WHITE LABOUR ARISTOCRACY AND BLACK PROLETARIAT

The Origins and Deployment of South Africa's racially divided Working Class[1]

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SUMMARY

The origins of the South African labour movement can be traced to a historically colour and skills divided working class. This working class crystallised into a small, mostly skilled, elitist and exclusivist white group of trade unionists and a vast unorganised and unskilled proletariat of black workers. The white labour movement became militant relatively soon after its formation and by 1924 achieved workers' rights through militant industrial action, whereafter its influence on labour issues steadily diminished. Due to factors such as discrimination and suppression black trade unionism took a much longer period to grow in stature against many odds. Since the 1970's black unions also became a major political force that played an indispensable role in the victory of the liberation struggle and the political transformation of the South African state.

A. INTRODUCTION

The discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 caused South Africa's economic balance to tilt towards the interior. South Africa was transformed from an agricultural into a mining country and the mining industry was destined to become the impetus which would lead to gradual industrialisation and the creation and growth of cities in the interior, such as Johannesburg and Kimberley.[2] The rich mineral-bearing diamond and gold lodes were deposited in deep level hard-rock. Subsequently, the demand for labour increased as South Africa lacked skilled and technical expertise in hard-rock mining. Therefore skilled experts, especially Cornish hard-rock tin miners ("Cousin Jacks"), were recruited mainly from the British Empire and America.[3] In order to attract and retain the required skills, these (white) immigrants were paid high wages and accorded a privileged status. The privileges of (foreign) skilled labour were extended to incorporate unskilled and semi-skilled white workers such as indigenous Afrikaners.[4]

However, due to its nature of deep-level mining and low average mineral content of the ore, South Africa's minerals could only be produced profitably at low production costs by creating and containing a vast supply of cheap available labour. Thus, the proletarianisation of South Africa's black labour force was initiated.[5] By the turn of the century the ratio of white to non-white labour on the Witwatersrand was one to nine.[6]

There was no question of equality of skills, initiative, development or organisational ability between the whites and indigenous blacks and the basic ingredients of a pattern of white "superiority" and black "inferiority" were thus also introduced as a characteristic of the South African labour movement. Whites succeeded in industrialising or "Europeanising" the country but failed to involve blacks in the process. Because the whites feared the blacks' numerical superiority and labour competition, they effectively excluded them from opportunities to acquire competitive skills, knowledge and expertise[7] by introducing labour legislation and other discriminatory practices on the basis of a colour bar in the work place.[8] Consequently, all white workers became an elitist "labour aristocracy"[9] regardless of their skills and correspondingly, all black workers formed a pool on unskilled, cheap labour.[10]

The South African working class, therefore came to be made up of two groups of workers subject to quite different relations of production with the property owning class - a group of exploitable non-white workers and a group of politically free white workers.[11] Thus, the South African labour movement emerged from a racial division of labour along colour lines - on the one hand, a smaller white labour force, and on the other, a vast emergent black proletariat.

B. THE FORMATION OF THE WHITE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE ISSUE OF INDUSTRIAL COLOUR BARS

Although unions for printers already existed by 1881-83 in coastal towns such as Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, (white) trade unionism in South Africa actually proliferated with the discovery of gold.[12] Therefore, the discovery of minerals made trade unionism possible and even inevitable.[13] The predominantly British character of the miners, the habits the British workshop and the tradition of the British trade unions established themselves on the Witwatersrand.[14] Both the trade union and political wings of the (white) South African labour movement were established by immigrants, and they were organised in the same way as were similar bodies and movements in Britain. Some of the first unions were branches of parent organisations overseas, such as the (British) Amalgamated Society of Engineers.[15]

These were craft unions that monopolised and controlled the supply of skilled labour through strict demarcation of trades and restricted access to union membership by means of the apprenticeship system and the closed shop principle.[16] It was in their interests to keep admissions to the craft low, and the criteria rigorous, to ensure strong demand for their skills and correspondingly high wages. Thus by nature, these craft unions were elitist and exclusivist, concerned primarily to protect the position of the skilled worker from competition from other less, or unskilled workers.[17] As a result, race and class converged not only to polarise black and white workers, but also to separate unions along racial lines.[18]

After the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the prewar white predominantly English-speaking labour force was augmented by demobilized British, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian soldiers from the British armies. The infusion of the demobilized soldiers into the labour movement carried with it new ideas of labour and socialist organization. A section of the workers, particularly miners, also came from America. They introduced the American variety of industrial unionism and syndicalism. Thus, most of the strands of socialist thought and labour politics in the English-speaking world were represented in the white South African labour movement. Besides these

English-speaking workers, immigrants also came from the continent of Europe. Italians, Germans and Jews were among those who arrived on the Witwatersrand, and whose ranks included socialists who brought their own particular organizational models to South Africa.[19]

The predominantly British model of industrial relations that was imported to South Africa is often characterised as the"adversary system" as opposed to the "conciliatory system" of the European continent. Matters such as mine regulations and safety, miners' phthisis, workmen's compensation, the eight-hour work day, prohibition of Sunday work, job reservation for whites, etc. were the contentious issues of negotiation and dispute in the relationship between trade unions and employer organisations like the Chamber of Mines.[20]

