

***Bakunin's Heirs in South Africa: race and revolutionary syndicalism
from the IWW to the International Socialist League, 1910-1921***

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Lucien van der Walt
Department of Sociology/ Sociology of Work Unit
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
PO Wits, 2050, South Africa
E-mail: vanderwaltl@social.wits.ac.za
Phone: +27+11 717-4441
Fax (Sociology Department): +27 +11 - 339-8163

Can we talk of the Cause of the Workers in which the cries of the most despairing and the claims of the most enslaved are spurned and disregarded? ... The new movement will break the bounds of Craft and race and sex. It will be founded on the rock of the meanest proletarian who toils for a master. It will be as wide as humanity. It will recognise no bounds of craft, no exclusions of colour.

The International, 3 December 1915, "The Wrath to Come"

Despite providing the foundation upon which the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was erected in June 1921, despite its substantial press and activism, despite its role in pioneering socialist activism and African trade unionism in southern Africa, despite, even, the substantial attention it attracted at the time from police, press and Parliament alike, the early revolutionary socialist movement in South Africa has attracted little scholarly attention.

The task of recording and interpreting the early history of the left has, instead, fallen largely to writers associated with the CPSA and its successor, the South African Communist Party (SACP), founded in 1953: from the 1940s onwards a number of writers associated with the CPSA and SACP - Brian Bunting (1975, 1981, 1996); R.K. Cope ([1940?] n.d.); Jeremy Cronin (1991, also see SACP 1991); Lionel Forman ([1959] 1992); "Lerumo" (Michael Harmel) (1971); Mbeki (1992); Eddie Roux [1944] 1993, [1948] 1978, 1970), and Jack and Ray Simons ([1965] 1983)- produced the first published histories of socialism in South Africa. It is possible to group these works together as the "Communist school" of South African socialist history, but it must also be noted that their views have become widely accepted, constituting the "common-sense" of most academic and popular references to the early socialist movement (for example, Drew 1996; Katz 1976, Legassick 1973; Musson 1989; Ntsebeza 1988; Pike 1985; van Duin 1990; Walshe 1970).

The paper will re-evaluate the South African left in the 1910s, taking issue with the key arguments of the Communist school regarding the early left, focussing upon two main groupings. The first is the network associated with *The Voice of Labour*, South Africa's first socialist weekly, founded in 1908, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary syndicalist union founded in 1910. The second group is the International Socialist League (ISL), which was founded in 1915, *The Voice of Labour* and the IWW having closed in 1912. The ISL published a weekly, *The International* and a range of pamphlets, formed in 1917 the Industrial Workers of Africa - the first African trade union- and other unions, and provided most CPSA members and leaders in 1921.

The views developed by the Communist school, and reflected in academic literature, rest upon four claims: that *The Voice of Labour* and the IWW lacked effective positions, and ignored or even pandered to racial conflict and divisions; that the ISL was, by contrast, a Marxist party whose political evolution logically culminated in the formation of the CPSA; and that the ISL, nonetheless, also ignored or collaborated in racial oppression. Drawing on primary sources, it will be demonstrated, however, that the *Voice of Labour* became dominated by revolutionary syndicalist ideas, and that Marxism was marginal in its discourse; that the IWW was the outgrowth of this process; and that the ISL, was revolutionary syndicalist and anti-statist in orientation, rather than classical Marxist. In other words, the predominant view in the early left was that revolutionary trade unions should overthrow capitalism and the State, replacing both with workers' self-management of the economy. This "libertarian socialism, " centred upon

proletarian self-activity, anti-authoritarianism and anti-statism, had little in common with the “political socialism” of classical Marxism and social-democracy, which insisted that political parties be built to take State power for socialist purposes (Thorpe 1989: 3). That is, the early South African left were heirs of Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), the Russian anarchist who formulated the core ideas of revolutionary syndicalism, rather than scions of Karl Marx, with whom Bakunin clashed in the International Workingmen’s Association (1864-1877).

Secondly, it will be demonstrated that *The Voice of Labour* provided a forum in which socialists began to articulate a political position opposed to racial segregation and racial inequality, that the IWW and the ISL shared and developed this position, articulating the need for working class unity across skill and race divisions to form of integrated revolutionary unions capable of opposing the State and capital, *and* resisting racial laws. Rather than pandering to White racism or ignoring racial inequalities, these groups applied internationalism to South Africa, a commitment that underpinned the formation of several independent unions for workers of colour under ISL aegis, notably the Industrial Workers of Africa.

Revolutionary Syndicalism: an international movement

Revolutionary syndicalism, Howell has argued, was a “significant radical movement,” whose history has been “buried under subsequent defeats and political orthodoxies” (Howell 2000: 30). As an organised movement and set of ideas it rested upon the proposition that self-organised unions, uniting workers on industrial and regional lines, could *both* struggle for immediate working-class demands *and* overthrow capitalism and the State through a revolutionary general strike. The union structures would subsequently provide the basis for workers’ self-management in agriculture and industry, the framework of the stateless socialism to which revolutionary syndicalists aspired.

The “first anticipations of syndicalist ideas may be found in the discussions and resolutions of the First International between 1868 and 1872 and especially in those of its Bakuninist sections between 1872 and 1876,” as Lorwin (1930) noted. Prior to 1895, unions on the revolutionary syndicalist model emerged with the Spanish Regional Federation of 1871 (Bookchin 1977: 132, 137), the Central Labour Union associated with the Haymarket anarchists in the United States in 1884 (Avrich 1984: 73), and the Workers’ Alliance in Cuba in 1887 (Casanovas 1994, 8, 300-302, 330-341, 366-7). As Thorpe argues, revolutionary syndicalists were “the anarchist current within the workers’ movement” of the late nineteenth-century and the first quarter of the twentieth, and in revolutionary syndicalism “the non-political tradition of socialism deriving from the libertarian wing of the First International” found “its most powerful form of expression” (Thorpe 1989: xiii-xiv). Revolutionary syndicalism cannot, however, be conflated with anarchism – not all anarchists accepted it, some syndicalists rejected the “anarchist” label – and is best understood as an anarchist *strategy* at odds with the political socialism exemplified by the Labour and Socialist international (1889-1914) and the Communist International (1919-1943).

