicts a quasi-bestial Hertzog threatening an ICU agitator with the nailed club of segregation. As noted by Collis-Buthelezi, the well-dressed agitator here fights with reason rather, not brute force, while the fence between the two men "contain the excesses of the white order under which they lived as though it is it that is uncivilized, wild, and barbaric."^{xii} After Hertzog's subsequent electoral successes in 1929, 'Nationalist Victory through African Proletarian Eyes' (figure 11) similarly portrays a mad-eyed Hertzog sjamboking a crowd of well-dressed African workers. Finally, going back to 'When He Awakes' (figure 6), amid the toppling the pillars of racial prejudice and imperial capitalism, a beleaguered-looking Hertzog is this time caught out, crushed under falling masonry labelled 'exploitation'. This time, his 'colour bar' has been abandoned on the floor.



Figure 10: J.S. Scott, 'General Hertzog's proposed solutions to the Native Problem as embodied in his recent Bills laid before Parliament has given the Non-European people food for thought', *Workers' Herald*, 15/06/1926.



Figure 11: J.S. Scott, ‘Nationalist Victory as seen through African Proletarian Political Eyes’, *New Africa*, 29/06/1929.

Scott’s first surviving cartoon from 1925, ‘Coming Events’ (figure 12), in turn, captures both the ICU’s anti-capitalist agenda and its engagement with black sport and culture. A huge black boxer lands a decisive blow against a small podgy white capitalist opponent – in a scene that closely tied in with *The Workers’ Herald* wider sporting coverage. In the newspaper’s sports columns, Jack Barnard regularly reported on the athletic feats of black boxers and used this to score political points. Tackling the subject of “European brains versus Black brains” through the medium of boxing commentary, Barnard contended that the successes of black boxers conclusively proved that if “the Blackman [had] the same equal chances as the Whiteman”, and the “freedom, justice and rights to use their brains”, the “boot would be on the other foot.”^{xiii} Scott’s 1926 cartoon, ‘Goal!’ (figure 13), likewise, celebrated Kadalie decisively defeat of the government in court, overturning his ban from Natal, slotting a winning strike past a hapless justice minister, Tielman Roos, as goalie, while a gawky Hertzog looks on. ICU members – such as Abe Phoofolo - were keen footballers, and ICU mass meetings were often held at football grounds in East London and Dundee.^{xiv}



Figure 12: J.S. Scott, 'Coming Events', *Workers' Herald*, 15/05/1925.



Figure 13: J.S. Scott, 'Goal!', *Workers' Herald*, 15/11/1926

Scott's cartoons and paintings were complemented by numerous other ICU-funded art. When Kadalie first arrived in Johannesburg in late 1924, the coloured entertainer and venue manager, Jack Phillips - a man with an "English accent mixed with bad grammar, airy, deep laugh, affected and somewhat 'pansyish' [manner]" - hosted ICU events at his "large, spacious and well-appointed" Inchcape Hall on Eloff Street Extension, and he helped as an MC at ICU events throughout the rest of the decade.^{xv} Kadalie was personally connected to the New Negro movement in New York as South African correspondent of *The Messenger* newspaper, and imported new literature such as Joel Roger's *From Superman to Man* to Johannesburg. James Dixon Mogaecho worked as a comedian in 'Dem Darkies' alongside his ICU secretarial work in Bloemfontein - and Kadalie attempted to rename Mogaecho's group 'The ICU Company' in 1925.^{xvi} Joe Kokozela, who managed the ICU Workers' Hall, meanwhile, was a "fine vocal soloist possessing a good tenor voice", "one of the best musicians of the time", who conducted an acclaimed choir.^{xvii} And Sam Masabalala, the ICU's organising secretary between 1922 and 1924, was a pianist in the 'Big Four' jazz orchestra.^{xviii} The ICU also publicly defended the right of black art students, including Moses Tladi (widely recognised as South Africa's first black painter) to enter Johannesburg's segregated public art gallery when entry was refused in 1928.^{xix}