But the white workers realized that their struggle for better conditions was unlikely to succeed if conducted in the industrial field only. Labour organisations, such as Trades and Labour Councils (c. 1890's), Labour Representation Committees (c. 1906-1907) and various provincial labour parties (c.1902-1909) were established in industrial towns and cities to further the political interests of white trade unionists.[21] In October 1909 these organisations where amalgamated with the establishment of the South African Labour Party (SALP). Trade unions, that formed the backbone of the SALP, strongly endorsed its white labour policy. Ironically, due to personality clashes and bickering for party positions within the ranks of trade union leaders, a middle class mining engineer, FHP Creswell, was elected as parliamentary leader. He and his friend, WJ Wybergh, a former Transvaal Commissioner of Mines that would later also become the editor of the party's official organ, joined the SALP in 1910 and were staunch champions of a white labour policy or "civilized labour" as it became known.[22]

Another faction that stood somewhat aloof from the mainstream politics and policies of the white labour movement were the socialists. A variety of socialist organisations, clubs and parties were established after the Anglo-Boer War such as the Socialist Labour Party (Johannesburg, 1903), Clarion Fellowship (Durban, 1903), Social Democratic Federation (Cape Town, 1904), Independent Labour Party (Pretoria, 1906), Social Democratic Party (Durban 1908) and the

Socialist Society (Johannesburg, 1909).[23] Italian socialist immigrants also formed an Italian Socialist Group, Germans organised a Vorwärts Club after the practice of the Marxist SDP and Jewish immigrants formed a Marxist Jewish Bund. Through bodies such as these some of the issues and struggles of the British and continental socialist movements, particularly Marxism, were introduced to South Africa.[24] The majority of white trade unionists, however, were averse to socialism.[25] On the other hand, a number of the militant socialists refused to join the SALP.[26]

The wide circulation of British and local labour and socialist literature hastened the growth of the South African labour movement. British socialist weeklies, such as Robert Blatchford's *Clarion* and *Merrie England*, as well as copies of *Labour Leader, Herald* and *Forward* were circulated by local socialists. Socialists in Cape Town started *The Cape Socialist* (1905), in Durban a monthly, *The Socialist Spark* (1905), was established and since 1908 the militant weekly, *Voice of Labour,* appeared as the organ of the Johannesburg Socialist Society. The South African Typographical Union started a weekly, *The Worker,* (1908) that was to become the official mouthpiece of the SALP by 1912.[27]

Since the 1970's a significant number of analytical studies were produced by historians that shed illuminating light on the rationale behind the protectionist strategies and policies of the white labour movement. Yudelman attributes these to the 1911 Native Labour Regulation Act, which standardized the recruitment and treatment of black contract migrant mineworkers. This act affected white labour in that it streamlined the separate and unequal position of the bulk of the black labour force. By making such workers cheaper to recruit and retain, they became more accessible to the mines, thus accentuating the threat to the white miners of very low-wage black competition.[28]

Johnstone argues that the divided working class consisted of politically free white, and politically unfree black workers who were subjected to fundamentally different and unequal political relations with the capitalist class employing them. Therefore, the politically free white workers could assert themselves in relation to the employers through such means as trade unions and

the vote. These factors placed them in a strong bargaining position to enable them to command high wages making white labour far more expensive than non-white labour.[29] Hence Webster states, the white workers' access to political power has enabled them to define their position in antagonistic terms to that of black workers.[30]

Johnstone explains that the proletarianisation of white workers lead to their structural insecurity which was greatly extended by exploitable, cheap non-white labour. For the skilled white workers, it posed the threat of displacement from employment, while for the unskilled white workers it meant the restriction of employment opportunities. There was no economic reason why (save for the existence of the colour bar that would protect white workers to an extent up to 1923), if non-white workers acquired skills, such workers could not be used in place of white workers. The white mineworkers were thus constantly faced with the potential threat of undercutting and displacement by cheap black labour, and this would lead them to take measures, such as strikes, to protect themselves against this threat.[31]

Davies proposes that mining capital, in its attempt to reorganise the labour process, sought to bring about a greater separation between the tasks of conception, co-ordination and control on the one hand and productive manual labour on the other, in order to restrict white employment to a supervisory role. By increasingly transforming the more numerous productive tasks to blacks (at a fraction of white wages), mining capital was able to increase the ratio of productive white workers to less numerous supervisors. It was therefore inevitably a process in which white labour was shed. From the outset white employees in the mining industry had relied to a large extent upon capital's dependence on their skills to secure and defend their relatively high wages. They were therefore faced, through deskilling, with a loss of one of their most important bargaining advantages as well.[32]

Katz illustrates this point very aptly by showing that many leading South African trade unionists who were British-born had worked in Australia or had visited that country before coming to South Africa. In Australia these men had directly or indirectly experienced the almost universal opposition of organised

(white) labour to cheap competitive non-white labour, especially to the indentured Chinese, imported as early as the 1850's into that country.[33]

The structural insecurity of the white workers and the tendency of trade unions to militantly resist deskilling efforts by the mining industry, would lead to direct conflict between such unions and capital. Therefore, the first two decades of 20th century South African labour history were characterised by endemic labour unrest and industrial strike action, particularly on the Witwatersrand. The strike actions of this period culminated in four major strikes: 1907, 1913, 1914 and 1922.[34]