If revolutionary syndicalism had a lengthy and anarchist pedigree, however, it was mainly from 1895 onwards, with the formation of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in France, that it became a powerful force in international labour. In the “glorious period” of the movement, the 1890s to the 1920s (Beyer-Arnesen 1997-1998: 20) anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists influenced unions in countries as varied as Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Uruguay and Venezuela (see, *inter alia*, Marshall

1994; Nettlau [1934], 1996; Rocker [1938] 1989; Thorpe 1989; van der Linden and Thorpe, 1990). In several cases - notably Argentine, Brazil, Cuba, Portugal, Mexico, the Netherlands, Uruguay, and to a lesser extent, France and Spain – revolutionary syndicalism dominated the largest union centres (see Bayerlein and van der Linden 1990; Casanovas 1994; Dulles 1973; Gordon 1978; Hart 1978; Woodcock 1975: 412-3; Yoast 1975). Its influence upon the socialist movement in this period was also profound: as Hobsbawm (1993: 72-3) comments,

... in 1905-1914, the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism ...

South Africa's Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Socialism

The first active anarchist in South Africa was Henry Glasse, an English emigrant who maintained contact with the London anarchist circles associated with Peter Kropotkin's *Freedom*. Glasse, who translated Kropotkin's *The Place of Anarchism in Socialistic Evolution* and *Expropriation*, settled in Port Elizabeth in the 1880s (Nettlau 1996: 262; Oliver 1983: 46, 70). He acted as a local distributor of anarchist writings (Glasse 1896; Glasse, 1900) and *Freedom* correspondent. In 1901, Glasse's *Socialism the Remedy*, based on a lecture at the Mechanic's Institute in Port Elizabeth, was published by Freedom Press (Glasse 1901). Glasse also wrote *The Superstition of Government*, published along with Kropotkin's *Organised Vengeance, Called "Justice"* in 1902 (Kropotkin/ Glass 1902).

Both works by Glasse were fairly abstract restatements of the anarchist case, stressing the "watchword of the Social Revolution ... 'Peasant, seize the land; workman, seize the factory'" (Glasse 1901: 11), but did not outline an anarchist strategy for South Africa, where racial divisions hampered working-class organisation and brought self-management into question. When the country's industrial revolution followed gold discoveries in 1886, South Africa suddenly became one of the "focal points of capitalistic activity in the world economy" (Bransky 1974: 1).

Vast urban areas emerged, notably Kimberley, and the Witwatersrand complex centred on Johannesburg, and ranging from Carletonville on the far West Rand, through Randfontein, Krugersdorp, and Roodepoort, and then to Germiston, Boksburg, Benoni, Brakpan and Springs on the East Rand. In 1886, Johannesburg had 3,000 prospectors; ten years later, it was a city of 100,000, and by 1913, 250,000 (Krut 1988: 136). Massive capital investments underpinned the rapid emergence of a deep-mining sector, which drew in hundreds of thousands of workers from across southern Africa, North America, Europe and Australia. The mines and cities in turn spurred local manufacturing, agricultural commercialisation, railway networks, and the creation of a unified capitalist State in 1910 by the British Empire, the Union of South Africa. The take-over of remaining independent African chiefdoms - the Zulu and Pedi in 1879, Bechuanaland in 1885, and the foundation of Rhodesia in 1890 – was followed by the conquest of the Afrikaner Republics in 1902 and Swaziland's protectorate status.

A partial process of African proletarianisation began on a scale unmatched elsewhere in Africa: in the early twentieth-century, the typical African worker, forced into wage labour by taxes and loss of land, was a male migrant labourer who completed a contract before returning to his rural home. This system, in combination with the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911, which criminalized breaches of labour contracts, pass controls, housing in tightly regulated mining compounds, and a

monopsonic labour recruitment system, all held African wages at a low level and helped prevent unionisation. So too did the dual consciousness fostered by migrant status. African workers were both proletarian *and* peasant; their aspirations were often to escape, rather than reform, wage labour; and resistance to proletarianisation itself continued to be a potent issue. One of the largest African mobilisations before the 1913 African mineworkers' strike was the armed 1906 "Bambatha Rebellion" by a Zulu clan against a new poll tax. No African trade union existed before 1917, although there were, by 1913, 195,000 Africans on the mines, mainly labourers, 37,000 in domestic service and 6,000 in factories, workshops and warehouses (Hobart Houghton 1964: 141; Hirson 1995: 106, 116).

In addition to African workers, the new urban areas had small communities of Coloured, Indian, and White workers. Concentrated in the Cape, most Coloureds were farm workers and unskilled labourers, although there was also an artisanal layer; the Indians, concentrated in Natal, engaged in farming, trade, manufacturing and clerical work. In 1913, of the 38,500 White workers on the Witwatersrand, 22,000 worked on mines, 4,500 on the railways, and the remainder in building, tramways, printing, electricity and other industries (Hobart Houghton 1964: 141; Hirson 1995: 106, 116). Many were tradesmen and professional miners, although there was a substantial local White working-class drawn from proletarianised Afrikaners: some found mine employment, but most formed an unskilled, underemployed "poor White" population estimated at 200,000 in the early 1920s. Initially most White miners were immigrants, with up to 85 percent British-born in the 1890s (Katz 1994: 65).

To an important degree, then, occupational distinctions amongst White workers coincided with nationality, and only from 1907 onwards did Afrikaners enter mine labour in significant numbers.

Racial divisions were even deeper. Skill and authority on the mines overlapped with race, and in the 1890s and early 1900s, wages for White professional miners and some tradesmen were often double those of comparable categories in other mining regions, whilst White miners often earned five times more than Africans (Katz 1994: 67, 75-7). Further, whilst African workers were generally male, migrant, unfree, and voteless, Whites were fully proletarianised, urbanised free labour, and exercised manhood suffrage from 1907. The poor Whites' conditions closely approximated those of Africans, and they often lived in multiracial slums, but, lacking skilled trades, they found themselves in bitter competition with the unfree Africans for unskilled work. White tradesmen and miners also keenly felt the threat of replacement by Africans, an issue central to miners' strikes in 1907, 1913, and 1922. Further, capitalist relations were based upon colonial domination, and Africans often regarded their subordinate status as symptomatic of national subjugation, whilst Whites tended to regard Africans as a dangerous inferior race from which paroxysms of violence were to be feared.

