

The Rise and Fall of the Industrial and Commercial Union of South Africa 1919-1929

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Introduction

The Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) was organized in 1919 in Cape Town. In post-World War I South Africa, prices were higher but wages, especially for African and Colored workers, had not been increased since 1914. Workers from all of South Africa's racial groups were discontent. "After the 1914-18 war, industrial unrest was intensified, and an element of violence became manifest as strikes by both white and African workers increased in number."¹ ANC leaders were initially associated with strikes by unorganized African workers for higher wages and better working conditions.² Of the post-war period, Walshe writes that "The injustices of economic discrimination were therefore recognized, although African protests were ineffective and the organization of a trade union movement soon slipped from Congress's grasp."³ Among African and Colored workers, the discontent found expression in the formation of the ICU first in Cape Town, and then rapidly throughout South Africa. White Socialists and, subsequently, white members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) were instrumental in the formation and development of the ICU.

In this paper I will address the following questions. Why was the ICU formed? Why did it grow so rapidly in the first seven years of its existence? What role did the CPSA play in the formation and functioning of the ICU? What were the objectives of the ICU? How did the union attempt to accomplish these objectives? What problems did it encounter in accomplishing them? What factors help explain its rapid demise as a trade union? What were the legacies of the ICU for the ANC? In other words, what lessons could the experience of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union have furnished Africans in general and the leaders of the African National Congress in particular? Clements Kadalie, a charismatic former school-teacher from Nyasaland, was the first National Secretary of the ICU. Although he spoke none of the indigenous languages of South Africa, he could arouse the crowds at ICU meetings. This may indicate the extent to which English had become widespread as a second language among urban African workers by the 1920s. Kadalie and other ICU leaders increased the membership of the ICU in the early 1920s. The rapid growth of the ICU as well as the 'militancy' of the speeches by ICU leaders at all-African meetings attracted the attention of the South African government and the attention of other whites as well.⁴

According to some sources, by 1926 the ICU had as many as 250,000 members.⁵ Understandably, the government grew alarmed at the rapid growth of the ICU, the membership of which dwarfed that of the ANC.⁶ The large membership and the rhetoric of ICU leaders challenged and impressed the more conservative leaders of the much smaller ANC. Yet, despite its impressive membership, by the late 1920s, the ICU proved unable to deliver on its many promises to raise wages and enhance the general standard of living of its members. By 1926 there were major disagreements on policy amongst ICU leaders at the national level. And there were major disagreements between national and local leaders on the goals of the organization and the methods it should employ. In 1927 communists members were expelled from ICU ranks. In 1929 it split into several rival factions and its demise soon followed.

Reasons for Formation:

As pointed out above, the ICU was formed in Cape Town in 1919. Evidently, the port cities of the Cape were especially fertile ground for the organization of Colored and African workers in the post-World War I period. Efforts to organize African workers met with considerable success in the Cape town area for three principal reasons. First, all workers were concerned with the increased cost of living in the post-war era. Second, there was a shortage of unskilled labor during this period. Third, many skilled and semi-skilled Colored workers in the Cape belonged to 'craft' unions composed mostly of white workers. This 'multiracialism' may have pre-disposed local labor movements to favour African trade unionism. Kadalie began to organize the ICU in mid-1919. Less than six months later, by December, the newly formed union led some 400 mostly-African dockworkers out on strike.⁷

As a result of this strike the wages of dockworkers were increased. Following upon this successful strike, the ICU spread rapidly in the Cape Province and, then, throughout South Africa, especially in the rural areas.⁸ At Port Elizabeth, Cape Province, Samuel Makama Masabalala was the most important ICU official. Described as a dynamic leader, Masabalala "...stressed the necessity of agitating, educating, and organizing the Bantu and other non-European sections of the community if any redress of their grievances was to be obtained."⁹ Under his leadership, the ICU began agitating for wage increases. Rather quickly, it began to attract large crowds of African and Coloured workers to its meetings. In October 1919 ICU leaders in Port Elizabeth threatened to call workers out on strike for a wage of 10s a day.¹⁰ Recall that the authorities responded by arresting Masabalala. This led to a demonstration outside the police station where ICU members and supporters demanded his release.¹¹ As we have seen, violence ensued. This violence did not prevent the development of a strong branch of the ICU in Port Elizabeth. In fact, Hellman contends that the Port Elizabeth 'shooting' attracted Africans to the ranks of the ICU! She writes that "Within a short time, aided by events such as the shooting of African strikers in Port Elizabeth in October 1920, the organization obtained the adherence of tens of thousands of workers, the majority of whom were Africans."¹² As we discuss below, subsequent developments suggest that these fatalities had a more sobering effect on ICU leaders than on ICU members.

