

THE REORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS IN JOHANNESBURG, 1936-42

by

Baruch Hirson

After a meteoric rise to prominence all over South Africa in the early 1920s, African trade unions had all but collapsed by the end of the decade. Thus, when they were restarted in the mid-thirties, there was little or no continuity with the movements of the twenties. The little pockets of Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) stalwarts who maintained rudimentary organizations in the smaller towns and villages operated as political groups rather than as trade unions. Kadalie had retired to East London, and the sole activities of his group were directed towards advisory board elections. Other groups of ICU adherents were even less organized, and, although they continued to be the centre of known political opposition, their activities were sporadic. Naboth Mokgatle, who was to be one of the first trade union organizers in Pretoria, describes the impact of ICU agitators on his own early political development. However, he saw no indication of any trade union activity from ICU quarters. When he became involved in establishing one of the first of the new unions in 1940, he states categorically that "African trade unions were virtually unknown in Pretoria". (1)

Former leaders and organizers of the ICU did play a part in the new trade unions. Gana Makabeni in the Transvaal, John Gomas and Jimmy La Guma in Cape Town, and others were active after 1935 in various trade union movements, and the experience they had gained during the twenties prepared them for local leadership in the coming decade. But there was little continuity between the forms of organization or the methods of operation of the now defunct ICU and the trade unions of the thirties and forties.

One personality of the old ICU who remained in Johannesburg and had some influence on the new unions, however, was W. G. Ballinger. This one-time "adviser" to the ICU, who had participated in the events which had led to its final collapse, continued to work through the Society of Friends of Africa. His full role remains to be described. He assisted Makabeni, drew up memoranda that were submitted to Wage Boards in Johannesburg and the Eastern Cape, and often represented the unions before the boards. He even provided scarce funds for the newly reorganized Laundry Workers Union. He still hoped to play a part in the new unions, but, as we shall see below, the days of the "white adviser" were over.

Industries grew rapidly in the post-depression years in South Africa, and the number of blacks employed in commerce and in the factories doubled in the period 1932-1936. The African labour force in industry increased from 66,751 to 134,233 in

these four years, and the largest section was concentrated in the southern Transvaal, where the number increased from 36,153 to 80,722. (2) The number of industries increased and the size of establishment was considerably enlarged. The labour turnover was still large, but there was greater stability in the labour force, and workers who moved from firm to firm tended to prefer employment in the same industry. This trend, both of industrial growth and of an increasingly stable labour force, was the first prerequisite of a new trade union movement that would be organized on industrial lines. The general workers union, part political, part trade union, was no longer appropriate to the structure of industry and the grouping of workers in industries that had differentiated skill requirements.

The need for industrially based unions was also a consequence of the manner by which wages were determined in the country. Under the Industrial Conciliation (IC) Act and the Wage Act, wages were regulated by Industrial Councils or by Wage Boards. Methods of procedure were laid down by acts of parliament and the negotiations inside Councils or the arguments before Wage Boards were linked to specific industries or trades. The pattern of legislation, despite the discriminatory provisions against African workers, helped determine the structure of the unions that were established. Africans were not recognized as employees under the IC Act, and therefore could not belong to registered trade unions, which alone could negotiate inside the Industrial Councils. None the less, unofficial unions could, on occasion, find a recognized union that would present the African's point of view on working conditions. On the other hand, African workers organized by their union could petition for new wage determinations and request the sitting of a Wage Board.

The new unions of the mid-thirties were thus able to exact concessions for the workers under existing legislation. By so doing, however, they tied themselves to a structure which left little room for manoeuvre and which led to their early collapse when the government called a halt to the granting of further concessions. The process of legal strangulation, coupled with police and military suppression, that led to the destruction of the unions will be discussed elsewhere. The aim of this paper is to sketch the way in which the unions were built in the Transvaal in the mid-thirties, and to show how the new organizers attempted to work inside the framework of the industrial laws. Here again, the pattern of legislation and the attempt to work inside the framework of this legislation helped determine the type of individual available to launch and organize the unions.