The Emergence of Socialism in South Africa and the Rise of Revolutionary Syndicalism

It is not surprising that – whilst working conditions were poor overall, the ravages of silicosis cut a swathe upon both African and White in the early years ((Katz 1994: 67, 75-7), and the suppression of strikes by African workers found its counterpart in the repression of the White labour in 1913, 1914 and 1922 – working class movements were profoundly racialised. When trade unionism emerged in the 1880s, it was largely an affair of White tradesmen, dominated by a "White labourite" tradition similar to that of mainstream Australian labour, and racially exclusive: faced with replacement by unfree Africans, the unions advocated job colour bars, social segregation, and barred Africans from membership (Katz 1976: 23-4). These demands were

reflected in the union-backed South African Labour Party (SALP), founded in 1910, which won six out of 121 parliamentary seats that year (SALP [1910] 1960: 73).

Nonetheless, a minority of White workers and intellectuals, particularly immigrants, in Cape Town, Kimberley, Durban and the Witwatersrand, adopted socialist views at odds with those of the White labour movement. Glasse was symptomatic of a broader trend: Italian, German, Irish, Jewish, Scottish and, to a lesser extent, English, immigrants brought with them radical European labour traditions, including anarchism, revolutionary syndicalism and classical Marxism (Johns 1995: 24-30), and distributed foreign publications, as did Glasse, and J.T. Bain, a Scottish fitter and trade unionist who distributed *The Clarion* from the 1890s (Johns 1995: 25).

Early socialist groups reflected this radical diversity. The Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the first twentieth-century socialist group, was founded in Cape Town in 1904 by Wilfred Harrison (later, first secretary of the CPSA), a "Philosophical Anarchist" who expounded Kropotkin to whites and Coloureds (Boydell, n.d.: vii-xiv; Harrison n.d.: 119). Its members included Marxists, "anarchists, reform socialists," and "guild socialists" (Johns 1995: 31). *The Voice of Labour*, South Africa's first socialist weekly: founded in Johannesburg by the socialist fitter Archie Crawford and activist Mary Fitzgerald, both Irish, provided a forum for "the leading Socialists of Durban, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg" (*The Voice of Labour*, hereafter "*VOL*," 14/8/1909), among them those of "our veteran comrade" Glasse (26/1/1912b, 15/7/1910).

After 1909 revolutionary syndicalism came to dominate the early left. As Cope notes (n.d.: 208),

In common with the Labour movement elsewhere in the world, South Africa passed through a period of vigorous reaction against politics on the working-class front ... The disillusion of the workers' movement in the value of parliamentary reform was now spreading from Europe, from Britain, America, Australia and New Zealand ... From America came the ringing call to action of ... the IWW, while from France was spreading an enthusiasm for the doctrines of the revolutionary Syndicalists ...

Founded in the United States in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was the main expression of revolutionary syndicalism within the English-speaking world, and aimed to organise all workers into "One Big Union" for the "One Big Strike." It developed into an international movement, with functioning unions in Canada, Chile, Mexico, Norway and Peru, an international seafarers' union, and adherents in Australia, Britain, Ireland, and New Zealand and elsewhere. The arrival of English revolutionary syndicalist Tom Mann in February 1910 provided further impetus. Mann spent two months in South Africa, visiting Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria, preaching the "gospel ... of a complete change of society" and the "perfected system industrial organisation to make this possible," urging "an amalgamation of the unions on the basis of industrial unionism" (Mann, [1923] 1967: 245, 247).

The Voice Of Labour, the IWW and the Socialist Labour Party, 1910-1913

From 1910 onwards, the pages of *The Voice of Labour* became dominated by IWW ideas, and in June 1910 an IWW union was established in Johannesburg through the take-over of an older "Industrial Workers Union" founded after Mann's visit. It organised two spectacular strikes by tramway workers in 1911 (Katz 1978; Visser 1987); held meetings in Pretoria amongst railway workers, formed a "Pretoria Local" and set up a Durban section (*VOL*, 24/11/1911a, 24/11/1911b,

1/12/1911b, 14/6/1912); the IWW also initially included a Bootmakers' Association, a Bakers' and Confectioners' Society, and a Tailors' Society (Katz 1978). In March 1910, a smaller Socialist Labour Party advocating a variant of IWW ideas was also been founded in Johannesburg. It concentrated on paper sales, discussions, and Sunday meetings at the Johannesburg Market Square, and was quite sectarian towards the IWW, which also rallied at the Square.

The most prominent IWW figure was Andrew Dunbar, a giant blacksmith born in Scotland in 1879, and who arrived in South Africa in 1906 and in 1909 led a strike of 2,500 workers on the Natal railways (Simons 1983: 150). Also central was Tom Glynn, a soldier in the Anglo-Boer War who left South Africa in 1907, returned in 1910 from New Zealand and who worked as a motorman on the Johannesburg tramways (Burgmann 1996: 36, 77, 88, 207). Socialist Labour Party adherents included veteran Jewish radical, Israel Israelstam, builder C.B. Tyler, as well as Ralph Rabb, Jock Campbell, John Campbell (no relation), J.M. Gibson, W. Reid and Philip R. Roux (Cope n.d.: 82; Roux 1970: 6-7).

In a speech at the Market Square in 1910 Glynn set out the differences "between the socialism of the industrial unionist and other socialisms" (*Solidarity*, 1/10/1910). Whereas "other socialisms" were merely propagandistic, revolutionary unionism aimed to organise and educate the working-class for revolution, "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." All-inclusive industrial organisation was also vital for workplace action "here and now" for better conditions, as opposed to divisive craft unionism and ineffective "so called labour politicians." "They are getting on the right track down in the Southern Hemisphere," commented the United States' IWW paper *Solidarity*. The Socialist Labour Party's views were not dissimilar, but they also supported the use of electoral platforms; their pieces, too, appeared in *The Voice of Labour*.

