

## CREATING SOLIDARITY: FOOD AND CANNING WORKERS AT THE CAPE, 1940-60

by

Iris Berger

If the 1940s and 1950s presented women garment workers in the Transvaal with challenges that ultimately threatened some of the basic principles for which they had fought in the past, another group of working women replaced them on the cutting edge of progressive political change: the food and canning workers of the Cape Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Living and labouring in small rural communities in the heart of the fruit growing areas, their experience was very different from that of most garment workers at the time, whether in the north or in nearby Cape Town. Before the enforcement of the Group Areas Act, their racially mixed communities and factories strengthened the struggle for non-racial solidarity, while the clusters of tiny houses in townships and camps near the factories contributed to a deep involvement in local issues. Though women made up a high percentage of the workers, gender usually was conceptualized as a political question in the context of struggles defined on class or racial grounds. In these struggles, however, and particularly in the campaign against passes for African women in the Cape, women food and canning workers played a significant role.

While women's labour history is replete with examples of mixed (or even female) unions in which women had only a faint or muted voice, the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) and its African counterpart (AFCWU) were distinct. Not only did women hold a disproportionate number of leadership positions, but in many instances of strikes and political actions women workers were far more involved than men. Explaining this departure from the more usual pattern of male domination of mixed organizations requires a fuller understanding of the structure and history of both the industry and the union.<sup>2</sup>

The food industry in South Africa dates back to the late nineteenth century, when the first jam factories opened in Stellenbosch and Paarl; fruit canning began early in the twentieth century. By 1925 there were twelve fruit processing factories in the country, among the most prominent H Jones and Company at Paarl, built with Australian capital. Development of the industry remained limited until World War II, when heightened demand for locally produced food led to investment in new factories and machinery and to new technological input from overseas.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting the rapidity of the expansion, total output more than tripled between the beginning of the war and July 1941 and the number of employees rose sharply: from 1,867 in 1938-39 to 4,647 in 1940-41.<sup>4</sup> During the five years of the war, the number of factories nearly doubled and the gross value of output increased by 517 per cent.

Following the wartime boom, the industry continued to change. A shift in emphasis from jams to canned fruits led to greater dependence on overseas exports, especially to Britain, and made international competitiveness of prime importance. The shift also meant that 75-80% of the industry's total production came from the deciduous fruit growing regions of the western and south-western Cape, while other regional specialities assumed less importance: vegetables from the Transvaal, pineapple and tropical fruit from Natal, citrus fruits from the eastern Cape, and pineapple from East London. Although the level of mechanization increased in the post-war period (particularly in cutting, skinning and depipping), the industry remained highly labour intensive.

The predominance of South African capital, and particularly of financial interests based in Cape agriculture, gave growers significant control over the disposition of their crops and over wages. They used their influence to try to ensure that factory pay did not compete with earnings in farming to an extent that would threaten their labour supply. Although financial control was relatively diffuse in the immediate post-war period, the mid-1950s, following a period of expansion in the industry, saw an increasing concentration of capital. After 1955 two companies were dominant: the Langeberg Kooperasie Beperk (LKB) and the South African Dried Fruit Co of Wellington.<sup>6</sup>

The development of both the industry and the union were informed by the distinct characteristics of the Cape, east and west. In the latter area, where large-scale, mechanized farms relied almost totally on wage labour, both the coloured and the settled black populations of small rural towns were totally proletarianized. Driven from farms in large numbers as increased mechanization and the fencing of grazing camps reduced the need for agricultural labour in the years before World War II, these men and women provided a ready source of workers for the canning factories. Their communities were deperately poor, with high levels of unemployment and irregular employment. Many workers lived in towns, but were drawn back to the farms in the peak months to harvest or pack fruit, accustoming women in particular to the seasonal rhythm of labour in the canning factories. Under these impoverished conditions, families formed earning units that relied heavily on the contributions of women and children.<sup>8</sup> Houses, overcrowded, insanitary and unhygienic "to a degree that can hardly be<sup>9</sup> described", were constructed mainly of sack, reed, tin or rusted galvanized iron.