The 1907 strike broke out as a result of the productive functions of white miners increasingly being superseded by their supervising roles. Where skilled white miners initially operated a mechanical drill with the help of two black (unskilled) assistants, the employers attempted to induce them to only supervise more than two drills operated by black workers. Thus, the intensification of the supervisory content of the skilled white miners' functions actually meant many of their skills and positions becoming redundant, as they increasingly were being replaced by cheaper, more cost-effective unskilled or semi-skilled black labour. Ironically, the strike was eventually broken when many of the striking overseas skilled miners were replaced by strike breaking unemployed and unskilled white Afrikaner scab labour. The latter were willing to perform a limited range of mostly supervisory jobs at a lower wage level than that of the skilled miners.[35]

The high level of militancy that white trade unionism have reached soon proved in the next major strike in 1913, once again on the Witwatersrand gold mines. Job fragmentation (deskilling) undoubtedly added to the insecurity of the white workers. In 1907, there were 2234 whites supervising 1890 black-operated rockdrills; by 1913, there were 2207 whites supervising 4781 machines. The white miners also resented the fact that their grievances of 1907 had not been significantly alleviated by 1913. The strike began on a technical question affecting working hours and conditions of employment and wages. The issue quickly escalated to one of recognition of trade unions for the purpose of collective bargaining, which the mining companies refused to do. The strike

then developed into a violent confrontation, including riots, armed clashes between strikers and government forces and the killing of citizens. Eventually, the government, who at that stage was not adequately equipped to deal with the situation, had to yield to the strikers' demands concerning working conditions. In January 1914 another (general) strike broke out as a result of government retrenchments on the railways. This time, the strike was suppressed after the declaration of martial law. What is more, the struggles of 1913 and 1914 had apparently strengthened the position within unions of syndicalists. The white labour movement emerged from these strikes still militant and relatively strong.[36]

But the upheaval that would have the most far-reaching consequences for white labour was the January 1922 strike, popularly known as the "Rand Revolt". The strike was characterised by serious rioting, attacks on police and military forces by armed strike commandos and the declaration of martial law involving 7000 armed troops, bomber planes, artillery and tanks. By 14 March 1922 government troops secured control of the Witwatersrand and put an end to the uprising. Thousands were arrested, hundreds killed and four strikers were eventually hanged.[37] Yudelman argues that it was the last sustained challenge from organised labour to the legitimacy of the South African state up until the present as subsequent strikes never escalated in the form of a systematic, concerted rejection of the state itself.[38]

According to Johnstone, the outbreak of the First World War resulted in many overseas mineworkers leaving their jobs to go to the war. This produced significant changes in the composition of the white labour force and in the occupational distribution of the labour force as a whole. Many of these vacant jobs were filled by less skilled Afrikaner workers, who for the most part lacked industrial skills. On the other hand, as a result of long experience of work in mines, up to 10 per cent of the black labour force had come to acquire certain mining skills. While skilled jobs were reserved to white workers by the mining regulations, there was no such reservation of work in the sphere of semi-skilled work. Therefore, the effect of the wartime exodus of white workers was to hasten the movement of black workers into semi-skilled work. This became a

cause of increasing anxiety among the new, less skilled white workers and as time went by, these workers began to demand the exclusion of cheap non-white labour from semi-skilled work and were to engage in militant strike action.[39]

For Yudelman, the Afrikaners were far more willing than were their predecessors to be mere supervisors. In effect, then, "Afrikanerisation" created a new work force of a more industrial type, with job fragmentation and mechanisation enabling far fewer skilled workers to achieve the same results or better in an increasingly supervisory capacity. This process, in turn, opened up the possibility of the increased use of unskilled and semi-skilled blacks, who were paid only a fraction of the white wage.[40]

A factor that aggravated the white workers' anxiety was a deepening productivity and costs crisis on the gold mines since 1914. By the end of the First World War, the gold mining companies were thus faced with a serious profitability crisis. The profitability crisis could be addressed by reducing white labour costs through the replacement of expensive white labour by cheap black labour, and labour productivity could be increased through a reorganisation of labour. Both of these imperatives were obstructed by the colour bar and, of course, resisted by white trade unions. Subsequently, as some black workers had already moved into semi-skilled employment, a *Status Quo* Agreement, designed to prevent the displacement of white workers in these jobs, came into effect on 1 September 1918. The colour bar *status quo* was frozen, with those white workers already employed keeping their jobs. The Chamber of Mines agreed to a fixed ratio of one white to 10.5 black workers. However, when in 1920 the price of gold suddenly dropped, a depression became unavoidable as more and more mines began operating at a loss. In order to survive financially, the mining industry thus had to reduce white wages. In December 1921 the SA Industrial Federation, an umbrella body of trade unions, was informed by the Chamber of Mines of an abrogation of the *Status Quo* Agreement. When negotiations between the Federation and the Chamber on this issue failed, the 1922 strike broke out.[41]

As mentioned before, the outcome of the strike would entail drastic consequences for the white working class as a whole. A reduction in white

wage rates of between 25 and 50 per cent was introduced. The protection of the *Status Quo* Agreement was lost. White miners previously employed as semi-skilled workers were correspondingly replaced by blacks, and the production processes in most departments were reorganised such that whites were restricted to performance of supervisory duties. It also involved the retrenchment of other white workers without replacement. In the mines alone the reorganisation of labour after the strike resulted in the permanent displacement of about 2000 white workers. The breaking of the strike also resulted in virtually smashing the white trade unions' bargaining power and in large numbers of resignations from the unions. And in 1923 the colour bar regulations in the Mines and Works Act of 1911 were declared by the court to be *ultra vires* and the act therefore invalid.[42]