The Voice of Labour and the IWW have been castigated by the Simons, who maintain the socialists associated with *The Voice of Labour* ignored racial questions or pandered to White chauvinism (Simons 1983: 155). This analysis has been uncritically reproduced in other discussions of the IWW, with Katz, for instance, citing the Simons as substantiation for her own, similar claims (Katz 1976: 273, citing Simons 1983: 139-140). Van Duin, drawing on the Simons and Katz, concludes that the local IWW was influenced by a "European superiority-complex," a "categorical imperative for status inequality" (van Duin 1990: 625, 627, 645). Even van der Linden's authoritative survey of revolutionary syndicalism does not escape the Simons' legacy: referring to van Duin, he singles out the local IWW as a possible exception to the generally anti-racist record of syndicalism (van der Linden 1998: 14-15).

A closer examination of the record reveals, however, a rather different picture. *The Voice of Labour* was undoubtedly an eclectic paper, but Crawford, its first editor, opposed the racism endemic in White labour. Even the Simons note he put forward a resolution at the 1909 SALP preparation conference that the new party reject any policy based on the colour bar (Simons 1983: 143), but they do not allow this to interfere with their claims elsewhere that Crawford "evaded the colour issue," and failed to criticise the South African Labour Party for "adopting White supremacy policies" (Simons 1983: 141, 144, 145, 154). It is, of course, quite true that some early correspondents with the paper were less sanguine, and in a heated debate on the "colour question" in 1909 denied the admissibility of Africans to socialist organisations, the franchise, and the "Socialist State" (VOL 31/7/1909a, 21/8/1909, 13/11/1909, 11/12/1909, 18/12/1909). However, Crawford disputed their views, replying, to a correspondent who lambasted *The Voice of Labour's* "strenuous advocacy of the social and political equality of black and White" (VOL 31/7/1909b),

that socialist ethics recognised no colour bar, and could countenance no racial restrictions on political rights (*VOL* 31/7/1909b):

I am asked for an explanation of my attitude on the Colour Question. An explanation is simple. I am a Socialist ... Socialism ... knows no Race, colour or creed. Socialism passes over geographic boundaries and transcends all lines, which some diseased organs of society seek -in the propagation of its own disease- to draw between Races and colours ... Regarding the Coloured franchise ... I do emphatically protest against the extreme political incapacity and want of perception which leads them ["labour politicians and others"] to deny the privileges of citizenship even unto one Coloured man, irrespective of his ability, morality or extraction.

Upbraided by Crawford, the conservatives also came under fire from anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist correspondents. Glasse, who called on the paper to give preference to "direct action ... over ... Parliamentary politics" – which acts to "chill and paralyse natural energy and initiative" – praised the paper for its editorial position "in regard to the native and coloured question," arguing that race issues were used to divide workers in the interests of the capitalists: "For a White worker in this South Africa to pretend he can successfully fight his battle independent of the coloured wage slaves – the vast majority – is, to my mind, simply idiocy" (*VOL* 26/01/1912b).

"Proletarian," the Cape Town-based revolutionary syndicalist who edited the paper from late 1910 to early 1912, argued it was inevitable that the African workers had begun to organise for "mutual protection." Unlike White craft unionists, "the hitherto unorganised natives" had won "a couple of strikes," precisely because they had "the commonsense to practice working class solidarity" the craft unionists lacked. "Sooner or later they will revolt against wage slavery" and the "only logical thing for white slaves to do is to throw in their lot with the black wage slave in a common assault on the capitalist system" ((*VOL* 27/10/1911). He stressed the common interests of both sets of workers: "if the natives are crushed the whites will go down with them," the "stress of industrial competition" compelling the White workers to "accept the same conditions of labour as their black brethren." Further, a "native rising" would be "wholly justified" given the "the cruel exploitation of South African natives by farmers, mining magnates and factory owners" (*VOL* 1/11/1911a). It should receive the "sympathy and support of every white wage-slave." "Proletarian" went on to condemn the "grotesque" "attitude of superiority" of the "'aristocrats' of labour" to the coloured races (*VOL* 27/11/1911).

What did this mean in practical terms? Both the local IWW and Socialist Labour Party advocated non-racial revolutionary industrial unions. Jock Campbell,¹ the leader of the Socialist Labour Party, an Irishman from the Clydeside in Scotland, has the distinction of being the "first socialist to make propaganda amongst the African workers," advocating "unity among all wage slaves, regardless of colour" (Cope n.d.: 93; Johns 1995: p. 32).² Such contacts are likely to have taken place at the meetings in the Market Square.³ The Industrial Workers Union, predecessor of the IWW, described itself as a "class-conscious revolutionary organisation embracing all workers regardless of craft, race or colour" (*VOL* 22/7/1910 quoted in Philips 1976: 123), whilst the IWW proper sought to "fight the class war with the aid of all workers, whether efficient or inefficient, skilled or unskilled, white or black" (*VOL* 25/11/1910). Glynn retained this outlook after he left for Australia in 1911, where he became a leading advocate of the Australian IWW's opposition to the "White Australia" policy (Burgmann 1996: 36). The local IWW was the only union in pre-

1914 South Africa that placed absolutely no racial restrictions on membership, and the first labour union in South African history open to workers of all races. It was possibly the first such in Britain's African empire.

These libertarian pioneers also developed a working-class criticism of black nationalism. "Proletarian" was critical of the "small capitalist" nationalists, such as Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, leader of the African Political Organisation (APO), based amongst Coloureds: whilst Abdurahman opposed socialism, he was willing to lobby, and work with, the local "Dutch farmers" (VOL 27/10/1911). This "notwithstanding the fact, of which he is fully aware" that this class was "responsible for the notorious Masters and Servants Act" of 1911, used to suppress African and Coloured workers. In place of nationalism, he proposed internationalism: "an organisation of wage-workers, black and white, male and female, young and old" which would proclaim "a universal general strike preparatory to seizing and running the interests of South Africa, for the benefit of *workers* to the exclusion of *parasites*" (VOL 27/10/1911, emphasis in original). The influence of revolutionary syndicalism, and the manner it engaged the South African situation, bring into question the Communist school's claims that revolutionary syndicalism was only a "malady," a form of abstract "ultra-leftism" confined to a few sectarians (Cope n.d.: 206-8).

