UCLA
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title
Origins of Industrial Unions in S.A.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60k4j68t

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 8(3)

ISSN
0041-5715

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Publication Date
1978

Peer reviewed
THE SOUTH AFRICAN WOBBLIES:
THE ORIGINS OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

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Keep your eyes on South Africa, comrades and fellow-workers of the world. There capitalism is seen in its most naked and unashamed, its most cruel and inexorable, form.


Some recent reportage on South Africa has noticed an American influence in the Black Consciousness movement there. Others have focused on the inspirational and organizational influence of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of the 1920's and other early Black Unions on subsequent South African unions, including those which were responsible for the 'stay-at-homes' of 1976. Many books have been written on the history of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W. or "Wobblies") as part of the labor movement in the United States. Some works have even acknowledged the impact of the I.W.W. 'overseas'. This paper will attempt to assess the impact of the I.W.W. on South African history and related events.

On February 21, 1910, Tom Mann arrived in Durban from Australia. This famous English unionist intended to survey the economic conditions in South Africa, and assist the struggling trade union movement there. He found a unique labor system:

... the actual mining is done by the natives supervised by white man. Because the payment given to Kaffirs is so trifling they are plentifully used as laborers and helpers to the white man.

This meant that the white wage "is received at the expense of the Native Kaffir."

Under such conditions Mann did not even attempt to preach interracial solidarity to the white miners. He recognised that racism held back the working class struggle. But
he felt so strongly about 'boring from within' the old unions for reform that he even tempered his attacks on craft chauvinism. This does not mean that he entirely abandoned industrial unionism. He merely deformed it. Under his guidance a Rand Industrial Union was set up to organise those white workers for whom no alternative organisation existed.

Mann did agree when pressed that industrial unionism was impossible without Africans. Yet he refrained from asking the unions to integrate and even told Dr. Abdurahman, a Coloured leader, that antagonising White workers would be counterproductive. Still, his ideas were far in advance of those of almost all South African Whites. The South African Political Association, a coloured group, presented him with a silver mounted sjambok for being the first white in Johannesburg to advocate Colored peoples' rights.

Mann persuaded the Trades Council to pay two months salary to Jack P. Anderson to organise the 'industrial' union that had been founded. The council quickly lost interest and Anderson went to Rhodesia. Mann had reported that there was much interest in what American workers were doing in the field of industrial unionism. He had also been bitterly attacked by radicals such as Archie Crawford for soft-peddling his attacks on racism. The new union elected Jim Davidson as its new Secretary, got in touch with the I.W.W. in the United States, and reorganised itself as the Industrial Workers of the World (South Africa). It described itself as a "class conscious, revolutionary organisation embracing all workers regardless of craft, race or colour" and dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. This was the first truly industrial union in South Africa.

After the 1910 elections White South African workers were feeling alienated from the purely political activity of the South African Labour Party. In January 1911 the tramway workers struck to remove a particularly obnoxious inspector named Peach. All public transport in the city stopped. The leaders of the craft unions were thrown out of the workers' meeting when they tried to explain that the strike was illegal under the Trade Disputes Act. The Tramways Committee of City Council capitulated that same day. The Mayor promised that there would be no reprisals. Tom Glynn, Glendon and Andrew Dunbar convinced their fellow tramworkers to form a branch of the I.W.W., presumably as Municipal Transportation Workers Industrial Union 540.

By May municipal officials were ready to strike back. The Union boycotted an investigation of tramworkers grievances. They said it was biased. Town Hall was peacefully picketed.
The city fired Glynn and Glendon and requested troops with which to crush a strike. They were given permission to arm their police. Tramsheds and workshops were quickly surrounded by 300 armed police. Within a few hours all streetcars had been abandoned, and another strike was on.

Women organised by Mary Fitzgerald sat down on the tracks to prevent scabs from driving the trams, or even returning them to their sheds. When the workers attempted to hold mass meetings in Market Square the city invoked Transvaal Law #6 of 1894, prohibiting gatherings of 6 or more persons. The result was a South African version of a wobbly free speech fight. Police arrested each speaker in turn, including members of the city council. 4,000 police then charged in on horses swinging pickhandles. The I.W.W. fought back with pickhandles and claimed to have held a mass meeting with 12,000 in attendance.