Phenomenal Growth:

Despite its rapid growth in the urban areas during the 1920s, the ICU gained most of its members in the rural areas of South Africa. "It was in 1923 that the rapid growth of the I.C.U began, when the organization began to advance into the country districts and into the northern territories," writes Roux.¹³ Why was this? One reason was that in many respects Africans were worse off or about to become worse off in the rural areas than they were in the urban areas during the inter-war years. The 1913 Native Land Act severely limited the land available to Africans for occupation and use. Nonetheless, despite the provisions of this act, until the 1920s, many African families were able to occupy and farm lands officially designated as 'white only'. Until the mid-1920s, many Africans worked and even prospered on 'white' lands as labor tenants, sharecroppers and 'squatters'. With the election of the more conservative 'Pact' Government in 1924, the government began to stringently enforce the provisions of the Land Act. It began to force African 'squatters' from areas designated 'white'. At the same time, for economic reasons, white farmers began to transform sharecropper arrangements with the Africans on their land into more formal rental agreements. These actions resulted in a great deal of African suffering in the rural areas. There was widespread unrest in rural South Africa. Bundy writes that "Rural Africans responded in a general wave of unrest: refusals to work on the farmers' land, mutilation of animals, threats, assaults and other forms of insubordination."¹⁴

In their efforts to improve their lot, i.e, gain access to sufficient land in order to survive and prosper, rural Africans employed a number of techniques. Bundy writes: So in any sustained action or movement a variety of strategies was present: petitions and direct appeals to the state, the use of law agents and attorneys, diplomatic sorties by chiefs and headmen, boycotts and non-compliance with the law, strikes, violence and cultural assertions.¹⁵ In their desperation, rural Africans began to join the ICU by the thousands as well. Thompson writes of ICU leaders "Drawing ideas from the independent churches, from Marxism, and from the back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey, they galvanized rural audiences with strong rhetoric, including promises of land repossession and national liberation."¹⁶ Beginning in 1923, ICU membership soared in the rural areas. And it continued to increase until 1926 or 1927. Thousands of Africans believed the promises of ICU leaders and continued to believe them for seven or eight years after the formation of the organization in 1919. This may have represented a 'clutching after straws' for thousands of desperate people. Writing of African conditions in the rural areas during the 1920s, Thompson observed that "In the Transkei there were echoes of the millennial beliefs that had led to the cattle-killing in 1857: 'Ama Melika' -- the Afro-Americans -- were coming with ships and planes to liberate South Africa and destroy all Whites and black nonbelievers."¹⁷

The Communist Party (CPSA) and the ICU:

First socialists and subsequently communists played an extremely important role in the formation and growth of the ICU. This is one reason why most ANC leaders steered clear of the more radical ICU. Initially, the socialists and then, after the formation of the CPSA in 1921, many communists worked closely with ICU leaders and workers. The party, whose executive consisted of individuals from all South Africa's racial groups, was the only white-led political organization that recruited Africans as members.¹⁸ The ICU, its membership growing rapidly in the early 1920s, was an obvious target for communist party workers.

White communists joined the ICU as individual members. The CPSA did not compete with the ICU in the recruitment of African workers into its ranks. Instead, working through the ICU, the communist objective seems to have been to use the ICU as a 'front' organization. To its credit, the CPSA concentrated on creating within the ICU a cadre of African workers trained to organize and lead their fellow workers. This was a critical need because all too often ICU officials at the branch level were both untrained and largely uneducated: "Scores of untrained officials were employed to enrol members, collect their subscriptions of 6d. or 3d a week organize, them into branches, and attend to their complaints."¹⁹ For years, the CPSA ran a night school in Johannesburg for African workers. As we shall discuss below, certain communist members of the ICU often had more influence with ICU members than with ICU leaders.

ICU Objectives:

The ICU was formed to press for improvements in the lot of South Africa's non-white workers. Although it was ostensibly a workers' organization, few of the ICU's early leaders were from the working class. Instead, writes Lodge "...the movement owed its strength to powerful and flamboyant personalities, usually from a non-working class background..."²⁰ The initial success of these 'flamboyant personalities' and of their rhetoric in rapidly increasing the membership of the ICU may have been one of the reasons the ICU did not devote significant effort to 'systematic organization.' Lodge argues that:

Ostensibly a workers' organization, because of the character and ambitions of its petty-bourgeois leadership the ICU tended to function as a mass-based political party, its charismatic leaders voicing a broad range of popular grievances. Incapable of organizing systematically on an industrial base it nevertheless attracted (and possibly diverted) massive support from Congress - an indication of considerable receptivity to political ideas among the urban and rural poor.²¹

The ICU began in the Cape where it was heavily influenced by many Colored and some African workers who had had long experience with trade union activity. However, in 1925 Kadalie moved ICU headquarters from the Cape to Johannesburg in the Transvaal. This move, Hellman argues, reduced the influence of Cape trade unionists on ICU leaders and policy. "The transfer to Johannesburg had reduced the influence of the more experienced Colored members in the Western Cape and the I.C.U. tended to assume the character of a political, rather than an industrial, movement."²² Despite its shortcomings as a labor union, until the mid-1920s, the ICU spread rapidly. By 1926 it had become a force to be reckoned with. Its secretary, Clements Kadalie received as much coverage in the white press as did many governmental cabinet ministers.²³ But even earlier, its rapid growth had attracted attention from some rather surprising sources. In July 1921, possibly in an effort to sway African voters in the Cape during a crucial election year, a prominent Afrikaner politician, General B. Hertzog, wrote to Kadalie and enclosed a donation to ICU funds!²⁴ Perhaps not to be outdone, in the same year another Afrikaner politician, Dr. D.F. Malan, leader of the Nationalist party in the Cape Province, sent the following telegram to an assembly of Africans at Queenstown: No race has shown greater love for South Africa than the Natives. Therein he, the Native, assuredly is a pattern of true patriotism and is entitled to take his place side by side with the Nationalist in the common political arena.²⁵