The International, the ISL, and the Industrial Workers of Africa

The ISL is presented by the Communist school as a radical Marxist organisation, whose political maturation led it to adopt Lenin's Communism: it was the "Communist nucleus" of "true socialists" (Dadoo 1981), launched and led by "revolutionary Marxists" (Cronin 1991: 9; SACP 1991: 6) and occupied with "tireless propaganda" (Roux 1978: 134) of the "the teachings of Karl Marx" (Mbeki 1992: 27). Nonetheless, the Communist school argues, the ISL lacked an adequate policy regarding racial discrimination.⁴

A certain inconsistency is, however, evident in these accounts, a disjuncture between data presented and political conclusions drawn. On the one hand, the ISL is said to have opposed racism and forged links with Africans, and numerous examples provided (Bunting 1975: 20; Bunting 1996: 11-2; Cronin 1991: 9; Forman 1992: 50-71; Lerumo 1971: 34-6; SACP 1991: 7). On the other, it is asserted the ISL ignored racial issues, and found "the national oppression of the majority of people in our country was not really very worthy of consideration" (Cronin 1991: 12). Thus, the Simons suggest that the ISL accepted segregation and colour bars (Simons 1983: 191-2), and Bunting, Lerumo and Roux claim most ISL members were unwilling to consider African workers' concerns (Bunting 1975: 19; Bunting 1996: 11-12; Lerumo 1971: 38-9; Roux 1978; Roux, 1993). Bunting, Cronin and Forman also claim the ISL focussed its attention on the organised White working-class, seeing it as the "vanguard" of the South African revolution (Bunting 1975: 17; Cronin 1991: 11; Forman 1993: 74-6).

Within academic studies, the two main lines of argument – the ISL's Marxist character, and its weakness on the racial question – have been generally accepted. The ISL appears as the "first Marxist orientated political organisation in the history of the South African labour movement" (Mantzaris 1988: 161; see also Johns 1995: 51-2; Ntsebeza 1988: 30), whilst the claim that it ignored or pandered to racism is widely repeated, mainly on the basis of citations from the Communist school (see, *inter alia*, Drew 1996: 16-7; Johns, 1995: 52; Legassick 1973: 3; Ntsebeza 1988: 30; Walshe 1970: 95-96, 169). Only two brief articles by Hirson (1993) and

Philips (1976) have suggested that that revolutionary syndicalism influenced the early left, including the ISL (Hirson 1993; Philips 1976), but both pieces lack detail regarding the ISL itself.

An examination of the ISL press, public meetings, and policies reveals a starkly different picture. The ISL was initially recruited from two main sources. Firstly, it secured the adherence of virtually all key IWW and the Socialist Labour Party activists after both groups, like *The Voice of Labour*, dissolved by 1913. Secondly, it drew on a radical left-wing faction that emerged within the SALP after the suppression of the 1913 White miner's general strike, and which was galvanised by opposition to the First World War that began in August 1914. Most were artisans or white-collar workers. W.H. "Bill" Andrews was born in Suffolk in 1870 and arrived in South Africa in 1893, where he became a leading member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers; in 1910 he was elected to parliament for the SALP (see Cope n.d.). David Ivon Jones was born in Wales in 1883, and came to South Africa for health reasons, and became involved in the White labour movement as a clerk (see Hirson 1995). Other activists included George Mason, a carpenter from England who worked on the mines, and T.P. Tinker, a skilled building worker and unionist. The exception was S.P. Bunting, an Oxford graduate from a middle-class English family, who operated a Johannesburg law practice (see Roux 1993).⁵

Organised as a "War on War League" within the SALP, the left-wing faction published the *War on War Gazette* to oppose the SALP majority's support for the war effort, but were decisively defeated at a special party conference held in August 1915. In protest, the members of the War on War League on the SALP management committee -including Andrews, the chair, Jones, the secretary, J.A. Clark, the vice-chair, and Gabriel Weinstock, the treasurer (Johns 1995: 46)-resigned and led a walk-out from the conference. The War on War League was reconstituted as the ISL in September 1915, its paper renamed *The International*, and it soon severed ties with the SALP (Ticktin 1969; *The International*, hereafter "*Int.*" 24/9/1915, 1/10/1915). A month later, the ISL ran its own candidates in the general elections, polling only 140 votes in total (Cope n.d.: 176; Johns 1995: 56). Its emerging positions clashed starkly with those of mainstream White labour. "I maintain," argued Andrews in his election manifesto, "that it is the imperative duty of the white workers to recognise their identity of interest with the native workers as against the common masters" (*Int.* 22/10/1915). The ISL never had more than few hundred members,⁶ mainly skilled immigrant workers from Britain and the United States, as well as Eastern European Jews (Mantzaris 1988). It established branches in Benoni, Durban, Germiston, Kimberley, Krugersdorp, Kimberley and Pretoria.

At its first congress on the 9 January 1916 the ISL resolved that "That we encourage the organisation of the workers on industrial or class lines, irrespective of race, colour or creed, as the most effective means of providing the necessary force for the emancipation of the workers" (*Int.* 7/1/1916, 14/1/1916). This was reaffirmed at the 1917 congress, where the ISL aims were defined thus: "To propagate the principles of International Socialism, Industrial Unionism and Anti-Militarism, and to maintain and strengthen International Working-Class organisation" (*Int.* 19/1/1917). In 1918, the "Promotion of Revolutionary Industrial Workers' Organisations" was added (*Int.* 11/1/1918).