Two workers named Whittaker and Morant were arrested and charged with placing dynamite on the tramlines. During the resultant panic public opinion turned against the I.W.W. Prominent citizens volunteered to run the trams. With scabs abundant and well-protected the strike was soon broken.

Whittaker and Morant were later acquitted. A paid government informer had placed the dynamite on the tracks himself. Whittaker was awarded damages when he sued the government, but it was too late to save the strike. The government had apparently succeeded in crushing revolutionary industrial unionism by illegal means.

The I.W.W. refused to surrender. Militant workers and supporters armed with pickhandles were led by Glynn, Dunbar, and 'Pickhandle Mary' Fitzgerald. They broke up the campaign meetings of those city Councillors who had been responsible for breaking the tramworkers' strike. Little physical violence occurred, but the I.W.W. kept its reputation as a fighting organisation. Many candidates of the Property Owners' Association were successfully denied the right to speak. Labour Party representation jumped from 5 to 11 on the 30 man council.

In the meantime Archie Crawford was touring the world under sponsorship of I.W.W. (S.A.). In addition to studying labor conditions he spoke about the situations in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. In the United States he spoke before I.W.W. locals. He returned more convinced than ever that the I.W.W. represented the most practical means of ending wage-slavery. He also learned much about its principles and practices.

Although Crawford came back a convinced political so-
cialist, he recognised that the I.W.W. left such questions as politics up to each individual worker. The union itself simply refused "all alliances, direct and indirect, with existing political parties or anti-political sects" (i.e. anarchist groups). Crawford was himself important in forming a United Socialist Party in South Africa. He carefully avoided making politics an issue in the union. When Andrew Dunbar, an anarchist, attempted to impose his own beliefs he was expelled for "intolerance, unpredictable behavior and intemperate attacks on comrades" in February of 1912. The I.W.W. had reaffirmed its non-political line in a country where the majority of the workers could not vote, and thus had little interest in formal elections.

At the same time as the I.W.W.'s internal difficulties, a conference of Africans in Johannesburg heard Zini bring forth a resolution in favor of an African miner's union. The Voice of Labour edited by Archie Crawford asked the White miners to cooperate with such an organisation. It claimed that the proposed union would organise the real proletariat in the mines. The I.W.W. in the U.S. seemed to agree, and printed Crawford's article in its own press. Before this new union could be organised other circumstances intervened.

Early in 1913 workers at the New Kleinfontein mine were ordered to work all day Saturday. They had been working only Saturday mornings. All the workers walked out and the management seemed to back down. The workers could go back to their old hours. But 30 of them would be fired for troublemaking. The workers refused to be divided this way and stayed out.

The Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions wished to keep the strike from spreading beyond this one mine. They didn't count on Archie Crawford and Mary Fitzgerald. Going from mine to mine these two succeeded in shutting down the whole mining industry. Crawford's slogan: "Strikers stand on this side - scabs over there" was probably the only way to get English-speaking and Afrikaanser miners (much less Black and White!) to unite. The leaders of the Transvaal Federation belatedly called for a general strike in the mining industry.

Transvaal Law #6 of 1894 was again dusted off. All available police in South Africa were rushed to the Rand. Two thousand soldiers with machine guns were sent in to guard the mines. The workers decided to test the government by holding a mass meeting in Market Square, Johannesburg on Friday, July 4, 1913. The government met this peaceful assembly with firepower. Police and troops killed 31 workers and injured 417 others. Workers armed themselves and fought back. Many gun-stores were looted. Although Crawford and Fitzgerald spoke a-
gainst offensive violence the Star newspaper building was burned down. Crawford and Fitzgerald were arrested for "inciting to violence." The court found them not guilty, but the point had been to keep them away from the strike. This strategy was unsuccessful and the government conceded the strike. Workers went back on the old terms.29