There had to be resources available to build the unions, to house them, to staff them, and to operate them. There had to be the personnel to draw up memoranda, to negotiate with members of the Industrial Councils, to give evidence before Wage Boards, and there had to be the personnel to type the documents, to roneo them, and to get them to the various centres in the country where the Boards would hear evidence. None of these factors was insuperable in itself, but taken together they were probably beyond the resources of any African organizer at the time. Finding premises for an African union in Johannesburg was difficult: in Pretoria it was almost impossible, unless a white sympathiser intervened. No African organization at the time could raise any funds - and trade unions starting from scratch had no available resources. Research work needed for drawing up memoranda on conditions in the townships required the tacit co-operation of location superintendents, and few, if any, Africans would have been granted the facilities to undertake such a project. Even when this could be overcome there was a dearth of typewriters or of duplicating machines, in the hands of any African organization. No new trade union could hope to acquire this equipment. Above all else, there was no money available to pay any official his salary. A trade union secretary paid £3 per week, and needing £2 per month rent and £2 per month for stationery, postage and other expenses, needed 680 fully paid up members at 6d (2½p) per month in order to maintain the most rudimentary organization. Even where this could be achieved, it would take an organizer several months to ensure a minimum revenue of £17 per month, and during this period the lack of resources made it difficult for any person to continue.

It would be an oversimplification to claim that the only barrier to building the trade unions lay in the lack of material resources. Gana Makabeni had his wage guaranteed (and paid) over a long period of time by the No. 1 branch of the Garment

Workers Union (GWU), and he had access to equipment. (3) This allowed him to survive the long lean period before the union was able to support itself - but his success only came after the impetus to growth had been provided by other factors which I will discuss below. The worker required some incentive to persuade him that the surrender of a monthly subscription to a trade union was justified. His wage was well below his required weekly expenditure, and he did not surrender his sixpence lightly to the first organizer on the scene. Most workers had to be convinced that there was something to be gained from joining a union, and only when it was shown that concessions from Wage Boards or Industrial Councils could be gained through the unions' actions did they join in large numbers. It was a young industrial chemist, Max Gordon, recently arrived in Johannesburg in 1935, who demonstrated the advantages of working through the Wage Board, and it was through the zeal of this man that the African unions were built up in the Transvaal (and later in Port Elizabeth) and, indirectly, in the other industrial centres of South Africa.

Max Gordon had been a student in Cape Town and his ideas were strongly influenced by the discussions inside the Lenin Club and the Workers Party (WP), and Trotsky's memorandum to the latter group. Trotsky knew little about the conditions inside South Africa but he was guided by theses provided for his perusal by the WP. The comments which he offered proved to be crucial in shaping the ideas of his followers, and in the case of Gordon helped determine his appraisal of the African's role in the political struggle. Trotsky argued that:

A victorious revolution is unthinkable without the awakening of the Native masses; in its turn it will give them what they are so lacking today, confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a cultural growth. Under these conditions the South African Republic will emerge first of all as a 'Black' Republic ...

In so far as a victorious revolution will radically change not only the relation between the classes, but also between the races, and will assure to the blacks that place in the State which corresponds to their numbers, in so far will the Social revolution in South Africa also have a national character.... Nevertheless the proletarian party can and must solve the national problem by its own methods ...

The revolutionary party must put before every white worker the following alternative: either with British Imperialism and with the white bourgeoisie of South Africa, or with the black workers and peasants against the white feudalists and slaveowners and their agents in the ranks of the working class itself. (4)

The members of the WP in Cape Town were publicists rather than active organizers, and they had no direct contact with the trade unions. It was only in 1938 that they applied Trotsky's comments to the unions, and in a trenchant article said:

At present it would be hopeless to expect a lead from the organised white workers. They are following the Trade Union leaders, and are enjoying the benefits, temporary benefits it is true, but nonetheless real benefits, of the 'civilised white labour policy'. The Bantu can expect nothing from this trade union movement. They must build their own movement, despite all the great obstacles in their way, despite all the heavy chains now binding them. (5)

Gordon was closely associated with the Trotskyite group in Johannesburg but they were largely inactive and apparently unwilling to participate in the day-to-day practical work required for building any workers' organization. This left Gordon an isolated man, ideologically committed to Trotskyism but with little practical support

from the men and women who shared his political ideals.

In May 1935 Gordon became secretary of the almost defunct Laundry Workers Union, and set about reconstructing the organization. Within a year the laundry workers were out on strike for higher wages and better conditions of employment. They were successful, and were given wages higher than those laid down subsequently by the Wage Board - but the union was almost smashed when thirteen of the leaders were arrested for organizing a strike. They were released on a legal technical point, but it was obvious to Gordon that the union was not yet ready to confront the state and its anti-strike legislation. He was also aware of the fact that the laundry workers had been re-employed because they were skilled or semi-skilled workers and could not be easily replaced. Workers in other trades would not be as indispensable. New tactics would have to be employed, and Gordon accordingly turned his attention to working inside the framework of existing labour legislation to secure improvements, and thus win workers' support for the unions.