While this level of poverty was hardly atypical in South Africa, contrary to the situation in many of the country's largest cities (although not unlike Port Elizabeth and East London) the black populations of these smaller urban centres were long established, sometimes over a period of generations, contributing to relatively balanced sex ratios and to stable family life.<sup>10</sup> This stability, combined with a lower degree of residential segregation than elsewhere, created a distinct racial climate, noted with some concern by the 1937 Commission on the Cape Coloured Population:

Among many of the lower classes of Cape Coloured living among the Natives in locations and otherwise under the same social and economic conditions, there is a weakening or absence of that feeling of difference and of superiority which tends in other cases to keep the two groups apart. Some of these Cape Coloured mingle racially with the Native, so that ... there is a growing class of 'Coloured' with an infusion of Bantu blood.<sup>11</sup>

To the east, Port Elizabeth and East London also differed from most urban centres in South Africa. As cities that had encouraged the migration of black families in order to establish a settled, semi-skilled work force, both had relatively balanced sex ratios that contributed to women's employment in industry and to their participation in politics; indeed, in both cities, black women outnumbered men and families lived together, mainly concentrated, by the early 1940s, in the newly developed and relatively unregulated location of New Brighton.<sup>12</sup> Predominantly Xhosa-speaking, ethnic homogeneity contributed to political unity. In East London, however, as Tom Lodge documents, closer ties to rural relatives in the Ciskei and a relatively great cultural rift between educated Christians and more rural-oriented people combined with higher levels of poverty and unemployment and a more repressive local administration to produce a level of political mobilization considerably lower than in Port Elizabeth.<sup>13</sup> This difference was reflected during the women's anti-pass campaigns in which many food and canning workers took part.

As the food industry developed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, working conditions were appalling, and wages extremely low. In 1939, a *Guardian* article exposed the complaints of young women in Paarl jam factories who earned 12s 6d for a forty-eight hour week. (Worcester wage levels of 7s 6d and 8s 6d a week would have shocked investigators several decades earlier.) The women lacked boots or

protective clothing, although many stood all day in water. Those who ran the tin cutting and lining machines for eighteen shillings a week were involved in labour that was not only skilled but dangerous; yet women who lost fingers while working these machines received no compensation. Workers were granted no paid leave for vacation or public holidays and the policy of sending pregnant women home deprived them of the possibility of collecting their confinement allowance.<sup>14</sup> The first agreement negotiated by the Food and Canning Workers' Union established wages of £1.10 and £2.5 per week at a time when the poverty datum line for single women and men in Cape Town was £2.13.3 and £2.17.10, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

Rapid wartime expansion produced shocking housing conditions around the factories. Living in a location that belonged to the Langeberg Kooperasie, for example, the 650 canning workers in Ashton had access to three types of dwellings: pyramid "pondokkies" (huts) made of reed and clay with floors of cow manure and doors of sacking that could only be entered on all fours; huts with bare earth floors, made of sacking stretched over a wooden frame; and better houses of clay brick constructed with iron roofs and clay floors. Not atypical, one hut 12 feet by 15 feet housed two families, four adults and ten children. The entire camp had only a few communal lavatories and a single water tap; the nearest doctor lived six miles away.<sup>16</sup>

During the season, the pace of labour was intense. When Elizabeth Mafekeng worked for H Jones at Paarl in the 1930s, hours were unregulated, so that workers were on duty from 6.30 a.m. until 1.00 a.m. the following morning, with only a half-hour break for lunch. After work they walked the several miles between Paarl and their homes in Huguenot. Even out of season, the working day did not end until 7.00 p.m. Reflecting on such conditions in 1939, a journalist issued a challenge that was soon to be taken up: "It looks like a case for organisation. What about it, trades unionists?"<sup>17</sup>