The mine magnates of Johannesburg had lost the battle but not the war. They would fight the next battle on their own terms. The story of the strike they provoked in 1914 is better told elsewhere. Suffice it to say that as part of their victory they kidnapped and temporarily deported 9 labor leaders, including Archie Crawford.30 Crawford was by this time secretary of the Transvaal Federation of Trades' Executive Committee.31 A majority of the deportees were avowed socialists.32 Subsequent blacklisting did much to reduce socialist influence in South Africa and spread it elsewhere.33

Early in 1913 Tom Glynn had already arrived in Australia. His influence helped drive out the DeLeonist element from the I.W.W.34 DeLeonist political sectarianism was considered the partisan equivalent of Andrew Dunbar's anarchism. The DeLeonists left the I.W.W. in the United States over the Resolution on Political Parties and Discipline. They resisted the South African I.W.W. but were only a minor irritant to Crawford in 1912.35 Glynn and another South African Wobbly named Peter Larkin went on to become involved in the famous Sydney 12 trial during World War I.36

A much more important socialist figure was to take I.W.W. ideas to India. Mohandas Gandhi, a self declared "out and out Socialist," was in touch with the South African radical movement of this time.37 In 1913 he led a general strike of Indians in Natal which won abolition of the £3 hut tax.38 Upon his return to India, the famous Mahatma led the Ahmedabad textile workers in an industry-wide general strike.39

I.W.W. ideas were not totally dead in South Africa, although the World War I had killed the union itself in the country.40 Archie Crawford had become Secretary of the South African Industrial Federation (an 'industrial' union for whites only) after returning from exile.41 Andrew Dunbar tried to start an Industrial Socialist League on I.W.W. lines. He himself was dropped as a speaker for his anti-political attitude and inability to cooperate with others. This organisation confined itself to agitating for the new revolutionary government in the Soviet Union.42

Meanwhile the war had led to a split in the then growing Labour Party. The radical War on War League became the
International Socialist League. DeLeonist influence in this organisation was strong and a decision was made to attempt organisation of a DeLeonist I.W.W. 43 Africans attended the founding meeting. 44 A Zulu newspaper, Bantu Batho, praised the new organisation and advocated a general strike against the new Native Affairs Administration Bill. 45 Asian workers were also organising themselves at this time. 46 The South African Administration grew alarmed. 47 The new union was crushed mercilessly. 48

These events had significant impact on subsequent South African history. The International Socialist League became the Communist Party of South Africa. 49 I.W.W. ideas were influencing the Communist Party of South Africa from its inception. I.W.W. sailors even taught the Capetown International Socialist League to sing, according to the League's own records. 50

The I.W.W. in the United States started to recover from wartime persecution. 51 It kept up an interest in South African unionism. While it was considering affiliation with the Syndicalist (AIT) and Communist (RTUI) international union federations, it was reporting on the activities of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) as part of the international movement toward industrial unionism:

The terrible condition of industrial slavery long existing among the black workers of South Africa is driving them to revolt. 52

The I.W.W. in the United States presented the I.C.U. as on the verge of a successful revolution. Under the headline "Black Workers Organising" the Industrial Worker reported that "twenty-two natives of the Transvaal were killed" by authorities for demonstrating on behalf of President "Masabala-ba" (sic) of the Native Workers Association (sic). 53

Next week American readers learned that after assembling in Market Square to listen to "inciting speeches" Africans had marched to the police station to release their leader. After two or three charges they broke through police lines. The police got soldiers who fired into the crowd killing 14, including 2 whites. At New Brighton a power station was attacked, telephone and telegraph lines were cut and an attempt was made to explode 70,000 cases of gasoline. 54

"Smuts Fears Revolution" said headlines next to attacks on racist Australian unions. 55 The I.W.W. saw that racism and capitalist exploitation were driving the Africans to revolt.
The I.W.W. did not advocate the armed overthrow of the state, but it did maintain that workers have the right to defend themselves, whether from attack by police with pickhandles, or from Smuts' air force "bombardments".56

The I.W.W.'s sense of solidarity with the I.C.U. is not surprising. The I.C.U.'s first Preamble and Constitution were based on those of the I.W.W.57 The "One Big Union" rhetoric and ideology were straight out of the I.W.W.58 Even its claim to be a non-political organisation fighting the pass laws would make sense to an I.W.W. which fought regular free-speech fights with American authorities and came out against World War I.59 Organising Black Workers had been important to the I.W.W. from its founding.