The formation of an electoral alliance between gen. JBM Hertzog's National Party, with its Afrikaner support base, and Creswell's SALP, that became known as the "Pact", was the single most significant political outcome of the 1922 strike. This Pact would, to a large extend, contribute to ousting from power the South African Party (SAP) government in the general election of 1924.[43] The governing alliance of the Pact supported and implemented a protectionist policy for the white workers.[44]

Prior to the election the SAP government already implemented the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, which gave the unionised white workers a secure position against undercutting from any quarter, but also helped management by the obstacles it placed in the way of precipitate strike action. The new Pact government also pursued a "civilised labour policy" that resulted in the Wage Act of 1925, a measure complementary to the Industrial Conciliation Act. It was designed to aid unskilled white workers to obtain "civilised" or white rates of pay. The government was also able to wean white labour away from industrial action by promoting a policy of job reservation in skilled trades. With the introduction of the Mines and Works Amendment (or "Colour Bar") Act of 1926 the opposition of the skilled white miner was disarmed. The law protected skilled and semi-skilled white workers by simply reserving the grant of certificates of competency in skilled trades to white and Coloured people and by

excluding blacks and Asians from it. It thus also gave the force of law to a principle (regarding the colour bar) which the courts had declared invalid in 1923. Job reservation for unskilled whites provided openings for careers in such organisations like the police, the prison service, the postal service, the railways and municipalities.[45]

Davies argues that the state's intervention in labour matters by means of labour legislation in the post 1922 period, effectively led to the incorporation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of white unions within the state structures, and thus eliminating them as a potential militant, political threat. Within the union structures power passed more into the hands of a bureaucracy of permanent and salaried trade union officials. Concomitantly, the rank and file membership became increasingly alienated from union leaders and apathetic toward unions in general. According to Davies "the Pact regime had succeeded in bringing about the almost complete political capitulation of the white labour movement to capital".[46]

Yudelman concurs with Davies's analysis by arguing that the interventionist state embarked upon a program to subjugate and pacify organised white labour by formally co-opting it into the structures of the state. Thus, organised white labour lost its power to use strikes as effective political and economic weapons, having been depoliticised by means of incorporation into the political and administrative structures of the state. For Yudelman, there can be no doubt that the increased role of the state did bring a virtual end to militant white worker resistance.[47]

In his analysis, Webster agues that the 1922 strike and its aftermath also marked the terminal point in the parting of ways of white and black mine workers. The white worker's access to political power has enabled him to define his position in antagonistic terms to that of the black worker.[48] Lever concludes that the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 gave major impetus to the tendency towards the separationist or exclusionist tendencies in white labour's activities and must therefore be accounted one of the major factors giving rise to South Africa's partial labour movement.[49] The institutionalisation of white trade unions within the state structures and the "solution" of the poor white problem by job creation

and job reservation produced real isolation effects between white and black members of the working class.[50] Thus began a dual system of labour relations in South Africa. White workers were increasingly drawn into a protected position in the capitalist system, while black workers remained excluded from political and economic power.[51]

Therefore, since 1924 the role that white workers played in the wider trade union movement increasingly diminished. White labour politics shifted towards the periphery of the South African labour movement. In 1928 divisions within the SALP caused the party to split into two factions, whereafter the organisation declined until its eventual demise in 1958.[52] In 1957 the South African Confederation of Labour Associations (SACLA) was established by exclusively white conservative unions representing mining, railway and steelworkers. In 1985 the dominant all-white Mineworkers Union in SACLA extended its scope of registration to become a general union. Also representing workers in the engineering, chemical, electric and telecommunisation industries, it continued to wield significant influence in those industries.[53]

C. THE RISE OF THE BLACK LABOUR MOVEMENT AND INFLUENCES FROM THE LEFT

In comparison with the emergence of white trade unions, for various reasons black unions appeared relatively late on the South African labour scene. Through a complete lack of education and training black workers lacked all the effective weapons of collective bargaining.[54] Factors such as white control over black labour through institutions like the system of contract migrant labour, the compound hostel system, white supervision in the work place and the battery of racial discriminatory custom and law, inhibited black workers from developing skills in controlling their work situation and thus also inhibited the emergence of an effective class consciousness and class mobilisation.[55]

However, the outbreak of the First World War would profoundly influence developments in both black and white sections of the working class. In the more general questions on the means to achieve socialism and the attitude of the party in the event of a "capitalist" war, the right wing and left wing of the SALP

continued to compromise uneasily. In 1913 the SALP affiliated to the International Socialist Bureau on the basis of its Stuttgart anti-war resolution. But although the vocabulary of segments of the militant socialist left overseas was imported into South Africa, the absence at that stage of the tiny local organised centres of Marxism from the most important labour organisations, meant that the most forthright advocates of greater attention to blacks were isolated from the mainstream of the white labour movement.[56]