A number of other characteristics of the food and canning industry shaped both the process of unionization and the consciousness of the workers involved, women and men alike. No matter how large and successful the industry became, labour continued to be seasonal, which, in the absence of salaries that could sustain workers throughout the year, meant that many were forced to seek other employment during the off-season. The number laid off could be substantial; at Associated Cannery Ltd, at Daljosophat, for example, the 300-400 workers in off-season jumped to 800-1,000 during the height of the canning season.<sup>18</sup> In Port Elizabeth, roughly half of the workers in the industry were employed on a seasonal basis.<sup>19</sup> Ray Alexander, the first Secretary of the Food and Canning workers' Union, described the rhythm of the year in a letter to the Secretary for Labour:

We have women workers engaged in large numbers during November, December, January and February and part of March to cope with the deciduous fruit. Then they are put off and they are again engaged during July and August to cope with guavas, pineapple and vegetables.<sup>20</sup>

Even during the season, there might be large numbers of breaks in work if the fruit had not arrived, often followed by excessive overtime.

The association of women with seasonal work was the most striking aspect of the sexual division of labour in the industry. Another was the association of men with machines and women with preparing the fruit. Complaining of speed-ups in a Durban factory in the early 1940s, one of the workers, Annie Miller, described the women's work.

As soon as all the girls arrive in the morning, they have to see that the conveyer belts and the scales have been properly cleaned. Then, as the tin containers are carried along on the belt, we have to fill them with vegetables and meat. This belt system compels us to work very fast, and recently, although a number of girls have been put off, the numbers of tins that we are producing per day still remains the same.

... We have to work like machines. But while a smaller number of us are giving more of our labour, our wages still remain the same.<sup>21</sup>

In fish canning factories a complex division of labour separated not only women and men but the small number of permanent workers (10 per cent) and more numerous contract labourers. Women worked only at two jobs: gutting, earning in one factory only 5d an hour; and packing, considered a more responsible job and paid according to the item. <sup>22</sup> Two other factories paid women a pittance of 3½d ordinary rate and 6d overtime.

As the primary group of seasonal workers, women occupied the least stable positions, whereas men predominated among permanent workers and qualified workers, those who had gained a degree of recognized skill. Employers' perception that women could be dismissed with impunity during the off-season made them similar to African male contract labourers, <sup>23</sup> who, in Luderitz Bay, for example, were employed only between February and May. As non-permanent employees, many black men and black and coloured women were presumed more pliable and more difficult to organize, often leading employers to dismiss the entire labour force during strikes under the mistaken impression that no reaction would be forthcoming.

Women's position as seasonal labourers led to continuing conflict between the union and the state that highlights the meagre number of possibilities open to them. State officials and employers consistently argued that alternative, short-term employment was available, primarily in domestic service, and that unemployment insurance simply fostered idleness. The union countered that seasonal workers required time to recuperate from months of intense labour. <sup>24</sup> However great the need for rest, few women had this luxury, and most were forced to seek other jobs during the off-season, mainly as domestic workers. Yet some women also found more varied, if not necessarily more appealing, work: farming, planting trees or working in the factory store. The youngest and most fit, like Mary Mefekeng, might be hired to break stones - arduous labour for which the factory paid 7/6 a load and farmers 2/6 a day. <sup>25</sup>

Many aspects of work and of the labour process remained relatively stable until the early 1960s, when the level of mechanization increased rapidly; and, although shifts occurred over time in the composition of the labour force, the overwhelming majority of workers during the 1940s and 1950s continued to be coloured and African and to include both women and men. <sup>26</sup> While overall figures available for the 1940s exclude Africans, 1948 employment statistics for LKB indicate a typical pattern. The two largest groups of employees were coloured women (32.7 per cent of the work force) and African men (25.9 per cent); coloured men and African women formed an almost equal proportion, 13.7 per cent and 13.5 per cent, respectively. The much smaller numbers of Europeans (men 11.1 per cent and women 2.7 per cent) were predominantly administrative and clerical employees with distinct interests and concerns. <sup>27</sup>