The I.C.U. and the I.W.W. had too many differences to unite. The I.C.U. discouraged strikes and direct action. Instead it put its trust in pleas to the government, conferences and peaceful petitions.60 Whites were accepted as members but could not become officers.61 The I.C.U. also had leaders, something which I.W.W. ideology opposed.62 Leadership struggles and personal ambitions helped to kill the I.C.U. Its story is also told better elsewhere.63

In the meantime Archie Crawford was pursuing his new career as a trade union bureaucrat. He had become recognised as the leader of South African White Unionism. He was not opposed to Black workers organising; he had simply given up on trying to organise Blacks and Whites into the same union.64 Crawford applauded the success of Clemens Kadalie and the I.C.U. He considered the I.C.U. not to be racist but as part of the international working class movement.65

Crawford and Kadalie both saw that uniting Black and White workers in South Africa was fraught with more than usual difficulties. The few opportunities at this time had been lost through the refusal of white miners to support the demands of Black miners in the 1913 and 1914 strikes, and the increasing use of whites as supervisors rather than as actual workers. An independent Black miners' strike had been ruthlessly crushed by the government in 1920.66 As long as Blacks and Whites had different relations to the productive process, the White Worker was mostly interested in preserving his position of privilege. The result was South Africa's peculiar system of legal job reservation.67

Crawford's constituency saw their interests better than he did. The Chamber of Mines also saw that they could increase profits by replacing White mine workers with cheaper Blacks. The Chamber moved in early 1922 to change the proportion of
Blacks and Whites in the mines. These proportions had formerly been negotiated by the chamber with the South African Industrial Federation. The White miners' strike which resulted could not shut down mines operated by supervisors and non-white workers. Smuts' government undertook to protect all scabs. The strike quickly turned into a revolt in which one of the slogans became "Workers of the World, Fight and Unite for a White South Africa." The white workers were initially defeated, but after the next elections the color bar was entrenched more firmly.

The whole episode would not deserve mention in a history of the South African I.W.W. if one author had not ascribed the role of organising this strike to the I.W.W. Historians should take note that this was not the case. Although the I.W.W. in the United States hoped that the revolt had been a successful and interracial one, they knew that the I.W.W. (S.A.) was long dead. When word came of the intent of the strike they did not hesitate to condemn it.

It should not be a surprise that the only I.W.W. in Africa would be in South Africa. South Africa is the only industrially developed country in Africa. The I.W.W. held that Engels' position on development in Socialism, Utopian and Scientific was correct. Thus it did not expect any workers revolutions in underdeveloped countries. It considered that syndicalism, with its craft union structure, would be more popular in underdeveloped countries rather than the purely industrial structure of the I.W.W. (See references in note 25). The largest I.W.W. in an underdeveloped country (that in Chile) left the I.W.W. in the 1920's to join the Syndicalist international.

The I.W.W.'s revolutionary tactic, the general strike has become part of Black South Africa's traditional repertoire of protest. This is the stay at home. It represents in form the early Syndicalist type of general strike. This form of strike can successfully stop production with the solidarity of unskilled workers alone. As a revolutionary strategy it provides for no transition to post-revolutionary production other than the surrender of the defeated capitalists.

The idea of an I.W.W. general strike became different. This 'strike on the job' would not let production stop. Workers on the job would run all the industries. This would be the only way the workers could outlast the bosses. From this came the American sit down strike.