The outbreak of the war in Europe in August 1914 quickly exposed the fragility of the left wing and right wing coalition within the SALP. The party's right wing, with the support of WJ Wybergh, editor of *The Worker*, the official party organ, endorsed participation in the war. On the other hand, those SALP members who in adherence to their socialist beliefs strongly opposed South African participation in the war, formed the War on War League and published its own weekly, the *War on War Gazette.* The League strongly emphasized international socialist solidarity as the most effective antidote to war. It acknowledged its debt to the strong anti-war stands, of the *Labour Leader, Forward* and *Avanti* and cited the protests of Liebknecht, Luxemburg, and other anti-war German socialists and those of "comrades in Russia". In the course of 1915 it thus became clear that the anti-war and pro-war factions within the SALP marshalled forces for a showdown. To resolve matters a special conference of the SALP met in August in Johannesburg. After a vigorous debate the anti-war SALP members were defeated on matters of principle and they left the conference. In September 1915 the anti-war faction formed the International Socialist League (ISL) with its own official organ, *The International,* and decided to sever all ties with the SALP.[57]

Interestingly, though, the bulk of the leading personalities of the breakaway group were not of trade union stock but recent adherents to the labour movement. They were English-speaking middle-class professional men, such as SP Bunting, a lawyer, and David Ivon Jones, a clerk.[58] Johns argues that the parting of the ways in the white labour movement and the formation of the ISL was a turning point in South African labour history. The ISL closely linked with the largely European based left-wing international socialist movement. It

was to infuse internationalism into the South African trade unions.[59] *"Here we plant the flag of the New International in South Africa*," wrote Jones as editor in the first issue of *The International*.[60] Moreover, negotiations that eventually lead to the successful merger of all leftist socialist centres into one organisation with the establishment of the Communist Party of South Africa in July 1921, also centered around the ISL.[61]

Most significantly, however, the ISL recognised that its activities ought to include the non-white working class. Thus Jones wrote in *The International:*

> *"…… an Internationalism which does not concede the fullest rights which the native working class is capable of claiming will be a sham. One of the justifications for our withdrawal from the Labour Party is that gives us untrammelled freedom to deal, regardless of political fortunes, with the great and fascinating problem of the native".*[62]

By excluding black workers from craft unions, these workers fell under the influence of white political interest groups that capitalised on black socio-economic grievances in order to mobilise them into unions. The ISL also became interested in organising black workers because it perceived them as the emergent proletariat that would take its rightful place in a world-wide class struggle against capitalism.[63]

Despite a lack of interest in the problems of the non-whites that occurred within the ranks of the ISL, SP Bunting and DI Jones persisted in carrying the socialist message to blacks. In 1917 they had set out to form the first black worker organisation, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA). The IWA was an industrial union for unskilled labourers. In 1918 the union distributed 10 000 copies of a leaflet in seZulu and seSotho, the first socialist publication in African languages. Black workers were urged to end tribal divisions and organise as workers against pass laws and low wages. It was hoped that the IWA would soon grow into a large trade union of unskilled workers on the lines of the American IWW. However, police spies infiltrated its structures and not

long after it became involved in a strike of black sanitation workers in Johannesburg for a small raise in pay in 1918, the union dissolved.[64]

Another important factor which facilitated the unionisation of black workers was a series of strikes and consumer boycotts since 1918, due to a rising cost of living which highlighted worker grievances. These strikes and protests created a conducive climate for the emergence of strong black unions, particularly in the light of the fact that the ANC appeared reluctant to get involved in strike activities of black workers which it regarded as a means to a political end rather than a weapon for an economic struggle. It was in the absence of a strong and meaningful black labour organisation to articulate the demands of the masses[65] that the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) was established in 1919 among black and Coloured dock workers of Cape Town.[66] According to Luckhardt and Wall the ICU was the first nationally based African workers' organisation and mass-based political movement in South African history. It brought together the extremes within the oppressed community from the rural migrants to the urban petty-bourgeois aspirants. The ICU was instrumental in founding a tradition of black workers' militancy.[67] Brits and Roux argues that the ICU overshadowed the ANC in the 1920's and was the first organisation which was able to make black workers aware of mass action.[68]

The formation of the ICU was initiated by a white socialist politician, AF Batty, and Clements Kadalie in Cape Town in 1919. Kadalie, who had come from Nyasaland (Malawi), became the leading figure and general secretary of the ICU. The ICU quickly assumed a militant and powerful character as a result of the post-war depression. Originally being a Cape-based organisation it began to spread its wings country wide to the provinces of the Free State, Transvaal and Natal. The ICU included in its ranks teachers, domestic servants, dock workers, landless rural agricultural workers and small traders. The only exception were black mine workers. The inability to organise this category of workers was due to the impenetrable compound system and the migratory labour system prevailing on the mines. The ICU even started its own newspaper *The Workers' Herald*. Communist influence soon became apparent in the ICU. When the union's assistant general secretary, James La Guma joined the CP, others

followed suit and by 1926 no fewer than six CP members were serving on the national council of the ICU. But this co-operation was of short duration. The communists accused the leadership of internal corruption, a lack of discipline, financial mismanagement and bureaucracy. In reaction, an ultimatum was issued in December 1926 to the communists within the ICU to choose between the CP and the union. Those who did not resign of their own accord from the CP were expelled.[69]

Kadalie's agreement to co-operate with the Pact government had been premature and rash as the latter's "civilised labour policy" clearly antagonised the ICU. As a consequence Kadalie started to condemn racism and capitalism and proposed the redistribution of land. The government tried in vain to check Kadalie and the ICU by means of legislation. In 1925 the ICU headquarters were transferred to Johannesburg and by 1926 the organisation had really begun to gather momentum. In 1927 the ICU applied for direct affiliation to the South African Trade Union Congress (SATUC) (founded in 1924) - a trade union confederation largely composed of all-white unions. However, the SATUC, with a membership of less that 30 000 feared domination by a black union and therefore rejected the ICU application for affiliation. By the end of 1927 the ICU had reached its zenith by claiming as many as 100 000 members. It became the biggest trade union organisation founded at that time in Africa and also began to increase in militancy. But then it began to lose momentum.