Organizing unions in 1935 was not easy. The workers were wary of any organization that wanted subscriptions, and years of adventurism in "revolutionary" unions during the early thirties had not established these organizations as particularly worthy of support. Trade union secretaries had to prove that they were capable of effecting improvements: claims had to be made for overtime pay, for sick leave, for workmen's compensation, and above all for back payment of shortfalls in wages. Each success established the bona fides of the union, and each payment exacted from an employer brought new members to the union headquarters.

To win new members, and build new trade unions, Gordon offered many attractions at the union offices. Legal assistance was available for any member who fell foul of the law. Employment was sought for any member who lost his job. Attempts were even made to provide medical assistance for workers who fell ill, and in some instances assistance was provided for workers who were in arrears with their rents. The union offices were transformed in the evenings into night schools and classes were offered in literacy, numeracy, book-keeping, procedure at meetings, and history. The last course had a distinct political flavour, and on police insistence Gordon was required to stop all classes.

By far the most important activity undertaken was that of preparing and presenting evidence at public sittings of the Wage Boards. (6) Although the unions had no legal standing, and were not able to intervene directly in Wage Board proceedings, they were able to initiate action which led the Minister to instruct the Board to undertake inquiries in various industries. The fact that the union became involved in such action, consulted the members about their demands, and presented memoranda, played an important part in persuading workers that they should join.

Gordon was highly successful, both in building up the unions and in securing payment for his workers on the basis of claims made on their behalf. Workers in more than twenty industries were organized in the unions he initiated - some in specific industrial unions, others in a General Workers Union, prior to the organization of independent industrial unions. By 1939, 20,000 workers were enrolled in 11 unions, all co-ordinated inside a Joint Committee with Gordon as Secretary. A considerable sum of money was collected as a result of the claims made to the employers. In the first few years Commercial and Distributive workers received £3,200, Bakers received £3,000 (although the union had only 900 members), and members of the General Workers Union received over £5,000. Other unions recovered smaller amounts for their members. (7) This led to a mushrooming of complaints and the unions were inundated with workers seeking recompense from employers.

In order to proceed with his work, and then extend its scope after some initial successes, Gordon had to find resources from some group or institution. He had no personal source of finance, and for a protracted period the unions were not able to pay him a salary. He was, furthermore, in no position to prepare the many

memoranda for presentation to Wage Boards and Industrial Councils, nor to appear every time to present the workers' case. And he certainly did not have the resources to offer legal aid, medical aid, night classes, and all the other facilities that his unions were prepared to provide. All these resources he was able to find at the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), then housed at the University of the Witwatersrand and directed by J. D. Rheinallt Jones.

The basis for co-operation arose from the fortuitous friendship between Gordon and A. Lynn Saffery, who had met as students at the University of Cape Town. But more than friendship was involved. Saffery, who had started his career as secretary of the SAIRR as a man of no political persuasion, had been strongly influenced by radical opinion amongst members of staff on the Johannesburg campus, and had come to believe that there was a need for independent African organization. Saffery had utilized his position as secretary of the IRR to investigate wage levels at Kroonstad, Kimberley, and in other smaller urban areas, and had been impressed by the need to raise wage levels. Inside the IRR he worked closely with Ruth Hayman (later to be his wife) and she introduced him to her own brand of socialism, in those days associated with a strong Zionist flavour.

Gordon's salary, which was at the rate of £10 per month, was paid for more than 18 months by the Bantu Welfare Trust, which was administered by the SAIRR. (8) Without this, he could never have worked in the unions. Memoranda were prepared with the assistance of SAIRR personnel, and Rheinallt Jones and Saffery accompanied many of the union delegations to Wage Board hearings. Typing and roneoing was done on IRR equipment. The legal aid bureau, organized by Ruth Hayman at the SAIRR, was used extensively by the trade unions for official business and for defending workers who came foul of the law. Finally, members of the IRR conducted many of the classes in the union's night school.

By the end of 1938, Saffery arranged a six-months trip to the UK for purposes of studying the British trade union structure, and asked particularly to be put in touch with organizers of agricultural and unskilled workers. (9) It appears to have been the goal of Gordon and Saffery to organize agricultural and mine workers, and Gordon was later to be a member of the first Mine Workers' Union committee. In 1939, Saffery made a pencilled note on the back of one of his typescripts in order to reply to discussions that followed an address to African trade unionists. Against the name Marx (presumably J. B. Marks) Saffery wrote:

Need for concentrating on basic industries whereas  
speaker says we must organise the unskilled. Must  
organise agriculturalists and mine workers.