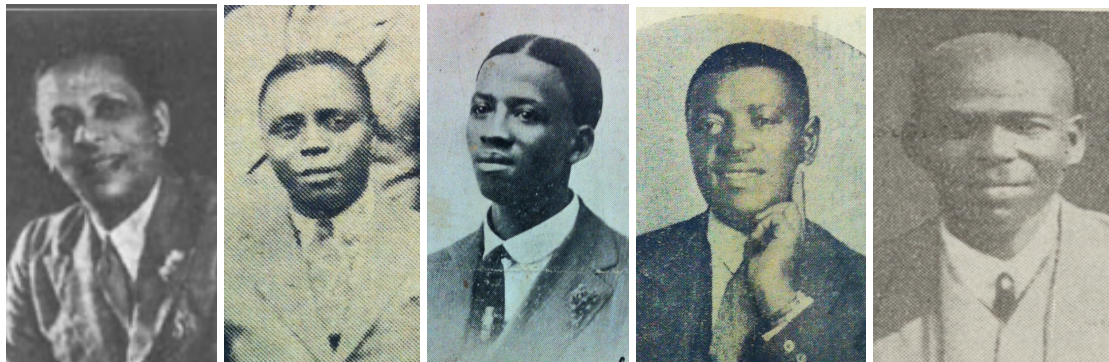


Figure 14: Jack Phillips, Clements Kadalie, James Mogaecho, Joe Kokozela and Sam Masabalala^{xx}

After the collapse of the ICU at the end of the 1920s, Scott earned a living as a sign-writer and poster-maker. In 1940s Johannesburg, he worked for the Schlesinger Organisation, one of South Africa's largest conglomerate businesses, which had stakes in insurance, industrial agriculture, real estate, media, cinema, theatre and amusement parks. While working for Schlesinger in Johannesburg, Scott was the boss and mentor of Ephraim Badsha, an Indian artist from Durban. Scott subsequently moved to Durban in the 1950s and worked at an amusement park on the beach front. In Durban, he and Badsha were involved in Bantu, Indian and Coloured Arts (BICA), an organisation which ran art education classes, exhibitions and outings. BICA met at the Bantu Young Men's Christian Association, and members included Selby Mvusi, Lingum Chetty, Marimutu Solai, Nils Solberg, Scott MacNab, and Sylvia Lawrence. Scott later move to Cape Town. He passed away after a car accident and subsequent long illness.^{xxi}

To-date the longer-lasting Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC) and the African National Congress' African Club are better remembered and researched as black cultural hubs in interwar Johannesburg. Black moderates like Sol Plaatje praised the white-run BMSC, in particular, claiming that in the mid-1920s, "our people are at present wholly unfit for the intricate job of managing efficiently a social or community centre", and needed "a white management over a black and white crew to train our men".^{xxii} ICU leaders, however, caustically rejected the BMSC's paternalistic liberal white management. They renamed the BMSC as the 'Bantu Men's Slaughter Centre' and 'British Masters' Slaves Centre', mocked misguided "good boy" members, like Plaatje, RV Selope Thema and HS Msimang, questioned the "colour bar" on its executive (which consisted of six white and only two black members), and jested that it was nothing more than a "hoax devised for no other purpose than to hoodwink the Natives".^{xxiii} In direct contrast to the BMSC, the ICU Workers' Hall represented a far more subversive, radical and autonomous black space – and, importantly, ICU leaders recognised that art and culture were inherently political. J.S. Scott worked within this radical ethos. Compared to the beautiful, but profoundly apolitical landscapes of Moses Tladi and sculptures of Ernest Mancoba, Scott's artwork vividly engaged with actual realities of contemporary politics, mocking white racism, lambasting the segregationist government and vibrantly visualising the form that future black emancipation would take.



Figure 15: BICA art class in the 1950s. JS Scott is the short man in glass to the back right of the picture. Image courtesy of Omar Badsha.