That the ISL's "Industrial Unionism" was revolutionary syndicalist is clear. "The key to social regeneration ... to the new Socialist Commonwealth," argued *The International*, "is to be found in the organisation of a class conscious proletariat within the Industrial Union" (5/5/1916; cf. 4/8/1916), aiming at "the union of all workers along the lines of industry; not only as a force

behind their political demands, but as the embryo of that Socialist Commonwealth which ... must take the place of the present barbaric order" (*Int.* 11/2/1916, 24/3/1916a). "Socialism can only be brought about by *all the workers* coming together on the industrial field to take the machinery of production into their own hands and working it for the good of all" (*Int.* 16/6/1916a, emphasis in original). Both armed insurrection and parliamentary activity "betray the workers, and lead them eventually in despair to death on the barricades" (5/5/1916). Parliament's function was "to regulate and adjust the Capitalist system, and to legislate the necessary violence for its preservation" (*Int.* 21/1/1916), and the State was an "engine of class tyranny" (*Int.* 21/9/1917). Increased State control of the economy was just "State Serfdom" run by "officials in uniforms and brass buttons," "State Capitalism imposed from above" (see *Int.* 8/12/1916, 25/2/1916b, 24/3/1916b, 3/11/1916, 2/3/1917, 27/4/1917, 16/6/1916b, 21/7/1916, 17/11/1916, 16/8/1918; *contra.* Ntsebeza 1988: 32).

Organised industrially, working-class could effect a relatively peaceful social revolution, not through "non-resistance nor in resort to violence" but through the "resistance of the Industrial Union" (*Int.* 26/5/1916), and industry would be "administered ... democratically by the workers themselves ... along the lines of their particular industry" (*Int.* 21/1/1916). The socialist commonwealth would have "no room for government, as only slaves require to be kept in subjection; no room for laws, as no restriction will be required in a society of social equals; no soldiers or policemen, who are only required to enforce class made rules" (*Int.* 1/6/1917a; cf. 1/6/1917b, 14/6/1918). The ISL stood electoral candidates, but mainly as a "method of propaganda" and gauging popular support, not to institute reforms (*Int.* 20/10/1916). From the start, the ISL opposed to racial prejudice, segregation and "scientific racism." The fourth issue of *Int.* in 1915 stated unequivocally that (1/10/1915),

... 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 it gives us untrammelled freedom to deal, regardless of political fortunes, with the great and fascinating problem of the Native. If the League deal resolutely in consonance with Socialist principles with the native question, it will succeed in shaking South African capitalism to its foundations ... Not until we free the native can we hope to free the white ...

At its January 1916 conference, the ISL adopted a "Petition of Native Rights" which stated, *inter alia*, "the emancipation of the working-class *requires* the abolition of all forms of native indenture, compound and passport systems; and the lifting of the native worker to the political and industrial status of the white" (*Int.* 14/1/1916, emphasis mine). In 1917, the *International* ran a series of articles characterising biological racism as "pure poppycock": "Recent work in the study of the brain has disproven such 'biology'," wrote S.G. Rich, "Let us not *invent* biological facts to excuse our remissness in reaching the natives" (*Int.* 16/3/1917b, emphasis in original; 23/3/1917; also *Int.* 2/6/1916).

Science confirmed, "all the fundamental phenomena and capabilities of man are rooted in ... humanity which is Black, White and Brown" (*Int.* 9/2/1917). African workers were mainly illiterate, but so too were "the founders of the British Trade Union Movement" (*Int.* 7/4/1916). J.M. Gibson, formerly of the Socialist Labour Party argued that there were no clear divisions between the abilities of races, and insisted White workers "descend from the pedestal of race prejudice" and "cease to have an inflated idea of their own value as a superior race" (*Int.* 25/2/1916a). For "segregation is a policy of capitalism, not of the labour movement": it led to

disastrous disunity between workers and was nothing more than a cover for the extreme exploitation of African workers, hardly the protective policy the SALP claimed (*Int.* 2/6/1916).

The “Industrial Union” was “the root of all the activities of Labour, whether political, social or otherwise” (*Int.* 5/5/1916), the primary weapon of the working class that would fight for better working conditions, for workers’ self-management *and* around all issues that affected the class. This conception does not correspond with the perennial caricature of the syndicalism as apolitical economism: in the ISL conception, the “Industrial Union” was *the* vehicle of national liberation for Africans. The pass laws, an instrument “splendid for ‘profits,’ because they make the native labourer cheap and easy to handle,” could only be overthrown if the African workers organised industrially (*Int.* 19/10/1917b, emphasis added):

Once organised, these workers can bust-up any tyrannical law. Unorganised, these laws are iron bands. *Organise industrially*, they become worth no more than the paper rags they are written on.

Further, the interests of the African workers could only be realised by forming revolutionary, integrated, industrial unions to “fight capitalism of every colour” (*Int.* 19/10/1917a, 19/10/1917b). Black nationalists such as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) offered no solution: their nationalism undermined working class unity and defended capitalism. The party of the “native attorneys and parsons” (*Int.* 19/10/1917b), the “native property owner” (*Int.* 19/10/1917a), the “cuff and collar men” (Cope, n.d.: 212-3), the SANNC reduced racism to Afrikaner prejudice, appealed to the British Empire for help, and accepted the capitalist order.

The SALP was attacked for its racism, its middle-class pretensions and its role in misleading the White workers, the White craft unions for their “complete oblivion to the sufferings of the lower paid [and] unemployed white workers, mainly women” and for their “intolerant” attitude “towards the native wage slave.” “Slaves to a higher oligarchy, the white workers of South Africa themselves batten on a lower slave class, the native races” (*Int.* 3/1/2/1915). The policies of segregation were but a “puny breakwater” (*Int.* 16/2/1917, 23/2/1917) against an ongoing “combination of capital” into giant corporations and employers’ associations that would surely defeat the tiny and divided craft unions (*Int.* 9/8/1918) and level all, “skilled and unskilled, before the great lord of machinery” (*Int.* 3/3/1916; also 22/9/1916, 18/2/1916). The craft unions’ would pay for ignoring “the cries of the most despairing and the claims of the most enslaved” workers (*Int.* 3/12/1915), the Africans, because the employers would use cheap African labour to undermine the overall level of wages and working conditions.

Only the One Big Union could meet the combination of capital with an equally universal combination of labour (*Int.*, 22/9/1916, emphasis added):

The choice is either to seek an alliance with the middle class or with the bottom dogs of wage-labour. So long as the white worker looks on his fellow wage-slave, the native worker, as an object to be kicked, instead of a work-mate to be linked up industrially to help him fight his industrial battles, so long will the white worker be the fool of imperialist notions and alarms. The one follows the other.