The struggle of the Africans is political and not  
primarily economic. We must link up trade unionism  
with a national political movement. The purely  
class issue is not sufficiently clear to the African  
people.

(Saffery's stress)

These few sentences indicate the extent to which Saffery's political thinking had advanced by the end of 1939, give an indication of his (and Gordon's) thoughts about developments in the trade unions, and also show their thinking on the broader relationship between trade unions and political organization. Gordon confirms that this was the way they viewed the situation, in an interview he gave in 1961. The object, he stated, was

to form viable unions as a base for what he regarded  
as a more important objective - a strong African  
mineworkers' union in co-ordination with the ANC. (10)

Ironically, it was Marks who became secretary of the African Mine Workers Union when it was launched (or relaunched) in 1941, with the co-operation of the ANC.

The co-operation between Gordon and Saffery continued from 1935 through to 1942, and was only interrupted by Gordon's internment in May 1940 for approximately one year. And, right through the period of Gordon's internment, Saffery and other members of the SAIRR played a prominent part in trying to secure his release. Prior to the internment, and the dislocation that followed Gordon's detention, unions were built in Johannesburg and branches opened along the Witwatersrand and in Pretoria. But, although we have some account, limited as it is, of the doings of Gordon and Saffery, our knowledge of the men and women who joined the unions is limited. Even those who became organizers, secretaries, and possibly figures of national importance, have left few records behind, and many remain shadowy figures. There was, for example, the worker of whom Gordon wrote:

During the beginning of this year a branch of the [Laundry] Union was established in Pretoria and has a membership of two hundred... The Chairwoman deserves particular mention for the capable way in which she has attended to the complaints of our members in Pretoria. (11)

Yet we have no idea who this active lady was.

Anonymous, unsung, the chairwomen, the committee members, and the thousands of workers in the factories, in the mines, and in the shops were the material from which the trade union movement was built. In turn, they built amongst themselves a sense of solidarity, and decided what union action was feasible. It was these men and women who would strike when strike action was called for, and it was these men and women, together with their families, who would be confronted by officialdom, by the police, and in some cases by the army. Inevitably, in the process they were going to grow apart from the very men and women who built their unions, but who all too often lived in a world apart. Gordon and Saffery, dedicated as they were, were going to feel the effect of this gap, in this case between white and black, all too soon, and in the process Gordon was going to be displaced by Daniel Koza, a man of remarkable attributes but of much narrower vision.

The workers who joined the trade unions were not necessarily cast in any heroic mould. Many of them brought all their pre-industrial norms into the unions: their lack of political consciousness; their racial prejudices. The trade unions may have changed a basic conservatism by bringing them face to face with the power structure of the state, or through confrontation with a set of unrelenting employers. But such stirrings of awareness were only rarely brought to the surface, and were often of short duration. More generally, the large majority of workers joined the trade unions because they sought material gain. This was their most immediate need, and a body which offered the possibility of improvement seemed to many to be worth joining. The union organizers were aware of this, and wage improvements always led to a considerable strengthening of the membership, both in size and in solidarity. Even the fact that the trade union officials were bargaining with the employers, or were submitting a memorandum to the Wage Board or Industrial Council, was sufficient to attract new members or hold the loyalty of the existing membership. Meetings called by the union to discuss such negotiations were eagerly attended and helped build a corporate spirit amongst the workers.

On the other hand, failure to achieve wage increases in an industry could be near disastrous. Gordon, in his 1938 memorandum, gives a report on negotiations with the Industrial Council of the printing industry, and records the difficulties in winning any concessions for the workers. He says of the African Printing Workers Union:

This Union has suffered a severe set-back and many of its members have become disillusioned ...

The membership of the Union has fallen but its activities are still kept going by a few enthusiastic members. If the [Industrial] Council fixes a decent

minimum wage [30/- per week was asked for], there is a good possibility of a strong Union, for these unskilled employees, being built up. Many of its members have become disillusioned by the repeated promises of the Secretary of the Typographical Union, and the Industrial Council.

The small achievements of the union which Gordon itemizes - the enforcement of the legal rates for some categories of workers, and the obtaining of wages in lieu of notice - were insufficient to hold the loyalty of the many workers. Those who did remain were undoubtedly the most conscious and the most dedicated, but they were few in number and insufficient to guarantee the viability of the union.