In 1927 Kadalie visited Europe where he made contact with British trade unionists and was the first African trade unionist to attend an International Labour Organisation Convention in Geneva. During Kadalie's stay in Europe the ICU centre of strength had shifted to Natal under the leadership of AWG Champion. The ICU soon begun to disintegrate over leadership rivalries between Kadalie and Champion. In May 1928 Champion left the ICU and established his own organisation, the ICU *yase* Natal. This was a severe blow for the organisation because Natal was a major source of income for the ICU. In July 1928, WG Ballinger, a Scottish trade unionist, arrived in South Africa as financial adviser to the ICU. He soon clashed with Kadalie because he wanted to reform the chaotic administration of the union against Kadalie's wishes. In

1929 an Independent ICU under Kadalie was formed with its headquarters in East London. From the start this organisation struggled to survive with insufficient funds and inadequate national support and by 1930 Kadalie had reached the end of the road. By then the ICU existed in name only. Sporadic attempts were made to try to reconcile the different fractions but these were in vain. For all practical purposes the organisation had disappeared from the scene by 1934. Disappointed blacks turned again to the ANC.[70]

Brits attributes the demise of the ICU to personal vendettas, poor administration, incompetent officials and unwise business decisions. Added to this, *The Workers' Herald* was financially an utter failure. The ICU also apparently made use of an ineffective strategy by not concentrating enough on strike action by urban workers.[71]

The development and progress of the black labour movement in the period from the late 1920's to the early 1970's was characterised by mixed successes. The movement had to negotiate various challenges and responses from either the state or rival trade union organisations. The demise of the ICU ushered in the emergence of black trade unions organised along industrial lines. This endeavour came primarily from the communists who, as a consequence of being expelled from the ICU, redirected their energies to the establishment of black trade unions. Communists, such as B Weinbren and TW Thibedi, pioneered industrial unions in the laundry, baking, sweet, clothing, tailoring, furniture, catering, engineering and distributive industries.[72]

The influence of the left was even present in the SATUC (which were dominated by white unions but permitted the affiliation of black unions) where a communist, WH Andrews, was elected to the position of secretary. During the economic depression of the early 1930's the need for greater unity was widely felt. SATUC laid the basis for the formation of the SA Trades and Labour Council (SAT & LC) in 1930.[73] SAT & LC affiliation was open to all *bona fide* unions, including black trade unions. Its policies reflected the militancy of the industrial unions and called for the abolition of racialistic labour legislation. However, in 1948 the National Party came to power again and started to introduce a series of repressive measures to the labour movement. The result of

these developments was a greater division in labour ranks and polarisation in the SAT & LC. White worker unions in the steel and mining industries and various railway staff associations withdrew from the SAT & LC. With this development the ideal of a unified South African labour movement was finally abolished.[74]

The Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, robbed many of the more militant unions in the SAT & LC of their officials and leaders. Thus, trade unionists began to fear that additional controls might be introduced. As a result, the SAT & LC was dissolved and in 1954 the South African Trade Union Council, representing 61 unions, was established, which in 1962 changed its name to the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). However, TUCSA vacillated as to whether or not black trade unions should affiliate, resulting in the withdrawal of a considerable number of unions. In 1986 the organisation officially disbanded.[75]

The emergence of black industrial unions was also facilitated by the rapid expansion of secondary industries which created a permanent, urbanised black working class. Another factor which contributed to the growth of these industrial unions was ironically the promulgation of the Wage Act in 1925 which, through the establishment of a Wage Board, provided some black workers with a forum to voice work-related complaints.[76] In March 1928 five black unions founded the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) under the leadership of communists such as Weinbren (president), Moses Kotane (vice-president) and James La Guma (general secretary). FNETU was initially quite active, but the depression of 1929 and involvement in the internal conflicts of the CP diluted its power and in 1953 the organisation disbanded.[77]

In November 1942, 29 black trade unions in Johannesburg came together to form the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU). This was a co-ordinating body established for the express purpose of obtaining the full statutory recognition of black unions and was to dominate the black trade union movement for the next decade. JB Marks, chairman of the African Mineworker's Union (AMWU) and a member of both the CP and the ANC, was to become one of its presidents.[78] In 1946, due to post-war food shortages and

low wages, the AMWU, with the consent of the CNETU, called a general strike. An estimated 70 000 strikers stopped work in at least twelve mines. The strike was eventually crushed by police with the result of fatally weakening the CNETU. In addition, government action against the CP banned many of the organisation's leaders and in 1953 CNETU finally split up.[79]

However, Luckhardt and Wall argue that the strike forged a new alliance in progressive circles with greater emphasis on mass mobilisation and mass action. For the first time in many years black trade unionists came in touch with ANC leaders. With the repressions against and decline of black trade unions following the strike, many trade unionists moved into key positions in the ANC and contributed to the radicalisation of the latter.[80]