The whole of the fight against capitalism is a fight with the prejudices and capitalist-engendered aversions of the workers. Conquer these and capitalism is conquered. While these remain, it is useless whining about the disunity of labour.

The job is to create among workers that feeling of unity with all those who labour for wages, irrespective of what pigment may have been injected by Nature into the labourer's skin, or what tools he may or may not have learnt to use. That is the only unity.

What was required was a "new movement" that would "recognise no bounds of craft, no exclusions of colour" (*Int.* 3/12/1915). "The man who talks about a Socialism which excludes nine-tenths of the workers is not being honest with himself" (*Int.* 16/6/1916a).

The ISL and union organisation

From 1916 the ISL established its policy "as one of solidarity with Africans as fellow workers in common struggle" (Forman 1992: 56), and by 1918, it had recruited a range of African, Coloured and Indian members – men such as T.W. Thibedi, Bernard Sigamoney, R.K. Moodley, and Johnny Gomas – and won the sympathy of some activists in the APO and SANNC. In February 1916, for example, the ISL hosted a meeting in Johannesburg against the 1913 Land Act (*Int.* 18/2/1916). The "first coming together in the Transvaal of white socialists and the African National Congress" (Forman 1992: 54), the meeting characterised the Act as a "barefaced attempt" to drive the African worker "cheap, helpless and unorganised, into the labour market ... ensuring to employers generally and particularly industrial employers, that most coveted plum of modern Imperialism, plentiful cheap labour" (*Int.* cited in Forman 1992: 54). Another meeting called for increased pay for both whites and Africans on the mines, equal pay for equal work, and the inclusion of the Africans in the Mine Workers Union (Gitsham and Trembath 1926: 159).

In March 1916, ISL trade unionist George Mason argued at a mixed meeting that socialists must organise African unions and merge these with White unions (*Int.* 7/4/1916). The meeting was told that the Masters and Servants Act could be "repealed by the strength of Trade Unionism." On 8 June 1916, the ISL hosted Robert Grendon of the SANNC at a meeting "with a large number of natives" present, where, to "boisterous approval" the trade union colour bar was condemned (*Int.* 9/6/1916). A July 1916 ISL meeting discussed the "barbarities to which the Indians in Natal were treated" (*Int.* 28/7/1916). On 9 March 1917, the ISL held a public protest against the Native Affairs Administration Bill, which resolved that the Bill was "designed to accelerate the manufacture of cheap labour and to keep the natives more than ever in the position of a serf" and "forebodes grave danger to the peace of South Africa." In 1918, the ISL held its May Day celebrations outside the Pilkington Hall in Ferreirastown, a Coloured area, the first time a May Day rally was "directed to non-European workers" (Forman 1992: 65-6).

From 1917 onwards, the organisation's attention shifted to "the great mass of the proletariat" which "happens in South Africa to be *black*, and therefore disenfranchised and socially outcast" (*Int.* 2/2/1917, emphasis in original). In September 1917 the ISL had to vacate its offices in the Johannesburg Trades Hall when management barred Africans from the facilities (Johns 1995: 75-6). The ISL's public meetings also faced disruption from White thugs, often drawn from returning soldiers, who evidently did not share the Communist school's thesis that the ISL was committed to the colour bar, segregation, and White supremacy. Its 1917 May Day rally, which included among its speakers Horatio Bud'Mbelle of the SANNC, was broken up by a mob, and its weekly public meetings came under regular attack from September that year (*Int.* 4/5/1917a, 4/5/1917b), a pattern that continued into 1919.

Prominent ISL members in the White unions, such as Andrews and Mason, sought to reform these bodies on non-racial revolutionary unionist lines (Johns 1995: 64-9), with little success. In August 1917, a committee involving ISL activists called for a conference in September 1917 "to discuss ways and means of urging the workers to unite and organise industrially so that they may be in a position to present a united front to the employing class, and eventually to take over the control of the industry" (Johns 1995: 66-8). Attended by forty-five workers –including three Africans – the conference elected a Manifesto Committee, which included one African, to draw up a manifesto for a convention for "the creation of a general industrial union embracing all industries ... organising the movement on revolutionary industrial lines." Although the Manifesto Committee's statement (see *Int.* 22/2/1918) was distributed at the South African Industrial Federation's December 1917 conference, only ISL members and several African activists attended the Easter 1918 revolutionary unionist gathering (Johns 1995: 67-8).

The ISL had more success organising its own revolutionary unions for African, Coloured and Indian workers; whilst these unions were organised along racial lines, the ISL hoped to amalgamate them into a new South African IWW. In March 1917, ISL activists launched an Indian Workers' Industrial Union "on the lines of the IWW" in Durban (*Int.* 3/8/1917; Mantzaris 1983). The union, organised by Gordon Lee of the ISL, and Bernard L.E. Sigamoney and R.K. Moodley, attracted workers in catering, docks, laundry, printing, and tobacco, and claimed to have mineworkers and sugar plantation workers (*Int.* 26/10/1917). Sigamoney, the most prominent Indian labour activist in 1910s Durban (Mantzaris 1983: 84), and Moodley both joined the ISL. Noting a "great awakening of industrial solidarity among the Coloured workers" in Kimberley, the ISL sent Sam Barlin to organise a Clothing Workers' Industrial Union, based amongst the several hundred mainly Coloured clothing workers; it was chaired by a Mr Davis, with Fred Pienaar as secretary, and 27 union members joined the ISL, including Johnny Gomas, later prominent in the CPSA (Musson 1989: 17-18; *Int.*, 19/1/2/1919). By 1919, the union had won shop steward recognition, the closed shop and higher wages, and established a section in Johannesburg (*Int.* 4/7/1919, 27/7/1919). Barlin also established a Horse Drivers' Union in Kimberley amongst Coloured workers, which struck in late 1919 for a 25 percent wage increase and minimum wage of £2 a month (*Int.* 2/1/1920).