Despite the continuing predominance of coloured women and African men throughout the 1950s, some shifts did occur. In the early period of the industry's expansion, the numbers of coloured men and women were roughly equal, although (apart from the years 1939-40 and 1946-47) men always outnumbered women. In 1950-51, however, the number of coloured men dropped substantially and remained significantly lower than the number of coloured women throughout the decade. The figures for that year are typical of the 1950s: 15 per cent of the total labour force was coloured men, 31 per cent coloured women. Thus, as union pressure for raises took effect, women's lower wages and their perceived flexibility (a seasonal reserve army of labour) made them increasingly attractive employees.

Similar efforts to reduce costs by seeking the cheapest possible workers are evident in the employment trends for African women, whose numbers rose steadily throughout the 1950s. While in 1950-51 they represented 9.4 per cent of the total labour force in the industry, by 1958-59 they were 20.1 per cent of the total. Curiously, however, in the crisis that hit the food and canning industry in the late 1950s, leading to a reduction of over 7,000 employees between 1958-59 and 1959-60, women were the hardest hit: while 29 per cent of employees were coloured women in

1958-59, their numbers had fallen to 20.8 per cent in 1959-60. African women dropped from 20.1 per cent to 16.3 per cent of the total.<sup>28</sup> Although in the case of coloured women the reason for this drop is unclear, for black women it probably represents the increasing success of the apartheid state in including them in influx control. As a result of these tightened controls on the number of African women in urban areas, and particularly in the western Cape, which was designated a "coloured preference area", large numbers were expelled to rural reserves.

A similar tendency to favour the cheapest and ostensibly most easily controllable labour is evident in the changing proportion of black and coloured workers in the course of the 1950s. Whereas in 1950-51, 46 per cent of workers were coloured, their proportion of the total dropped gradually over the course of the decade to 40.5 per cent in 1958-59, and then rather precipitously to 33.4 per cent the following year. By contrast, the percentage of Africans grew steadily during this time, rising from 37.3 per cent of the work force in 1950-51 to 48.1 per cent in 1959-60.<sup>29</sup>

Although not substantial for most workers, a gender-based wage gap helps to explain women's attractiveness to employers. In 1947 women labourers under 18 earned 93.5% of male wages; those 18 and over 80%. A similar differential of 83% held among Grade IV workers (the lowest in the graded hierarchy).<sup>30</sup> The gender differential increased substantially among higher paid workers: women supervisors earning 67% of the pay of their male counterparts while forewomen earned only 56% of the pay of foremen.<sup>31</sup> Considering women's greater prevalence in seasonal work and probably among casual employees paid on a daily basis, their yearly earnings would have been substantially less than those of most men. Yet the lower differential in the most menial jobs gave employers less incentive to replace men with women in these positions. Indeed, in 1955 the Wage Board proposed a significant decrease in the wages of women labourers, which the union saw as introducing a new form of discrimination against women, thereby asserting the "superiority of the male" and providing employers with cheap labour. The Board was acting on a belief that it was "normal" in other countries to employ women in such work.<sup>32</sup>

The distribution of gender specific wage scales documents the clustering of women in the lower grades of work. By contrast with the separate male and female wage designations for grade IV employees, the lack of distinct scales for the higher grades (I-III) suggests the absence of women from these jobs. Although equally prevalent as "labourers", many black and coloured men occupied these graded positions, as well as jobs as food boilers, beginning at £2 1s a week, but with steadily rising wages. After three years, a qualified boiler earned £5 17s 6d a week. Most women who had escaped the classification of "labourer" became fruit molders or packers, earning £2 2s 6d but lacking any possibility of increasing their wages according to the length of their experience. (No parallel grouping existed for men.)<sup>33</sup>