This type of strike was first suggested by Lucy Parsons, a Black American, who was one of the founders of the I.W.W.:

*I wish to say that my conception of the*
future method of taking possession of this is that of the general strike; that is my conception of it. The trouble with all the strikes in the past has been this: the workingmen... strike and go out and starve. Their children starve. Their wives get discouraged. Some feel that they have to go out and beg for relief, and to get a little coal to keep the children warm, or a little bread to keep the wife from starving, or a little something to keep the spark of life in them so they can remain wage slaves. That is the way with the strikes in the past. My conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve, but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production. If anyone is to starve—I do not say it is necessary—let it be the capitalist class. They have starved us long enough, while they have had wealth and luxury and all that is necessary. 

Such a strike requires the cooperation of skilled workers much more than the earlier type does. This resulted in a shift in the I.W.W.'s attitude towards skilled workers. The early attitude is best summed up in the speech by Big Bill Haywood at the founding convention:

I do not care the snap of my finger whether or not the skilled workers join this industrial movement at the present time... the skilled worker today is exploiting the laborer beneath him, the unskilled man, just as much as the capitalist is.

If this was true in the United States in 1905, think how true it must be in South Africa today! To unite the Black and White Workers of South Africa in such a general strike is a utopian dream.

To run the gold mines of South Africa requires skilled labor. This problem exists, as seen in Zambia and Shaba, but its importance has been exaggerated in reference to South Africa.

Some observers would say let the mines go. The ore in South African gold mines is so poor that it would be a geological curiosity in the United States. It is indeed doubtful if the mines could provide a living wage for all miners and remain
open. In such a situation the proper strategy and goal of a revolution may be to shut down the mines entirely.

One more option remains. It has been argued that the allegedly skilled White miner is essentially a gun thug hired to 'supervise' the African and assure his high productivity. The core of his 'skill' is in the handling of explosives and firearms. Compounded Black labor of the type used in South Africa was attempted in the late 19th century U.S. coal mining industry. Tennessee miners fought the 'Coal Creek Rebellion' against it. It has not been tried since in mining. It is doubtful if South Africa's White 'miners' would be eligible for membership in the United Mine Workers of America, if there were such an institution as the 'white miner' in the United States.

It is not inconceivable that experienced Black miners in South Africa would know enough about explosives from experience to be able to use them adequately. I do not mean to suggest that Blacks could take over only the mining industry and hold it. It might be possible for a properly organised 'strike on the job' coordinated with an armed insurrection, to take control of South Africa and keep the gold mines operating long enough to provide the foreign exchange necessary to reorient the economy. Since more and more South African miners come from OAU member countries, it should be easier to organise unions among them. Such a strike-on-the-job could be the greatest contribution to the emerging South African revolution that Lucy Parsons and the I.W.W. could make.

Footnotes:


1. Justice Minister James Kruger told the South Africa Parliament that Black Power ideology was the most dangerous thing to have come to South Africa from the United States. Tiit Luuk, "What Biko Represents," Africa Report XX, no.6 (Nov.-Dec. 1977), p.6.


Conlon, Joseph, Bread and Roses Too (Greenwood, 1970).


7. Ibid. p.3.


10. Ibid. p.4.

11. Ibid. p.3. This is called the "Industrial Federation" in Mann's Memoirs and the "Industrial Workers' Union" in R. K. Cope, Comrade Bill (Cape Town: Stewart Printing Co, Pty. Ltd., no date). It was more of a general workers' union than a strictly Industrial Union. It may have also given rise to the South African Industrial Federation, an 'industrial' union for whites only, and thus more of a 'trans craft' than a strictly industrial union. Industrial unions enroll all workers in an industry.


16. Mann, Tom. op. cit., p.3.


19. Voice of Labour, July 22, 1910, quoted in Simons and Simons, op. cit., p.148; For I.W.W. relations in the U.S. see Myland Rudolph Brown, The I.W.W. And the Negro Worker (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ball State, 1968) and Philip Foner in Journal of Negro History, January 1970. Interracial and interethnic solidarity was a major part of I.W.W. ideology from the beginning. At the height of I.W.W. influence approximately 100,000 of its 1,000,000 members were Black.


21. For the most famous of American free speech fights led by the I.W.W. see History of the San Diego Free Speech Fight (Chicago: I.W.W.) as well as references in note 3 above.