The full impact of successful representations for wage increases and improved conditions of work came after the Wage Board Determination for the Distributive trade. This was gazetted in December 1939, and became effective from the first of January 1940. Minimum wages were laid down for the entire trade, covering everyone from counter-hands to labourers and night watchmen. Labourers in Johannesburg were awarded 27/8 per week, which were the highest unskilled wages paid in the town. Pay along the Reef was slightly lower, but still represented a considerable increase. The determination also made provision for sick pay, for annual paid leave, for over-time pay, and for remuneration for work on public holidays. (12)

The effect of this determination on the workers in the Transvaal is described by Naboth Mokgatle. He was a worker in Pretoria who had been in contact with members of the Communist Party, and was to become a leading trade unionist and member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in Pretoria. In January he was informed by two friends who had belonged to the African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union, when they worked in Johannesburg, of a meeting called by Gordon in Johannesburg. Mokgatle, with his friends, travelled to Johannesburg and provides this account:

The purpose of the meeting was to celebrate an event which was worth celebrating, the coming into force of industrial law in the commercial and distributive trades, which, for the first time covered African workers in that field of South African industry. A minimum wage level was laid down for unskilled men in the industry, which of course meant African workers ...

The meeting was a very big one; Wemmer Sports Ground, which held thousands of people, could not absorb all those who came to attend. Those of us who had come to the meeting were urged to join the already formed unions, or form others where none existed. Mr Gordon [sic] was the main speaker, supported by the African secretaries who worked with him. Wages laid down for unskilled workers, the Africans, were far below those of Europeans, but at last the African worker was taken away from the mercy of the employers. He knew what pay to expect when he performed certain types of job in the industry, that he was entitled to overtime payments, sick pay, injury benefits and an annual holiday with pay.

It was a big landmark for the African workers in the country... (13)

Mokgatle met Gordon after the meeting was closed, and he was invited to form a branch of the ACDWU in Pretoria, and acted as its secretary. He never received the backing he needed because Max Gordon was interned shortly after the Wemmer Pan meeting, and the Johannesburg office and the Joint Committee were thrown

into disarray. None the less, Mokgatle did attend to the complaints of some workers, and when other unions were launched he participated in their work. The Pretoria unions, however, required trained personnel and needed resources which became available only at a later date, when Mike Muller, an organizer of the CPSA devoted his energies, and used the resources of his party, to build the unions. The story of Muller's work, the organization of the Municipal workers, and the shooting at Marabastad location on the 28th December 1942 (leaving 17 dead and over 100 wounded), and the withdrawal of CPSA money from trade union work, have an importance in the shaping of the history of the war-time unions. Space and time do not allow me to pursue this further here, and the story will be presented elsewhere.

Mokgatle carried on as best he could in Pretoria in 1940, and workers streamed into the union to file their complaints against employers. Being inexperienced, he forwarded these to Johannesburg, but received no replies. He continues:

A man who has paid his money always wants to know his fate. Doubts began to set in. Some suspected that I did not send on their complaints. To free myself of suspicion I had to write letters in their presence and let them post them. Mr Gordin [sic] was interned; I did not know what was happening at headquarters and there was confusion. Complaints increased and stories began to circulate that my union was only interested in collecting money, not in the settlement of members grievances. I carried on ... (14)

But, in fact, he could not carry on for long, and trade unionism in Pretoria made no headway until resources were made available to it. And when those resources were removed the unions collapsed.

When Gordon was interned in May 1940, and kept out of the unions for a year, the trade union movement was radically altered. In the first months the unions were in confusion and subscriptions fell by two-thirds. The union secretaries had no common policy and the Joint Committee failed to take the lead. Gordon advised, from internment camp, that Saffery be appointed in his place as secretary of the Joint Committee, and this was rejected. There was a growing resentment from the African ranks against white "control" of the unions, and Dan Koza, organizer in the ACDWU, was in the forefront of those who argued that Africans were fully capable of conducting their own affairs.

There was a struggle inside the unions, and it was intertwined with clashes of personality and accusations that some £1,000 had been misappropriated. But, basically, the antagonism revolved around the position of white officials in the unions. Gana Makabeni of the African Clothing Workers Union, and Secretary of the Co-ordinating Committee of African Trade Unions (which had a total membership of 2670 in 1940), had long since rejected all white officials, but Gordon had been assured of his position in his own group of unions. Gordon's position was raised afresh when Rheinallt Jones and Saffery met the Joint Committee to get their support for a petition requesting the release of Gordon. Jones initiated the discussion and seemed insensitive to the possible reactions of his audience. In asking whether the unions wanted Gordon back, he "made [the] mistake of suggesting that the reason be that the unions could not manage without G[ordon]". (15) Koza exploded, the secretaries were split, and some maintained that in many ways Gordon was needed. The meeting degenerated into personal accusations, and Jones walked out of the meeting vowing that he would have no more to do with the unions, or with Gordon's release.