Although the absence of racial segregation in factories and in many communities formed a strong base for building solidarity among all food workers, the structure of the industry, with its great demand for unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, contributed as well. The figures on this are striking: in 1945, in the dried fruit industry, 70 per cent of total employees were classified as labourers and nearly 95 per cent as either general workers or labourers.<sup>34</sup> Although general workers earned slightly more than labourers, the difference was not great; in Cape Town, for example, all wages in these two categories fell between £1 3s and £2 4s 1d per week. Within this small range of difference, the other two sources of distinction, apart from gender, were region and age.<sup>35</sup> Thus, from the beginning, black and coloured food workers did not face the degree of wage or skill distinction that was built into the structure of the garment industry. This relative lack of differential was displayed in most instances of conflict, where workers from one category usually supported those from another without hesitation, often forcing employers to seek scabs from outside the factory to keep production going during strikes.

If the forms of labour necessary for food and canning production encouraged inter-racial unity, even at a time when state policies were directed towards deliberately creating and fomenting racial disunity among working-class

people, the structure of the industry made this group of workers more difficult to organize than in most other comparable sectors of the economy in the 1940s. (The industrial decentralization policies that intensified from the 1950s would create comparable problems for clothing and textile organizers.) Not only did the seasonal nature of work make it difficult to keep branches active during the off-season, but of the twenty-seven branches of the Food and Canning Workers' Union listed in the 1957 Annual Report, twenty-four were scattered across the rural areas of the eastern and western Cape and up the coast of South-West Africa (a centre of the fishing industry). The remaining three included Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. Holding together such a dispersed organization required continual effort; but the necessity it created for training responsible and independent local leadership resulted in a high level of democracy within the union. Frances Baard, an African union leader in Port Elizabeth, recalled the intense concern of Ray Alexander, the first general secretary, with training local branch leaders. "She taught us how to run the union, and we learnt administration and taking minutes, how to chair a meeting, and about shop stewards and so on, so that the union should be properly run."<sup>36</sup>

A gap between permanent dwellers and those brought in from outside was also a significant source of division, especially in smaller centres like Ashton, Wolseley and Worcester. In Wolseley, for example, where migrant workers were either transported back and forth daily or lived in various forms of factory accommodation, the resulting residential dispersal was the major division among the workers. Goode judged that between the two groups "there was little mutual assistance or contact, nor was there much co-operation and community solidarity".<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, those who lived in factory housing faced the prospect of eviction if they took part in work stoppages.

While these structural conditions created particular constraints and opportunities that influenced the organizing of food and canning workers, both men and women, the strongly articulated political orientation of union leaders was equally vital in shaping the direction of the Food and Canning Workers' Union. Bettie du Toit, Secretary of the Johannesburg union, was important to the organizing process in that area; but the centre of the union lay in the Cape, where its energetic founder, Ray Alexander, took up the challenge of the Guardian article, bringing to the task both her energy and her dedication to a non-racial South Africa.

Born in Latvia into a religious Jewish family, Alexander became involved early in illegal socialist activity. By the age of 15, when she went to Riga to study for a teaching certificate at the technical college, she belonged to an organization whose members faced the continual threat of arrest. Fearing for her daughter's future under these conditions, Alexander's mother arranged to send her to South Africa, where she arrived in 1929 at the age of 16. While taking a job in a dress-making establishment, she taught herself English by working through Olive Schreiner's classic Women and Labour. It did not take her long to find political companionship in Cape Town.