Its growth brought not only recognition from politicians, however. On at least one case, a white labor organization recognized the ICU. This recognition followed upon ICU strikes in Bloemfontein and in East London in 1925. During these strikes, the ICU demanded a minimum wage rate for African workers. Both strikes failed. Nevertheless, the "...white South African Trades Union Congress passed a resolution supporting the Bloemfontein demand."²⁶ This, according to Edward Roux, was the first time an important white labor organization publicly recognized the ICU.²⁷ The ICU attracted the attention not only of the authorities and of white trade union officials, but of many other whites as well. Edward Roux, a white member of the CPSA, argues rather cynically that many liberal and moderate whites were frightened by the growth of the ICU. For this reason, for the first time, contends Roux, they suddenly became concerned with Bantu welfare. This was something which had not greatly concerned them before the advent of the ICU. More seriously, writes Roux, they began to advise ICU leaders on policy and methods of struggle. This attention from whites, argues Roux, flattered Kadalie and other important ICU leaders. One consequence was that these leaders were diverted from the task of organizing the workers to press for economic change through direct action against employers. Instead, following the advice of their liberal white advisors, they began to seek respectability and governmental recognition. Much to the dismay of the communist party, these advisors persuaded Kadalie and other ICU leaders to seek change through constitutional channels.

Governmental Recognition:

In 1926 ICU leaders began to have major disagreements over the goals and methods of the organization. According to Roux, "The question of policy came to the fore."²⁸ The major disagreement over policy centered on whether the ICU would seek recognition and respectability as a trade union or whether it would - as the communists argued - use its large membership to engage in direct action to bring pressure for economic change to bear on employers and even on the state, when necessary. Kadalie and his supporters within the ICU elected to become a respectable trade union organization using constitutional methods to effect economic, and where necessary, political change in South Africa.²⁹ This decision entailed their turning their backs on those whites who had done the most to help create the ICU: the communists. Although the ICU had started out with many socialist goals, communists should not have been greatly surprised by this decision. In 1923, Kadalie wrote "No African leader will join any political movement purporting to upset any Constitution."³⁰ Not surprisingly, the communists, long critical of ICU leadership, policy, objectives, methods, administration and financial irregularities, vehemently opposed the decision to pursue change in South Africa through constitutional channels. The communists favored direct action - strikes, and boycotts against employers and 'pass-boycotts' against the government³¹ Many communists viewed Kadalie's decision as a 'sell-out' of the African working class: "Leaders who fail to lead when the struggle is on are of no use to the workers..."³² A leading South African Communist, S.P. Bunting wrote:

What is happening in the I.C.U. is not a mere flash in the pan peculiar to local circumstances, but is on all fours with similar fate in most other countries of unions whose bureaucratic leaders have made themselves snug, gone yellow and led them through the wide gate and along the broad path that brings them to -- what may appear to be superficial prosperity, but really means, as fighting organs against capitalism, their absolute destruction.³³ Governmental officials hounded Kadalie constantly with the accusation that he was a communist or a communist lackey. He resented this. In 1923 he wrote "Give us what we desire, economic freedom, we must have a say in the affairs of our country and for God's sake do not make Bolshevism as an excuse."³⁴ One might argue that Kadalie was constantly pressured from the right for being 'soft on communism' and from the left for being petty-bourgeois. Not surprisingly, by 1926 there were considerable tensions between communists and the ICU, arising from both tactical and ideological differences. First, the ICU was not functioning as a trade union organization as the communists understood the concept. Its membership was scattered and diffused and tended to be concentrated among farm workers rather than the industrial proletariat.³⁵

Second, the ICU's founders tended to view achievement in petty-bourgeois terms - status, wealth, and individual power - and hence could with some justification be accused of using the organization to enrich themselves. Third, Kadalie viewed the struggle as primarily a political one. This belief led him to seek institutional respectability for his movement - including international affiliations with reformist European labor organizations. Fourth, Kadalie viewed social conflict in South Africa mainly in nationalist or colonial terms and did not share the communist vision of a class struggle complicated only by racist 'false consciousness.' Communist criticism and the increasing influence of non-communist whites on Kadalie and his lieutenants in the national organization led to the expulsion of the communist members of the organization in 1927. The decision to expel the communists may have been made easier by the fact that the communists were not the only whites interested in 'Bantu welfare' by 1927. As noted above, once the ICU became a large organization, many whites rushed in to demonstrate their concern. Many of them were liberals and moderates who abhorred the communists and advised ICU leaders to have no 'truck' with the communists. The working class members of the ICU were generally far more militant than were ICU leaders. Many members opposed the decision to expel the communists. Many more wanted to take the type of direct action recommended by the communists. ICU tensions with the communists were increased because communists accused ICU leaders of failing to organize or to support mass action.³⁶ This allegation was not without foundation as the following quote illustrates:

Coal miners in Natal, many of whom were union members, went out on strike in June 1927. The officials denied responsibility and even declared the strike was illegal. Dock workers at the Point in Durban, the union's main centre, came out twice within a short period, and received no help or guidance from the ICU.³⁷

In his efforts to win recognition and respect for the ICU, Kadalie undermined his position with many African workers. According to Roux, "The new doctrine of constitutional methods did not chime in with the angry mood of workers..."³⁸ On June 16, 1927, 1,500 dock African workers conducted a wildcat strike. They were protesting the arrest of twenty fellow workers for failure to pay their poll taxes.³⁹