- ⁱ For general histories of the ICU, see D. Johnson, *Dreaming of Freedom in South Africa: Literature Between Critique and Utopia* (Edinburgh, 2019), pp.41-70; S. Neame, *The Congress Movement: The Unfolding of the Congress Alliance* (Cape Town, 2015), vols.1-3; L. van der Walt, 'The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW and the ICU, 1904-1934', *African Studies*, 66:2-3 (2007); H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (Johannesburg, 1987); P.L. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (Cape Town, 1978).
- ⁱⁱ D. Coplan, *In the Township Tonight: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, 1985), pp.134-135; C. Ballantine, 'Music and Emancipation: The Social Role of Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa between the 1920s and early 1940s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17:1 (1991), pp.141-142.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For the ICU's direct connection with the idea of a 'New Africa' see D. Fraser, *The New Africa* (London, 1927); R.V. Selope Thema, 'The New Africa', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 29/10/1927; C. Kadalie, 'The Outlook', *New Africa*, 29/06/1929. For the wider movement, see N. Masilela, *An Outline of the New African Movement in South Africa* (Trenton, 2013).
- ^{iv} James Thaele, quoted in 'Segregation Scheme: Native Deputed to Explain', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 05/07/1924.
- ^v V. Collis-[Buthelezi], *Anxious Records: Race, Imperial Belonging, and the Black Literary Imagination, 1900-1946* (PhD thesis, Uni. of Columbia, 2013), pp.196-206.
- ^{vi} Correspondence with Omar Badsha, 30/11/2020.
- ^{vii} C. Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU: The Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist in South Africa*, (London, 1970), pp.85-86.
- ^{viii} 'When He Awakes', *Workers' Herald*, 15/06/1929; Wits Historical Papers (WITS) AD1178 Saffery Papers, H.D. Tyamzashe, *Summarised History of the ICU by Henri Danielle Tyamzashe who was Complaints & Research Secretary ICU and Editor of ICU Newspapers*. Tyamzashe later asserted that the black Samson painting was "Kadalie's idea", see 'Baboon Journalism', *New Africa*, 29/06/1929.
- ^{ix} 'Rand Activities', *Workers' Herald*, 15/01/1926; 'Workers' Tea Room', *Workers' Herald*, 15/11/1926; 'Don't Forget ICU Night School', *Workers' Herald*, 06/04/1927; 'Biggest Event at the Workers Hall: Fancy Dress Ball', *Workers' Herald*, 18/03/1927.
- ^x South African National Archives, Pretoria (SANA) JUS 916 1/18/26 'The African World: Police Reports: Part 5', report of ICU meeting in Sydenham, Port Elizabeth on 13/01/1927.
- ^{xi} SANA JUS 915 1/18/26 'The African World: Police Reports: Part 3', report of ICU meeting in Pretoria, dated 13/08/1926.
- ^{xii} Collis-Buthelezi, *Anxious Records*, pp.200-201.
- ^{xiii} 'Sports News: The Negro Race Holding Their Own with Europeans in the Boxing Ring', *Workers' Herald*, 27/03/1926.
- ^{xiv} T.D.M. Skota, *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in Africa*. (Johannesburg, 1930), p.240.
- ^{xv} 'Trade Unionism Spreads Amongst the African Proletariat', *Workers' Herald*, 09/01/1925; 'News and Doings of the ICU', *Workers' Herald*, 02/04/1925. Phillips and the Inchcape Hall are described at length in R. Bunche (R. Edgar (ed.)), *An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph Bunche, 28 September 1937 - 1 January 1938* (Athens, 2001), pp.174,180,187,221,351; A. MacMillan, *The Golden City* (Johannesburg 1933), p.209.
- ^{xvi} J.D. Mogaeche, 'National Secretary in Bloemfontein', *Workers' Herald*, 15/11/1925.
- ^{xvii} Skota, *African Yearly Register*, p.162; School of Oriental and African Studies Special Collections MSS 380077 H.S. Msimang, *Autobiography*, p.118.
- ^{xviii} 'The 'Big Four' (Queenstown) Bantu Jazz Orchestra', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 10/12/1932.
- ^{xix} 'Right of Access to Art Gallery', *Workers' Herald*, 18/02/1928.
- ^{xx} Photos from Bunche & Edgar, *Travel Notes*; *Workers' Herald*, 18/02/1928; University of Cape Town, BC581 Lionel Forman Papers, B3; Skota, *African Yearly Register*, p.187.
- ^{xxi} Correspondence with Omar Badsha, 30/11/2020. For more on the Schlesinger Organisation, see B. Freund, *Twentieth Century South Africa: A Development History* (Cambridge, 2019), p.52.
- ^{xxii} S. Plaatje, 'Joint Council and its Constitution', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 28/02/1925. For the BMSC, see T. Couzens, 'The Social Ethos of Black Writing in South Africa, 1920-1950' in C. Heywood (ed.), *Aspects of South African Literature* (London, 1976), pp.72-79; M. Matera & S. King, *The Global 1930: The International Decade*, (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 26-27; P. Limb, 'An African Newspaper in Central Johannesburg: The Journalistic and Associational Context of *Abantu-Batho*', in P. Limb (ed.), *The People's Paper: A Centenary History & Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (Johannesburg, 2012).
- ^{xxiii} H.D. Tyamzashe, 'Bantu Men's Social Centre', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 14/03/1925; S.M. Silwana, 'Who are the Enemies of Our Race', *Workers' Herald*, 02/04/1925; S.M. Silwana, 'A Candid Reply to Rev Ray E Phillips', *Workers' Herald*, 15/08/1925; 'Colour Bar at Bantu Men's Slaughter Centre', *Workers' Herald*, 20/02/1926.