In March 1955, a federation of 19 largely black trade unions, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed. It comprised some of the radical and non-radical trade unions of the disbanded SAT & LC together with the black unions of the latter in addition to the black unions of the CNETU. Its main fields of union activity lay in manufacturing, food processing and services. SACTU maintained close political links with resistance movements, especially the ANC, to the extent that the leadership of the two organisations overlapped. SACTU was active in promoting a political role for trade unions such as fighting racial discrimination. However, due to persecution under the Suppression of Communism Act and the 1962 Sabotage Act, banning orders were served on all its leaders. Despite the fact that it was never actually banned inside the country, SACTU by the middle of the 1960's lost its presence in South Africa.[81]

In what can be regarded as a watershed event in the history of the black labour movement that also heralded the renaissance of black trade union organisation in South Africa, were the mass Durban strikes of 1973.[82] These widespread strikes over low wages, mounting unemployment and poverty, involved an estimated 60 000 to 100 000 black employees. The strikes erupted in Durban and spread to other centres. Industry was brought to a near standstill. The strikers made no fixed demands, but the actions were indicative of general dissatisfaction among black employees. For the first time the real power of

black workers was demonstrated. It proved that even without the backing of any formal organisation, worker action was able to bring pressure to bear on a labour issue as well as the necessity to accommodate their interests within the industrial relations system.[83] The institutionalised racial separatism entrenched in labour structures and the 1973 strike waves prepared the ground for the unprecedented growth of a new brand of trade unionism in the history of the South African labour movement. The work stoppages signalled the evolution of a profound consciousness of power among the black working masses.[84]

By 1976 it had become obvious that the government had not solved the problem of black worker militancy. Pressured by the political consequences of the 1976 Soweto student uprisings, combined with the threat of sanctions and disinvestment the government in 1977 appointed a commission of enquiry into labour legislation, commonly known as the Wiehahn Commission. Among others, the most outstanding recommendations which the government accepted and implemented were the registration of black trade unions and the abolition of statutory job reservation. Although the registration of black trade unions was meant as a way of controlling working class organisation, the interests of black employees have gained prominence. Trade union growth has coincided with the mushrooming of protest movements. Hence trade unions, as the major representatives of the black working class, have increasingly found themselves in a politically prominent position.[85]

Encouraged by the post-Wiehahn spirit of change the growth of black unions since the late 1970's has created a diverse and fluid labour movement in South Africa. The best organised of the independent union federations at that stage was the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), founded in April 1979 on the principles of non-racialism and industrial unionism. It was the first non-racial trade union federation (representing mainly black workers) since the decline of SACTU in the early 1960's. The establishment of FOSATU was evidence of the growing confidence of the black unions. By the 1980's the black trade union movement in South Africa was the fastest growing movement in the world. FOSATU's nine affiliated unions were particularly strong in the motor, metal, food, transport, textile, chemical and paper industries. The unions

in this federation provided the major impetus for the later formation of COSATU.[86]

Although recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission, such as full trade union rights to black workers, were implemented with the promulgation of the 1981 Labour Relations Act, such reforms were not consistent with political, economic and social divisions in the wider society. Thus, conflict between state and labour continued to escalate. It was argued that black workers now had industrial citizenship but no political rights. The trade union movement, as the only black opposition group accorded some legitimacy through the Labour Relations Act moved strongly to the forefront of the political struggle. The strategy of the stayaway was to be successfully used to maintain pressure on the government for transformation. The ability of trade unions to orchestrate the labour and consumer power of their members became a major tactic in the political struggle.[87]

After four years of planning[88] the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), was launched in November 1985 in Durban during the height of political unrest, such as a State of Emergency and widespread rebellion in the black townships. Its formation introduced a new dynamic into political unionism in South Africa. The 33 unions which amalgamated, comprised the old FOSATU affiliates and a large number of independent unions. The increasingly important (black) National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which broke away from the second largest trade union grouping, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), also affiliated. At its inception COSATU had a total membership of 450 000.[89] According to Denis MacShane the move from a powerless, atomised working class in 1970 to the 450 000 strong COSATU Federation and the successful organisation and militancy of workers in key industrial and service sectors, is a remarkable success story for working class organisation anywhere in the world.[90]

COSATU set itself a dual economic and political role and identified itself with the political problems which affected its members' lives from the outset. Resolutions passed at its inaugural conference supported disinvestment and sanctions against the government, called for the termination of the State of

Emergency, the unconditional release of all political prisoners and detainees, etc. It also espoused a pro-socialist stance and announced its intention of becoming a pivot of the struggle against apartheid and capitalism.[91]

The community based unions which entered COSATU brought with them a strong tradition of support for the ANC.[92] At a meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, in April 1986, COSATU issued a joint statement with the ANC, accepting the latter as the leading force in the liberation struggle of which COSATU was deemed an integral part. Internally COSATU linked up with the United Democratic Front (UDF) for national campaigns.[93] Founded in 1983 the UDF grew out of the discrediting of the state sponsored black urban councils and the collapse of black municipal government.[94]