This strike is indicative of the intimate connection workers saw between the state and their employers. ICU leaders disavowed it.⁴⁰ Miners constituted a very large proportion of African workers in South Africa. Yet ICU leaders made few efforts to organize these workers, who made such a vital contribution to the economy.⁴¹ It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for this. One might be that these workers were for the most part migrants. This would have made organizing them more difficult, even though many of them migrated from the rural areas where the ICU had most of its members. Another reason might be that, unlike most workers in the urban areas, these workers were housed in compounds. Therefore, mine owners could control access to them while they were on the mines. A less flattering - but more politically astute - reason may be that ICU leaders recognized that this would have been a direct challenge to the very powerful Chamber of Mines and to the South African government. ICU leaders did not operate in a vacuum. They cannot have failed to notice the South African's government's very violent reaction to the 1922 strike by white mine workers! The ICU may have survived and grown as long as it did because it did not attempt to organize African mine workers. In 1928, upon his return from his Europe, where he had sought affiliation with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Kadalie announced that he "...would transform the ICU into a 'true trade union', cooperate with white unions, and repudiate any African who was anti-white."⁴² According to the Simons, "None of these aims could be realized under the prevailing conditions; and attempts at reform along these lines probably marred his prospects of settling disputes within the organization and restoring unity.

⁴³Decline of the ICU: 1926 seems to be a watershed year for the ICU. Roux writes that by 1926:

The movement had reached the stage where something had to be done to satisfy the rank and file. The Africans had welcomed this hope of deliverance from their misery. Thousands had joined the movement: they had paid large sums in subscriptions. Money was being spent like water. But no positive gains had been achieved for the masses. Since the early dock strikes at Cape Town and Port Elizabeth there had been no strikes at all. No attempt had been made to take direct action on a mass scale against the pass laws or against any other of the slave laws.⁴⁴

In their efforts to recruit members, ICU leaders made many promises. They could keep few of them. Rural Africans had joined the ICU with the expectation (the hope) that they would thereby receive freedom and land. Unfortunately, "All the ICU had to offer were some rather shady land purchase schemes, legal maneuvers, and attempts to improve conditions by negotiations with farmers."⁴⁵ Clearly, neither governmental officials, responsible to an overwhelmingly white electorate, nor white farmers, often hard pressed themselves, were impressed with ICU 'requests' for improvements in the lot of rural Africans. By 1926 it was becoming clear to Africans, rural and urban alike, that, despite its large membership, the ICU had failed to bring effective pressure to bear on the government, white employers, and white farmers. By 1927 ICU membership leveled off; in 1928 it began to decline; by 1929, when the organization split into a number of rival factions, memberships in all those factions fell off drastically. Clearly, the failure of the organization to deliver on its many promises to its followers reduced the power and prestige of Kadalie and his supporters in the ICU. By 1928 he could no longer control the organization. By 1929, it had been seriously weakened by internal dissension and the subsequent break-up into many rival factions. One indication of the depths to which the organization had fallen came during the Durban riots of 1929. In 1921, Kadalie received a donation 'for ICU funds' from a prominent Afrikaner politician, in 1929 white hooligans, using the desecration of Europeans graves by unknown African hooligans as a pretext, attacked and even besieged the ICU hall in Durban.⁴⁶

In this same year, as noted above, the ICU fragmented into several rival factions.⁴⁷ The most serious break-away movement was led by A.W.G. Champion who formed ICU yase Natal in his native province.⁴⁸ In January 1929 following numerous conflicts over policy and financial irregularities with Ballinger, a British trade union official seconded to ICU, Kadalie resigned from the organization. Of Ballinger, Kadalie was quoted as saying: "I asked for an advisor and received a dictator."⁴⁹ After resigning from the organization he had done so much to create and to lead for a decade, Kadalie promptly created a rival organization. "At Easter in 1929, Kadalie gathered his followers together at Bloemfontein, where the Independent I.C.U. was then formed."⁵⁰ What caused this precipitous decline after such a rapid increase in membership? There are a number of reasons including opposition from a relatively powerful government, the decision to pursue change through constitutional methods, and the related decision to expel its communist members, deficiencies in organization, 'financial irregularities', the lack of a trained cadre of leaders at the local level, and the failure to deliver on the many promises made to its members. Clearly the single most important reason was the opposition of a very powerful government. Ironically, the ICU may have failed so quickly because it grew so quickly. It grew far faster than it could organize itself and develop a trained cadre of efficient and dedicated local leaders.

This created serious problems of organization, leadership, and administration.⁵¹ More importantly, its rapid growth alerted the government to the threat it posed to the South African political system. This gave the government a chance to introduce counter-measures well before the ICU had become an effective organization. Of course, Africans in general were hampered by numerous restrictions long before the advent of the ICU. Before leaving office in 1924, the Smuts government had introduced legislation which could be and was used against white trade unions, but which was employed most effectively against black trade unions, non-white political organizations, and the South African Communist Party. This legislation was the Riotous Assemblies and Criminal Law Amendment Bill, which ...penalized attempts to force workers to join or not to join trade unions; banned strikes in public utility services; gave magistrates, acting under ministerial authority, wide powers to prohibit meetings expected to endanger the public peace; and allowed the police to in certain circumstances to arrest speakers and listeners or, in the last resort to fire.⁵² It is perhaps not a mere coincidence that Prime Minister's Hertzog's Pact Government introduced a Sedition bill into parliament during the heyday of the ICU's growth.