The ACDWU split, and A. M. Thipe, the most loyal of Gordon's officials, led the dairy workers into a new union. Yet Koza was correct. The union managed without Gordon or Saffery, and the most militant actions and the biggest wage rises were achieved by Koza and his union. The first of the big war-time strikes was not far

off, and was to take place over the implementation of wage determination 70 for the Distributive and Commercial workers - Gordon's greatest achievement.

The provisions of the determination specifically excluded workers in the timber yards, in the coal yards, and in the dairies. This led to union representations, and the Minister of Labour referred the case of the coal yard workers to the Wage Board. The employers sought to escape the outcome of such an investigation by forming a cartage company to which all the workers were seconded. This was, however, too transparent, and the workers were not alone in seeing through the deviousness of this move. The attempt to escape the wage determination under consideration brought sympathy from many who were opposed to strike actions, and the SAIRR gave its full support to the union. (16) A strike was narrowly averted in November 1940, but the employers reneged on the offers they had made and the workers struck work on 8th May 1941.

Five Johannesburg coal yards were affected, and in order to break the strike 366 workers were arrested and charged with refusing to obey the lawful command of the employers. The strike proved to be remarkable in a number of respects. In the first place, the employers were so obviously in the wrong, and yet it was the strikers who faced charges. Secondly, there had been very few non-whites involved in strike action since the war started. According to official statistics (which consistently understated the number of disputes, but none the less provide an order of magnitude), only 700 blacks had been involved in industrial disputes during 1940. (17), and this strike was only the sixth to take place in 1941 (18) and the first large-scale strike involving only Africans. It was the third factor, however, which set this strike apart from all others. The workers who had been arrested decided that they would not accept a joint trial, and demanded that they be tried separately. Only 85 of the workers accepted a joint trial, and they were found guilty and fined £1 or 10 days, all of which were suspended for three months. (19)

The trade union prepared for a lengthy strike to secure their demands and support the imprisoned workers, and started collecting money. Members of the SAIRR and of the Friends of Africa intervened to persuade the employers to recognize the trade union and meet the organizers, and an interim agreement was reached pending the wage determination. The strike was successfully concluded when the workers were cautioned and discharged by the Court. This was, furthermore, followed by a circular to the police from the Secretary of Justice, directing them not to arrest or prosecute Africans on strike until the matter had been reported to the Native Affairs Department and the Department of Labour and workers' representatives were given the opportunity of settling the dispute. (20) This directive was to be superseded by war measures that illegalized all strike action, but the workers had won a breathing space for themselves, and the demand for separate trials had won the strikers the admiration of all unionists. Although their trade unions were not recognized, and there was no change in the IC Act, there was a mood of optimism in the unions. Their membership figures increased considerably, the number of unions grew, steps were taken to organize the miners, and the existing unions on the Witwatersrand were able to sink their differences at least temporarily and take steps to federate under a Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU). Twenty-five trade unions, claiming 37,000 registered members, met together in conference in November 1941, closing the gap between the old Joint Committee and Makabeni's group, in order to take the struggle for recognition, higher wages, and improved working conditions one step further.

Dan Koza seems to have proved his assertion that the African trade unions could manage without the presence of whites in the unions. But, in fact, this was at best proven only in a few unions in Johannesburg and by no means applicable to every centre (or every union in Johannesburg).

Saffery continued his efforts to secure a hold on the African trade unions, despite the Joint Committee's rejection. He helped rally support for the ACDWU during the coal workers' strike and publicized their case. He was also actively

engaged in securing Gordon's release and played a major part in organizing support for his friend.

Inside the Institute, Saffery argued for greater participation in the unions, and his most important appeal came during an address to the Council of the IRR in January 1941. In this paper he argued:

There are ... supporters of the Institute who feel that the time has come for the Institute to give even more direct help, not only to the existing unions, but to organizations and individuals that are attempting to found and build new ones. It is generally recognized that the question of higher wages for unskilled workers is one of the major problems to be faced today. Inadequate housing, problems of delinquency, malnutrition, and disease amongst the Non-European people, are all directly traceable to low wages ...

