

**“Hundreds of Native Workers are Joining the Communist Party in Bloemfontein; ... which organisation ... ever faced calamities, persecutions and prosecutions as the CP did?”:  
The Communists in the Free State, 1921-1940”**

**Peter Limb**

Historians have largely neglected the history of the Communist Party in the Free State due in part to its limited strength there relating to a largely rural economy dominated by hard-to-organise farm workers accompanied by a low industrial base that failed to spawn a large permanent black proletariat or black unions, and in part due to its scant written sources. The CPSA faced incessant hostility from the segregation state, churches, white-owned black press, and moderate black political figures in the ANC, ICU, and liberal organisations. After winning a greater degree of influence in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the party fell victim to sectarianism and declined. Nevertheless, it was influential at different times from the foundation of the party in 1921 to World War II.

I trace this complex history, bringing out the changing political and economic trends that influenced the party's trajectory, elaborating the lives and ideas of oft-forgotten proponents of the CPSA, and analysing reasons for its weaknesses, but also for its occasional bursts of activity and short-term support. I draw on Sesotho columns of the communist and other newspapers and diverse archives to paint a more comprehensive, nuanced history of the party in the Free State. Despite limited industrialisation, there were numerous black strikes across the province, some white communists lived inside black locations, agitating alongside black activists, but as their combined effectiveness rose, so they were banned or deported. Notwithstanding, communist/marxist terms and rhetoric were adopted by some provincial ICU and ANC leaders, and if often later discarded, the party, like the ICU began to lay down an imprint that would be built on by activists in later years of struggle. Today the province memorialises several important SACP figures including Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana and Bram Fischer, although the class and other inequalities that the party committed to overcome remain.

**BIO**

Peter Limb, emeritus professor, Michigan State University and Research Fellow, Gender and Africa Studies Centre, University of the Free State, has published widely on South African history, satire, journalism, and anti-apartheid movements. His books include *Historical Dictionary of South Africa* (2020), with Chris Saunders, *Taking African Cartoons Seriously*, with Teju Olaniyan (2018), *The People's Paper: A Centenary History & Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (2012), *Autobiography & Selected Works of A.B. Xuma* (2012), *The ANC's Early Years* (2010), *Grappling with the Beast* (2010) and *Nelson Mandela* (2008). Current research includes a book on the Black political history of the Free State.