As a result of this bill, ICU leaders had to tread lightly because "...the least hint of extremism might lead to the disbanding of the whole organization by an apprehensive government..."⁵³ Wilson and Thompson argue that the ICU lost ground rapidly, in part, because of "...the repressive powers assumed by the Government under the Native Administration Act of 1927, and later the Riotous Assemblies Amendment Act of 1930..."⁵⁴ In 1929 A.W.G. Champion, an ICU official in Natal, was very careful to stipulate in his pamphlet, 'Blood and Tears' that he had no intentions of creating ill-will between Africans and Europeans! Champion wrote "The author wishes to put on record in the second edition of this book that it is not because he wants to create ill-feeling between the natives and Europeans that he has published this book, nor because he wants to encourage the native to resist the constituted authority."⁵⁵ The Simons identify the opposition of the South African government to a powerful and viable African-led labor movement as the most important factor in the ICU's steep decline: White unions which experienced similar difficulties in their infancy, had the advantage of possessing a significant measure of political power. The ICU, in contrast, fought a constant battle against hostile employers and oppressive administration that never scrupled to use pass laws and other instruments of colonial domination against the union's organizers.⁵⁶

Kadalié and his lieutenants misread the South African political situation. Roux writes that "in the early months of 1927 the restless Kadalié was still busy consolidating his position against the communists and preparing for still greater triumphs of membership and finance. He failed to see what was coming."⁵⁷ Having made the decision to become a respectable labor organization, Kadalié and his supporters made efforts to gain recognition from the government. For example, the Seventh Annual Congress of ICU was held in Durban in April 1927. Kadalié invited the mayor of Durban to open the conference with a speech. The mayor responded that he would be otherwise engaged. So Kadalié requested that another responsible - white - official from Durban open the conference. "This would not be possible", was the response from the mayor's office. Failing in his efforts to get a distinguished white to open the conference, Kadalié had to be satisfied with allowing an African to open the conference.⁵⁸ It is significant that Kadalié himself acted as though it would be advantageous for a distinguished white to open the conference of an overwhelming African organization. His efforts to do so indicate just how far African leaders felt they had to go to win the full confidence of their African followers. Conceivably, many African members of the ICU believed that power and prestige had to be bestowed on African leaders by distinguished whites.⁵⁹ If so, this would help explain both Kadalié's neglect of union organization and his frantic quest for 'recognition!'

During the same period that many leaders of 'separatist' African churches were seeking governmental recognition, Kadalié sought governmental recognition for the ICU. Many of these churches gained such recognition. The ICU did not. Obviously, there is a considerable difference between a church regardless of how many members it has and an African trade union with tens of thousands African workers in its ranks. No doubt, governmental recognition would have spurred the growth of the ICU for several years. Inevitably, this growth would have been followed by increased demands on both employers and on the government. Clearly, any governmental effort to satisfy these demands would have entailed major changes in South Africa's labor system, which by the 1920s was based on the principle that African workers did not fit the definition of 'employees.' In short, the mere recognition of the ICU as a trade union would have entailed revolutionary changes in the economic and political systems of South Africa. Kadalié was asking for a great deal more than he apparently realized. Governmental recognition of the ICU in the 1920s could well have led to the fall of the Hertzog government.

To 'revise' a phrase, Kadalie, under great pressure from inside and outside the ICU by 1927, possibly attempted 'to have his cake without going through all the trouble of either buying or baking it.' Lodge in analyzing the ICU's decline focuses on internal factors: the petty-bourgeois character and ambitions of its leadership. It is for this reason, argues Lodge, that the ICU tended to function more as a political party than as a worker's organization.⁶⁰ It goes without saying that the ICU had a political orientation, even though, unlike white labor organizations, the vast majority of its members could not vote. The attention which some white politicians in the Cape bestowed on ICU leaders may have had the effect of seriously diverting the organization from its more logical program in South Africa. ICU leaders may have been seduced by the same beliefs in ultimate progress as were their counterparts in the ANC during the same period. With this in mind, Lodge's argument that the ICU did not function as it should have 'because of the character and ambitions of its petty-bourgeois leadership' is a bit unfair. Possibly, ICU leaders had little choice but to assume many 'political functions. First, unlike white trade unions in South Africa, there was no political party with which they could align the ICU. Second, ICU members, becoming more aware of the intimate connection between politics and economics in South Africa, may have expected their leaders to behave like politicians.

The ICU was criticized because of its petit-bourgeois leadership. But where would one have found radical non-petty bourgeois black leaders in the South Africa of the early 1920s? The backgrounds and ideologies of senior ICU leaders in the 1920s were very similar, if not identical, to those of senior ANC leaders. The only alternative to petty-bourgeois leaders would have been the chiefs. It was the membership and not the ideology of the leaders that made the ICU appear more 'radical' than the ANC during this period. The communists worked very hard to produce radical or revolutionary leaders throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁶¹ But such leaders did not begin to make an appearance in any significant numbers until the 1940s. Still another reason was for the rapid demise of the ICU was that it attracted the attention not only of the authorities, but of many other whites as well. As we have seen, Roux, argues that many liberal and white moderates who previously had shown little or no concern with 'Bantu welfare' became very concerned after the appearance of the ICU on the scene in the early 1920s. These 'concerned individuals' advised ICU leaders on the most correct approaches to change. This sudden attention from whites, argues Roux, flattered Kadalie and other important ICU leaders.