Three months after launching the Indian Workers' Industrial Union the ISL advertised a meeting in Johannesburg to "discuss matters of common interest between white and native workers."⁷ The meeting, attended by 10 White ISL members and 20 Africans, was the first of a series of study groups in which Dunbar was very prominent, arguing the ISL wished to "make the natives who are the working-class of South Africa be organised and have rights as a white man" (Jali, 19/7/1917). He maintained, "natives should first of all have political rights so as to avoid pass laws, and then they will be able to strike for the other things" (Jali, 19/7/1917). Asked how, he echoed the *International*: "If the natives in the mines ... [are] ... in a Union, and strike," they will be able to force the Government to concede their demands. The government could not arrest all strikers, and strikers at large would be able to demand the release of prisoners. Similarly, the pass laws: "they can do it only [by] coming together and at the end of the month ... refuse to go and register their pass at the pass office" (Jali, 26/7/1917). The government could "not arrest the whole lot of them" and would have to "abolish the pass laws." African workers should then launch a wage strike across the Witwatersrand (Mtembu, 26/7/1917).

The study groups attracted dozens, including SANNC and APO activists, and on 27 September 1917, were transformed into an African union with an African committee (Jali, 27/9/1917). The

first union for Africans, it was “not a political organisation but an Industrial Body” (Johnstone 1979: 254) aiming at a giant union uniting *all* workers, although focussed on Africans. Initially named the “IWW,” it finally adopted a variant of the title – the “Industrial Workers of Africa” -in October (Moroosi, 11/10/1917).

The Industrial Workers of Africa began to build links with other organisations. It sought links with the Indian Workers’ Industrial Union (Jali, 27/9/1917), and held joint meetings with the SANNC’s provincial section, the Transvaal Native Congress (TNC) and the APO. In December 1917, two meetings were held with the APO and the TNC, and the “Industrial Workers put in good class war points,” and “... seemed to have a knack of 'riling' the T.N.C. 'respectables' beyond all patience” (*Int.* 4/1/1918). A meeting with the APO on union organising saw nine Industrial Workers elected to address the APO (Johns 1995: 73; Johnstone 1979: 258). Prominent Industrial Workers were also members of the TNC, and when a left-wing TNC faction emerged in 1918 (Bonner 1982) Industrial Workers Reuben Cetiwe, Hamilton Kraai and J.D. Ngojo were prominent (van der Walt 2000).

From 1915 to 1920 trade union numbers grew tenfold, from 10,538 to 135,140 (Cope n.d.: 200), and strikes increased as well. The ISL was blamed, and Prime Minister Louis Botha railed against socialists “going to the native kraals urging them to combine” (quoted in Simons 1983: 206). The ISL was not so powerful, but it did publicise and support the struggles. In June 1918, 152 African municipal sanitation workers were sentenced to hard labour for a wage strike, leading to widespread indignation and a TNC rally in Johannesburg on 10 June. The ISL and the Industrial Workers were speakers, and an Industrial Worker, “Mtota,” proposed a general strike to support the municipal workers to great acclaim (Bonner 1982: 291.). At a rally 12 days later, a joint TNC/ ISL/ Industrial Workers committee proposed a general strike on 1 July by African for the municipal workers’ release and a general wage increase (unnamed, 19/6/1918). Although the strike was cancelled, eight men were charged for “incitement to public violence,” including Bunting, Tinker, and H.C. Hanscombe of the ISL, Cetiwe, Kraai and Ngojo, and TNC moderates Mvabaza and D. Letanka (Forman 1992: 69), “the first time in South Africa” that “members of the European and Native races, in common cause united, were arrested and charged together for ... political activities” (Forman 1992: 59).

The Industrial Workers of Africa reorganised in Johannesburg by ISL member Thibedi, a teacher (*Int.* 13/9/1918, 28/2/1919), and, after a TNC anti-pass law campaign in March and April 1919, Cetiwe and Kraai (both prominent in this action) moved to Cape Town and organised an Industrial Workers section in Ndabeni and on the docks (Wickens 1974: 393). The local Industrial Socialist League – a split from the SDF that adopted the IWW platform (*Bolshevik* 2/1920), and organised a Sweet and Jam Workers’ Industrial Union amongst Coloureds in 1918 - supported their efforts (*Int.* 25/7/1919). In Johannesburg, meanwhile, the ISL raised funds for striking Coloured building workers (*Int.* 18/4/1919), bail for imprisoned Bloemfontein strike leader, Selby Msimang (*Int.* 7/3/ 1919, 2/5/1919, 9/5/1919), and secured a protest resolution from White workers: “That this meeting of workers protests in the strongest possible manner against the attempt made by the Orange Free State authorities to intimidate the native workers for seeking to better their conditions of life, by arresting and imprisoning their delegates or representatives” (*Rand Daily Mail* 3/3/ 1919, in Ulrich 1998: 8).

In Conclusion: Bakunin’s heirs, race and revolutionary syndicalism in South Africa

From the above discussion two points stand out. Firstly, the dominant tradition on the revolutionary left in the 1910s was revolutionary syndicalism. With the Russian Revolution,

classical Marxism gained a new influence, and in 1921 the SDF, ISL and Industrial Socialist League joined with other smaller groups to found the CPSA on the Communist International platform.

This development marked a sharp *break* with the syndicalist orientation of the left, a break obscured by the subsequent weight of Communist school historiography. Even so, well into 1921, articles in *The International* continued to promote revolutionary syndicalism, and, as Lerumo admits in the official SACP history, “syndicalist concepts remained within the CPSA for many years after its foundation; echoes of their approach and phraseology appear in many documents and journals” (1971: p. 40; also van der Walt 1999). Secondly, there is little support for the claim that the early left was oblivious to the racial question, or actively supported White supremacy. The ISL, in particular, developed a surprisingly sophisticated critique of racism and a revolutionary syndicalist solution, and influenced a wide range of activists of colour.

That this history has been so thoroughly lost, so thoroughly forgotten, is testament to the influence of the Communist school, and grounds for reconsideration of the pre-Communist left in South Africa as part of the history of revolutionary syndicalism.

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Abbreviations

APO: African Peoples Organisation
 DJ: Department of Justice, South Africa
 IISH: International Institute for Social History
Int.: *The International*
 ISL: International Socialist League
 SALP: South African Labour Party
 SANNC: South African Native National Congress
 SDF: Social Democratic Federation
 TNC: Transvaal Native Congress
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