Experience has shown that organization of the workers into unions is ultimately the only effective way of raising their wages and improving their conditions of work. The Institute has in the past recognized this to some extent in the assistance which it has given, but I am of the opinion that the time has come for Council [which controlled SAIRR policy] to consider whether the Institute should not take a more positive line than hitherto.

One of the major functions of the Institute is to initiate social welfare schemes which are likely to further the well-being of the Non-Europeans. There is no difference in principle between initiating clinics for the care of the sick, and forming trade unions which will be instrumental in raising wages and thereby preventing people from getting sick. (21)

The argument was couched in these terms in order to appeal to a Council which was far from sympathetic. In fact, many were frankly antagonistic to IRR personnel being so closely involved in trade union activities, and the leading Institute officials would have preferred to have no direct links with such organizations.

Saffery, however, persevered. In 1940 the SAIRR had set up a committee which was later known as the Southern African Committee on Industrial Relations, and by 1941 Saffery was its secretary. He drew up detailed plans for training trade union organizers, involving intensive educational courses (22), and also arranged for Gordon to visit and organize trade unions in Port Elizabeth. (23)

There appears to have been some intense lobbying, both in Port Elizabeth and in Johannesburg, before the visit was undertaken. The Ballingers, working in the Friends of Africa, had already made plans for starting the unions in Port Elizabeth, and they were opposed to the dispatch of Gordon to the town. Their opinions were, however, disregarded when their contact, Mr Tshiwula, found that he was not able to devote his full time to trade union activity.

Saffery, who had received requests that an organizer visit the town, from at least two sources, travelled to Port Elizabeth to ensure that Gordon's visit would be supported, and then obtained the authorization of Professor Gray of the SAIRR for

the project. The requests were undoubtedly inspired by P. J. Kaplan, a lawyer of left persuasion. He had written requesting Gordon's visit, and became chairman of an Advisory Committee on Non-European Trade Union Organization that provided the practical support for Gordon's visit.

Gordon was able to set up seven trade unions in a "blitz" tour of ten weeks and established contact with workers in three other trades. Complaints were taken up with employers and improvements were effected in several factories. Furthermore, he arranged for a central trade union office to be set up, established workers' committees for the unions, appointed secretaries to the unions, and arranged for two full-time secretaries to be appointed. M. M. Dessai, secretary of the newly organized Food and Canning Workers Union (affiliated to the central body in Cape Town), was also elected secretary of the local co-ordinating council, which had 1,200 paid members in the unions. He subsequently became the acknowledged leader of the unions in the Eastern Province, and was elected to the Municipal Council as a union candidate.

At this stage, Rheinallt Jones, who had lost his seat in the Senate to H. Basner, wished to take over the directorship of the SAIRR and remove Saffery. Jones never regained his position, but the acrimonious interview between Saffery and Jones over the secretaryship hastened Saffery's resignation. Then came the announcement in Race Relations News:

The Institute does not concern itself with the actual organisation of trade unions. The organisation and administration is left to the unions themselves, and, officially, the Institute's only connection with the unions is to give them the assistance and guidance which it gives to any other bodies and individuals who ask for help. (24)

Saffery's efforts to change the nature of the SAIRR, and his efforts to organize African trade unions together with Gordon, had failed. They had to fail on two accounts. As long as unions were organized on ethnic lines, and there was no alternative but to organize them in that fashion, whites would face possible antagonisms which would make their continued stay extremely difficult. And inside the white-led IRR there was little possibility of a radical revolt. The leading members of the Institute were supporters of the government; they believed in white leadership and they wanted gradual reforms which would leave the structure of society intact. There was no social base for Saffery inside the IRR, and he and his supporters - moderate as some of them were - constituted a small, isolated group.

Three months later the Safferys left for the Copperbelt, and Gordon retired from trade union work. Gordon's departure was in part due to continued police harassment and a threat of further internment, but without Saffery at the IRR his future in the trade union movement would have been insecure. Their work was done, and the trade unions were launched. The course that they followed, their successes and failures, will also have to be told elsewhere.