Whereas the communists advocated and practiced direct action, the more liberal whites and even foreign socialists, who gained influence over Kadalie and other ICU leaders after the ICU was a 'going concern', advocated that Kadalie adhere to constitutional methods. "They impressed on him the importance of strict adherence to constitutional forms, avoiding direct action, communism, or 'politics'..."⁶² Apparently, this approach appealed to Kadalie. It suited his personal style more than would have direct action tactics. "Kadalie was happier," argue the Simonses, "when addressing a mass audience than when pleading for small concessions from employers inferior to him in will-power and intelligence."⁶³ Whereas the government was able to react well before the ICU could develop effective organizational techniques and train a cadre of effective local leaders, one could argue, similarly, that 'concerned whites' arrived before the organization could develop an effective doctrine (or culture). As a consequence, these 'outsiders' gained too much influence on ICU leaders and, more seriously, on ICU policy. Roux identifies still another reason: most African leaders avoided confrontations with the police. Kadalie and "...his lieutenants shrank from turning the power they had generated into a weapon against the oppressor."⁶⁴ In contrast, according to Roux, it was the willingness of the communists to stand up to the police that gave them so much popularity with the African workers. This very quality made many of the better educated Africans involved in the organization leery of having much to do with the communists.

However popular the decision to expel communists from the ICU may have been with Kadalie's liberal and moderate white supporters, it was not popular with many rank and file ICU members. Thousands of them attended meetings protesting the expulsion of the communists. After all, the communists and their predecessors, the socialists, had helped form the ICU. Furthermore, the communists were the only whites who repeatedly stood with Africans against the hated police. Communists identified another important factor in the demise: the absence of a trained cadre. They recognized the critical need for qualified African leaders at the local level. They attempted to solve this problem through their night schools. The ICU was like an army that had a few good generals and colonels, thousands of privates ('raw' recruits actually) but few lieutenants, captains, and sergeants. These ranks are crucial to the effective operation of an army because they translate plans (policy) into orders which the privates, the 'shooters', can understand and execute. Equally important, these middle ranks train the new recruits, often a very time-consuming and expensive process. Finally, an extremely important reason for the demise of the ICU was its failure to deliver on the many promises made to recruit members.

Many Africans in the 1920s were desperate; though they were not yet demoralized. ICU promises raised their expectations of a 'quick fix' and thereby mobilized them for action. But once ICU national leaders had all these members at their disposal, they seemed to have asked themselves: "What now? How do we turn all this potential power into political power?" More seriously, ICU leaders evidently came to see the ICU as an end in and of itself. Most members saw it as a means to an end. As these leaders struggled to preserve the organization in a very hostile political and economic environment, its members began to withdraw their support. Why? Because the expectations of rural Africans for freedom and the restoration of land, as well as the expectation of urban Africans for freedom and higher wages were disappointed. Understandably, in time Africans tired of 'throwing good money after bad.' This development was not helped by reports of the fraudulent mismanagement of ICU funds which came increasingly to the attention of ICU members in the latter years of the 1920s. The Simons write that "Ignorance of bookkeeping and trade union procedures often blurred the distinction between social and private property."⁶⁵ While many of its members were struggling to survive in a very harsh environment, Kadalie and other ICU leaders lived well indeed. "Kadalie himself drew a salary of thirty pounds a month, at least six times that of many farm laborers; some Africans came to regard him as a 'great cheat.'"⁶⁶

Legacies of the ICU:

What were the legacies of the ICU? Its most important legacy was its efforts to convert the potential power of the majority into actual power. In its efforts to do so, it was presented with two possibilities. First, the communists arrived with one facile answer: direct action. There were a number of problems with this approach. The communists themselves recognized the first problem: the ICU lacked a trained cadre of leaders. Such a cadre would have to be created. This takes time. The second problem is the degree of militancy of ICU leaders. To what extent were they willing to undergo the suffering that would be involved in extended direct action campaigns? A third, related, problem is whether or not the members, were ready for the violence and suffering a 'direct action' campaign would have entailed in South Africa. There is considerable evidence that the members were relatively more 'militant' than ICU leaders. But Africans had engaged in direct action tactics against whites for centuries. Such tactics had entailed great suffering for them. The best example was the battle of Blood River during which the best indigenous army South Africa ever produced, the Zulu, had launched a direct assault on entrenched whites and suffered 'unacceptable losses.'

A more recent parallel, example occurred in 1921, two years after the formation of the ICU. It came about as a result of the refusal of members of an African religious sect, the Israelites, to obey governmental orders to evacuate land designated as 'white only': "The slaughter took ten minutes, and claimed 190 lives."⁶⁷ Hans Christian Smuts was the Prime Minister when the Israelites were massacred. He was quoted as saying that "...the incident would teach every part of the population that the law of the land will be carried out in the last resort as fearlessly against black as against white." Again, ICU leaders did not operate in a vacuum. It is all too easy to criticize both ICU and ANC leaders for their moderate, 'constitutional approach' to change during the inter-war years, if one overlooks a very unpleasant reality: a more militant 'stance' would have been quickly answered with a well-aimed round to the chest!⁶⁸ White workers discovered this during the Rand strike of 1922.