In 1986 COSATU and the UDF stepped up their joint industrial action. A May Day stayaway was called that was supported by more than 1,5 million people countrywide.[95] During 1987 COSATU saw its tasks as building mass united action by mobilising workers around workplace issues. The major industry-wide strikes of that year were partly an attempt to demonstrate that, despite the State of Emergency, and police action against the liberation movement, black people were still able to mobilise. In the same year COSATU endorsed the Freedom Charter (a document accepted in 1955 by a multi-racial alliance that proclaimed a unitary, democratic South Africa with universal suffrage, human rights and containing elements of a mixed economy socialism). This was an important indication of the federation's identification with the broad anti-apartheid alliance, led by the ANC. COSATU and the UDF also joined together in calling two days of protest to coincide with the all-white election in May 1987. At least 2,5 million people responded.[96]

In 1988 the government passed the Labour Relations Amendment Act that was seen by trade unions as a serious attempt to curb their powers and rights, such as restrictions on the right to strike. COSATU therefore mounted a strong well-supported mass action campaign against the Act including a three-day stayaway.[97] In 1989 COSATU acted on behalf of an alliance of anti-apartheid groups, known as the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), and called on

various opponents of the government to support a campaign of defiance against apartheid.[98]

However, the turning point for COSATU and other parties in the liberation struggle occurred in February 1990 when FW de Klerk unbanned political organisations such as the ANC, PAC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Following these developments thousands of exiles returned to South Africa, among others, many formerly banned SACTU cadres. In March, therefore, SACTU was dissolved and its remnants integrated into COSATU. In addition, COSATU entered into negotiations with the ANC and the SACP aiming at formalising their strategic alliance and culminating in a formally constituted new tripartite alliance in May 1990. What emerged from these talks was a formidable consolidated political power block that would successfully engage the government in negotiations for a new constitutional dispensation.[99]

In the run up to South Africa's first democratic general election in April 1994, the tripartite alliance very effectively put pressure on the government by alternating negotiations for mass action. Being the alliance's most organised section COSATU called a general strike in August 1992 as part of the mass action campaign – described as the largest stayaway in South African history.[100] Prior to the 1994 general election the ANC agreed in principle to adopt COSATU's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in return for COSATU's support in the elections. The programme addressed a wide range of issues, including the democratisation of the state, human resource development, rights of workers, etc. Thus the RDP formed the basis of the ANC's election manifesto and through the programme COSATU has managed to influence the agenda of the country's transition generally.[101]

The support of COSATU for the ANC in the election was a significant aspect of the overwhelming ANC victory and a key determinant of the election result. COSATU contributed indispensable organisational capacity in devoting personnel and resources to the election campaign, doing voter education and canvassing voters for an ANC victory. A large number of COSATU unionists also secured parliamentary seats and key positions in government departments and in cabinet positions, with major influence over economic policy and

development.[102] The new government was widely perceived as being pro-labour – in stark contrast to previous governments which held a marked business bias. This was reinforced by COSATU's continued alliance with the ANC and SACP and several meetings between the new labour ministry and COSATU as well as president Mandela and COSATU leaders.[103]

D. CONCLUSION

The formation and deployment of South Africa's divided working class were determined by various factors. The origins of trade unionism in South Africa were influenced and actually conceptualised on the lines of the British workshop and British trade union traditions. Initially, these influences were instrumental in establishing a craft union variant of trade unionism that was elitist and exclusivist, concerned primarily to protect skilled (white) workers from competition with unskilled (black) workers. Thus, a small white labour aristocracy emerged in contrast to a vast unorganised black proletariat, which also determined the political character of the labour movement in general. Therefore, the historic racial divisions within the South African labour movement were to a great extent determined by colour, although revisionist historians, such as Johnstone, Davies and Yudelman, have convincingly argued that capital and state also significantly influenced the genesis of these divisions.

The adverse character of the British model of industrial relations and industrial unionism, together with socialism, also profoundly influenced the nature of South African trade unionism. Industrial unionism and socialism introduced an element of militancy into the working class. Therefore, militant industrial action was pursued by both black and white sections of the trade union movement in an effort to achieve a fair deal for labour. Socialists and communists were also instrumental in forging black trade unionism and exercised a considerable influence on its political nature.

Although there is no clear consensus on this issue, some historians tend to periodise 20th century South African history that dominated the course of events since unification broadly into three economic categories: the era of international "imperialist" mining capital, 1910-1924; the era of agricultural

and manufacturing industry "national" capital, 1924-1970; and the era of economic deterioration and the internationalisation of apartheid, 1970 – 1994.[104] In at least two of these eras the labour movement played a major role. The white working class' militant struggles were rewarded in 1924 when white workers' rights were secured, whereafter white influence in labour politics and trade union issues steadily diminished. The black working class re-emerged since the 1970's, as a new dynamic political force that played an indispensable part in the eventual victory of the liberation struggle and the political transformation of the South African state. Even in the dormant era of 1924-1970, despite setbacks, black trade unionism steadily grew in militancy and progressed in consolidating its structures. Therefore, in the case of South African labour history the 20th century can indeed be regarded as the century of the labour movement.

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[104] See for instance RH Davies, *op. cit.,* pp. 44-46, 160-162, 167-169; D Yudelman, *op. cit.,* pp. 263-288*;* JP Brits*, op. cit.,* pp. 176, 213-216, 262-263; TRH Davenport: *South Africa. A Modern History,* pp. 523, 530, 571-578.