24. Cerny, Frank, Letter in Industrial Solidarity vol.2, #26 (whole number 78) June 10, 1911, p.1; articles in Industrial Worker #115, June 18, 1911 and #133, October 12, 1911.

25. "Resolution on Political Parties and Discipline" passed at the 1908 convention and printed in the Constitution ever since. This has caused some historians to consider
the I.W.W. itself to be anarchist or syndicalist, a position taken by most Leninist and DeLeonist Marxists. For a contrasting view, see the works of Joseph Conlin, or most I.W.W. propaganda, especially Ralph Chaplin, The General Strike (Chicago: I.W.W., 1972) p.30 and Industrial Solidarity #183, May 6, 1922, p.2.


28. Industrial Worker #154, March 7, 1912, p.2.


32. Wilfred H. Harrison, op. cit., p.44.

33. Walker and Weinbren, op. cit., pp.57-8; 'Big Bill' Haywood, whose mother was South African (see Renshaw, op. cit., p.71) wrote "A Message," a poem dedicated to the deported unionists. Although sold to Metropolitan Magazine it was not published until the Industrial Worker printed it on March 3, 1917 (vol.1, no.47, p.4).

34. Coates, Roger, "Notes on the Industrial Workers of the

35. Crawford, "Socialist Party Progress in South Africa".

36. *Industrial Solidarity* #178, April 1, 1922, p.6; Ian Turner, *op. cit.*


40. *Industrial Solidarity* (Chicago) #178, p.6, April 1, 1922.


43. *The International* (Johannesburg) #115, January 4, 1918, p.3; #127, April 5, 1918, p.2; *The New York Times* July 19, 1918, p.13, col.5; The DeLeonist or 'Detroit' I.W.W. split from the Chicago organization in 1908. It was associated with the Socialist Labor Party, and died in the 1920's.

44. *The International* #127, p.2.


46. *The International* #95, August 3, 1917, p.3.


51. Fred Thompson and Pat Murfin, *op. cit.*, pp.135-50:
The fact that the I.W.W. grew from the war years to the 1924 split, and that the disaster occurred when the leaders were released, does not fit in with the conclusion of Perlman and Taft and other historians that the decline of the I.W.W. was due to the loss of its leaders by imprisonment.

52. Industrial Worker vol.1, no.83, November 20, 1920, p.2.
53. Industrial Worker vol.1, no.82, November 13, 1920, p.2.
55. Industrial Worker vol.1, no.85, December 4, 1920, p.2.
60. Ibid, p.707.
62. See note 51 above, as well as any and all I.W.W. propaganda dealing with leaders.
64. Kadalie, Clemens, op. cit., p.68.
67. Ibid., p.374.
68. Gitsham and Trembath, op. cit., pp. 47-52; Walker and Weinbren, op. cit., chapters 11-23, appendices B-I.

69. Roux, Edward, S.P. Bunting: A Political Biography, chapter 7, Time Longer Than Rope, Chapter XIV.


72. Industrial Solidarity, new series #178, April 1, 1922, p. 6. Industrial Solidarity, new series #179, April 8, 1922, p. 3.

The I.W.W. considered the whites miners' fight impossible. As Americans they knew that Blacks were capable of all skilled labor, and that employers would use them to reduce the wages of Whites. White workers in South Africa were compared to the allegedly doomed 'aristocrats' of the segregated American Federation of Labor.

73. Fred Thompson and Pat Murfin, op. cit., p. 83.

74. Chaplin, Ralph, The General Strike.


76. Ibid., p. 575-6.


v.12, August 1911, p.78.

79. Philip S. Foner in *The History of the American Labor Movement* vol.II; Green, Archie, "Coal Creek Troubles" in *Only a Miner* (University of Illinois) rptd. Appalachian Movement Press, 1973 as *Coal Creek Rebellion*.

80. When asked how Blacks and Whites feel about working together underground in the U.S.A., the standard miners' reply is: "When we come out of the mines, all of us are Black." See *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, a film by Barbara Kapple.

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