Conclusion

The constitutional methods recommended by the liberal whites had one advantage: they did not directly challenge the ruling regime. This stance enabled the ICU to build up its strength. But the problem with this approach was that it played into the hands of the government. Governmental policy toward the ICU appears to have been: "Let it exist, but do not allow it to change anything." Herein, we argue, lies the tragedy of the ICU. It needed time to build an effective organization capable of challenging the government. But its members were so desperate that they could not afford to wait.⁶⁹ Lodge writes that there was a great deal of pressure on the ANC to take action to improve the lot of Africans in the immediate post-World War I period. He argues further that the advent of the ICU took a great deal of this pressure off ANC leaders. "... it freed Congress's elitist leadership from the radicalizing pressures emanating from below which had helped to condition its responses at the beginning of the decade."⁷⁰

Of course, this meant that this pressure was 'displaced' from ANC leaders and 'placed' on ICU leaders. It did not go away. Another legacy, according to Lodge, was that the ICU influenced ANC leaders to become less respectful and more militant in their political demands. "Its spokesmen infused into the courtly and often pompous discourse of African politicians a fierce anger and apocalyptic imagery."⁷¹ The ICU, I argue, reinforced African ideas that any improvement in their status would have to come in both the political and economic arenas.

The ICU with the help of the communists made many poorly-educated or uneducated Africans more conscious of the connection between the governmentally-imposed and enforced pass-system and the wages white employers paid their African employees.

White employers were not independent operators; in effect, they functioned as agents of the state, enforcing governmental policy vis-à-vis their African employees. Ultimately, the contest was always with the South African government. The rapid growth of the ICU as well as the enthusiastic support provided it by hundreds of thousands of Africans demonstrated to even the most skeptical the extent to which Africans could be recruited under the right circumstances. Of course, this alerted the government to the potential of an all-African (inter-ethnic) mass base organization.⁷² Yet numbers were not enough! The ICU demonstrated that there was a great deal of work to be done before effective pressure could be brought to bear on the government. We argue that this is an important lesson which ANC leaders learned from the ICU. When Dr. Xuma later initiated the ANC's 'Million Member Drive' of the 1940s, he also introduced a program to strengthen Congress at the branch level. Finally, the ICU further disillusioned and disappointed an already desperate people. It demonstrated the extent to which leaders have to be able to deliver on promises in order to retain their followings. In other words, it demonstrated to African leaders, or at least should have, the extent to which all organizations must be effective. Thompson quotes one former ICU member, an African labor tenant from the Transkei, who, in our opinion, summed up the attitude of Africans in general toward the ICU by the end of the 1920s: "It all ended up in speeches."⁷³

Roux writes:

Remembering the I.C.U., the Africans are wary. No single mass movement of the black workers in South Africa has ever even remotely approached the power that was in the I.C.U.⁷⁴ In this respect, the failure of the ICU in the 1920s made the work of the ANC much more difficult in the 1940s. Nonetheless, despite its failure, the most important legacy of the ICU for the ANC was that once ANC leaders made the decision to transform Congress into a mass-base organization, although they still had to traverse very difficult political terrain, they did not have to traverse virgin territory. The ICU 'experience' was a 'learning' experience for thousands of Africans. The lessons they learned became a much needed component of modern African political culture.

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End Notes

- ¹ Leo Kuper, "African Nationalism In South Africa." In The Oxford History of South Africa, ed. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 26
- ² Peter Walshe, The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa. London: Horst Press 1970, p. 75
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Edward Roux, Time Longer Than Rope, A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964, p. 161
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 167. Tom Lodge gives a maximum strength of 100,000 in 1927. Black Politics in South Africa since 1945. New York: Longman, 1983, pp. 6-7
- ⁶ Roux, op. cit., p. 161
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 154
- ⁸ Lodge, op. cit. p. 5
- ⁹ Roux, op. cit., p. 156
- ¹⁰ H.J. and R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa 1880-1950, Baltimore: Penquin Books, 1969, p. 241
- ¹¹ In the 1970s, American veterans of the Vietnam War were fond of saying that it was not the bullet with your name on it that you had to worry about. "It was the one addressed to whom it may concern."
- ¹² Ellen Hellman, Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), pp. 163
- ¹³ Roux, op. cit., p. 157
- ¹⁴ William Beinart and Colin Bundy, Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa, Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei & Eastern Cape 1890-1900, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 33
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Leonard Thompson, A History of South Africa,. New. Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 176
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Thompson, op. cit., p. 177. See Roux, op. cit., p. 217. Roux writes: "The Communist Party held its Seventh Annual Conference in Johannesburg in January, 1929. There were thirty delegates, twenty black and ten white, representing, according to the credentials committee, nearly 3,000 members.
- ¹⁹ The Simons, op. cit., p. 357
- ²⁰ Lodge, op. cit. p. 5
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 6
- ²² Hellman, op. cit., p. 163
- ²³ Roux, op. cit., p. 161
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 183
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 184
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 158
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 160
- ²⁹ The Simons, op. cit., p. 358

³⁰ Document 49b-1. "African Labour Congress." Article by Clements Kadalie, National Secretary, I.C.U., in *The Workers' Herald*, December 21, 1923 in From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964, eds. Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972, pg. 324. this document and all those below are located in Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter, From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964, eds., Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972.

³¹ The Simons, op. cit., p. 358

³² Ibid., p. 362

³³ Roux, op. cit., p. 167

³⁴ Document 49b-1. "African Labour Congress." Article by Clements Kadalie, National Secretary, I.C.U., in *The Workers' Herald*, December 21, 1923 in Johns, op. cit., p. 324.