Ballinger and his "Friends of Africa" continued operating in Johannesburg, but were confined to the periphery of events. On the 25th March 1944, he wrote an article on the ICU, and in a concluding paragraph gave his appraisal of the new unions. It contains some insights, some wishful thinking about the ICU, and sentiments which reflect a "sour-grape" attitude to the exclusion of liberals from the unions. His appraisal seems to lack all generosity, and is perhaps a fitting epitaph to his own failure to take control of the black working class. I quote his conclusion in full:

The phase in the development of industrial organisations for Africans that followed the demise of the I.C.U. has revealed a peculiar phenomenon,

nothing less than a reversal of trends in industrial history. This has revealed itself in the form of trade and industrial organisations of the Native 'unskilled' coming into existence after wage determinations have provided for increases in wages and other improved conditions of employment. Where these organisations have survived the vicissitudes of mal-administration they have tended to regard their function as primarily that of seeing that the provisions of the determinations are implemented. They contend that these functions cannot be fully carried out so long as they remain unregistered and therefore claim recognition in terms similar to that given to the trade unions of Europeans and Coloureds. Another of their demands is the 'closed shop' and deduction of members' subscriptions from wages which are handed over by the employers to the unions thereby saving them the irksome work of collecting 'subs' from lukewarm members. In brief the present phase of 'Native' trade unionism is distinctly conservative as contrasted with the early militancy of the quasi-industrial and political I.C.U. of Africa. Thus has native trade unionism got back on to the line which is the marked characteristic feature of European trade unionism both in South Africa and the older industrialised countries today. (25)

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#### Notes

- (1) Naboth Mokgatle, The Autobiography of an Unknown South African (London: Hurst, 1971), p. 227.
- (2) Sheila van der Horst, Native Labour in South Africa (London: Cass, 1971), p.263.
- (3) Personal communication from E. S. Sachs, secretary of the GWU, during the period under survey. (1975)
- (4) Leon Trotsky, Remarks on the Draft Thesis of the Workers Party of South Africa (mimeographed, 20.4.1935).
- (5) The Spark, Vol. 4, No. 9 (September 1938).
- (6) These Boards were set up in terms of the Wage Act of 1925, initially to protect white workers from competition by Africans, by establishing minimum wages for all categories of work. Any group of workers could petition the Minister of Labour for a Wage Board investigation, and African workers were able to obtain considerable improvements when their petitions were supported by well argued memoranda. Liberal bodies like the Institute of Race Relations and the Friends of Africa spent considerable energy in the late thirties producing such memoranda.  
The Act specifically excluded agricultural workers, domestic servants, and workers covered by the IC Act. The Mines, furthermore, were notorious in blocking all attempts to get a Wage Board investigation of conditions of employment in their industry.
- (7) See, for example, A. Lynn Saffery, "African trade unions and the Institute" in Race Relations, Vol. VIII, No. 2 (1941); and memorandum by Saffery on trade unions in 1939 (Saffery Papers, A 10).
- (8) Saffery, op. cit.; also R. D. Rheinallt Jones, letter to the Chief Controller of Internments, 20.6.1940 (Saffery Papers, E 14-17).

- (9) Letter to Transport House, 20.8.1938, and subsequent correspondence with the British unions, were kindly shown to me by the TUC.
- (10) Garfield Clack, "The Changing Structures of Industrial Relations in South Africa", unpublished PhD thesis (University of London, 1962), p. 65.
- (11) M. Gordon, Memorandum to Bantu Welfare Trust, 20.12.1938.
- (12) Cf Ellen Hellman, A Sociological Survey of an African Commercial Labour Force (Johannesburg, SAIRR, 1953), p. 12.
- (13) N. Mokgatle, op. cit., p. 288.
- (14) Ibid., p. 231.
- (15) Notes made by Saffery of emergency meeting 18.6.1940. This comment is inserted by Saffery in parenthesis (Saffery Papers, E 8-11).
- (16) "The Story of a Strike", Race Relations News, Vol. 3, No. 6 (June 1941).
- (17) G. Clack, op. cit., Appendix 2.
- (18) Taken from statement by Ministry of Labour, Parliamentary Debates (1942), Col. 1355.
- (19) E. S. Sachs claims that he and the defending counsel devised the tactic of requesting separate trials. All but 85 agreed to adopt this procedure. (Personal communication, 1975)
- (20) This was arranged following representations to the Minister of Justice by members of the SAIRR and the Friends of Africa. Race Relations News, Vol. 3, No. 7 (July 1941).
- (21) Op. cit., p. 32.
- (22) Memorandum RR 62/42, dated 17.4.1942 (Saffery Papers, A 8).
- (23) A full account of the visit is given in Saffery's memorandum, RR 63/42, also dated 17.4.1942 (Saffery Papers, A 8).
- (24) Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1942), pp. 3-4.
- (25) "Cable address makes history", Trek, 25.3.1944.