³⁵ Document 49b-2. Revised Constitution of the I.C.U.. 1925 [Extracts] (Printed, 40 pages) in Johns, op. cit., p. 325 The revised constitution stipulates that the ICU 'shall cater for the following sections under its aegis: Municipal Workers, Waterside Workers, Miner Workers, Building Workers, Agricultural Workers, Marine Workers, Transport Workers, Railway Workers, Factory Workers, Domestic Workers, Warehouse Workers...."

³⁶ The Simons, op. cit., p. 363

³⁷ Ibid., p. 363

³⁸ Roux, op. cit., p. 173

³⁹ Ibid., p. 173

⁴⁰ Martin Kilson, *Political Change in a West African State* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1969), p.106. Writing of colonial Sierra Leone, Kilson argues that the railway Worker's Union strike of 1926, demonstrated this role in an exemplary fashion. "The violence accompanying the strike brought the wage-laborers, and the urban masses generally, into direct encounter with the coercive power of the colonial government, thereby providing for the workers an important lesson in the role of force in the maintenance of colonial authority." According to Kilson, this 'lesson' was all the more important to workers because they did not have access to the political organizations of the new African elite.

⁴¹ Roux, op. cit., p. 156

⁴² The Simons, op. cit., p. 365

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Roux, op. cit., p. 160

⁴⁵ Lodge, op. cit., p. 6

⁴⁶ Roux, op. cit., p. 190

⁴⁷ Bundy, op. cit., p. 260. Bundy writes: "...dissolution was by no means atypical of popular movements in a repressive state, where people could not hook onto more institutionalized forms of expression and organisation."

⁴⁸ The Simons, op. cit., p. 374

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 375

⁵⁰ Roux, op. cit., p. 187

⁵¹ Hellman, op. cit., pp. 163-164. Hellman writes of the ICU that "Its loosely knit structure, the indiscriminate grouping of workers of different trades and occupations within one organization, lack of experience, and the scarcity of competent leaders, were some of the factors that prevented it from developing into an effective medium for negotiation with employers."

⁵² The Simons, op. cit., p. 171

⁵³ Ibid., p. 359

⁵⁴ Wilson and Thompson, op. cit., p. 447

⁵⁵ Document 49c-2. "Blood and Tears." Pamphlet by A.W.G. champion, 1929 [Extracts] (Published in History of Durban Native Riots) in Johns, op. cit., p. 335

⁵⁶ The Simons, op. cit. pp. 357-358

⁵⁷ Roux, op. cit., p. 167

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 167-168

⁵⁹ See Gustav Jahoda, *White Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 135. In his study of African attitudes toward themselves and toward whites in Ghana, Jahoda writes: "In Ghana, as in other parts of West Africa where the path towards independence from European political tutelage has met with no serious obstacle, the more subtle psychological bondage, which is the inheritance of European domination, will also progressively loosen and perhaps disappear in the next generation or two." Jahoda adds "There is some evidence that comparable psychological problems exist in even more acute form in parts of Africa, where the political situation is more complex and confused."

⁶⁰ Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 6

⁶¹ The CPSA did not fare all that well in in South Africa itself. The 1930s was a decade when both the ANC and the CPSA reached the nadir of their influence. The communists, from being the best-organised and most militant group active among black South Africans, were to lose much of their popular following. With the rise of nazism in Germany, the communists received instructions from the Comintern which directed they work closely with anti-fascist organizations. This led to a shift toward white organizations with the result that even the Party newspaper became to report on African activities less. Roux, p. XI, "I left the Communist Party in 1936 for reasons which anyone who has read my book *S. P. Bunting-A Political Biography* will understand. The control exercised by the Communist International over its South African section had produced a situation which I and a number of others began to find intolerable."

⁶² The Simons, *op. cit.*, p. 365

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ The Simons, *op. cit.*, p. 364

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 357

⁶⁶ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 176

⁶⁷ The Simons, *op. cit.*, p. 253

⁶⁸ At the Battle of Blood River in 1838, vastly outnumbered Boer riflemen killed over three thousand Zulu warriors in a single day. These Boers were armed with rifles that had a rate of fire of perhaps two at most three rounds per minutes. By the 1920s Europeans soldiers and police were armed with modern rifles and with machine guns that could fire several hundred rounds per minutes. See the Simons, *op. cit.*, p. 434. ANC leaders were understandably reluctant to take militant mass action. The Simons write that on 16 December 1928, Johannes Nkosi, an African communist, from the Durban branch of the party, led anti-pass demonstration. "A large force of policemen barred the way and, when the demonstrators bore down on them, attacked with clubs and assegais, Nkosi and three other Africans were stabbed to death and horribly mutilated by African constables. The coroner commended the white police for their self-restraint and put the blame squarely on the African constables."

⁶⁹ Japanese soldiers were noted for their loyalty to the Imperial Japanese Army. Many were of peasant stock. During the depression of the 1930s, their families suffered. These soldiers did not desert. Many simply returned to help their families in the countryside. When their officers would show up, they would find them working in the family's fields in uniform! No orders had to be given. 'Torn between two loyalties', these soldiers simply followed their officers back to their units.

⁷⁰ Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 6

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² The Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist Party which came into power in 1948 made excellent use of this 'intelligence.' It's 'Bantu education' policy required that the various African ethnic groups be educated in their own languages.

⁷³ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p 176

⁷⁴ Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 197