Shortly after her arrival, Alexander began assisting the organizers of a number of different unions, doing office work, visiting workers in factories and homes, and taking part in picket lines during strikes. From 1933 onward she played a central role in forming numerous new local unions: the Commercial Employees' Union (forerunner of the National Union of Distributive Workers), the Oatmeal Workers, and the Non-European Railway Workers' Union. Later in the decade, as the moving force behind the new surge of unionization in Cape Town, she worked directly with chemical, sweet, laundry and tin workers, and shoe repairers. Late in 1940, Alexander turned her organizing abilities to the food and canning workers, whose numbers were mushrooming under wartime conditions.<sup>38</sup> At the time of her banning in 1954, a union flyer detailed her philosophy and the range of her concerns:

She not only organised workers in trade unions but fought against injustice to the workers, and has always been in the forefront of the struggle for freedom and justice. She also took part in the recent campaigns against apartheid on buses, fought for the

reduction in the price of bread, against the introduction of the Separate Representation of Voters Bill and has always been in the forefront of the struggle for democratic rights for all working men and women, and for an independent and democratic Trade Union movement.

A special meeting held at the time of her banning exuded a sense of reverence for Alexander and her accomplishments. As the main speaker, Oscar Mpetha of the African Food and Canning Workers' Union drew out such emotional audience responses as: "Until Ray came we were slaves" and "If Ray dies we must die. Hand in hand and with all our hearts we must try to get Ray back." Mpetha concluded: "Watch out that your children don't curse you when they grow up because you did nothing. If you feel she must come back, then say so." To which members responded resoundingly: "Yes!!!!"<sup>40</sup>

Alexander's philosophy, shaped by her active membership in the South African Communist Party, informed the position of the Food and Canning Workers' Union on political and trade union issues from the time of its inception: at a meeting on the banks of the Berg River in Cape Town on 6 February 1941. Less than a year later, in January 1942, a national union was formed, and by the end of that year the Wage Board was conducting its first investigation of the industry (a process that did not yield the promising results the union had hoped for). Under inflationary wartime conditions, however, and appealing to workers lacking any access to alternative rural resources, the union spread quickly. Within three years branches had developed in Paarl, Wellington, Worcester, Groot Drakenstein, Stellenbosch, Wolseley, Ashton, Lamberts Bay, Robertson, Port Elizabeth, Port Nolloth, Grabouw, Saldanha Bay, Ceres, Prince Alfred Hamlet, and Doornbaai.<sup>41</sup> Successful strikes in a number of areas, leading to increases in pay, helped to galvanize support, forcefully convincing workers of the material benefits that membership could offer them. By the time Alexander was banned in 1954, she had successfully won over workers of all communities. In a tribute to her success, the women of the African townships of Langa and Nyanga gave her, respectively, the names of Nozizwe and Nothemba, meaning "Trustworthy".<sup>42</sup> Frances Baard, a leading union activist, remembers the great affection workers felt for Alexander: "We used to call her our mother."<sup>43</sup>

Highlights of the early years included a strike at H Jones and Co, Paarl, in September 1941, that began over the firing of a worker for trade union organizing and expanded to include grievances over wages and working conditions. These events established a pattern of equal male and female involvement in local union activity; although the dismissed employee was a man who had worked at the factory for thirteen years, the other two workers penalized during the strike, for arranging to have the Inspector of Labour visit the factory to investigate complaints, were Mrs D Adriaanse and Miss Eva Arendse.<sup>44</sup> Arendse was soon to become the organizer for Paarl and the union vice-president.

With the success of the Paarl strike, other branches quickly followed suit, over the protests of canners, one of whom complained that the workers always had been "happy and content" until Ray Alexander came along and "upset" them.<sup>45</sup> Many of the early stoppages, at the Cape and elsewhere, showed patterns of solidarity that were to mark the history of the union during this period. On 29 November 1941, one hundred and fifty coloured women at the factory of Associated Canners Ltd, at Daljosophat, ceased work, demanding pay increases; the "lorry loads of girls" brought from Wellington as scabs refused to work when they realized why they were there.<sup>46</sup> In Durban, in December, 400 workers at Morton's jam factory left work, also over pay increases. For the coloured, Indian and African workers, both women and men, the precipitating incident came when 40 African women were put on short time. The pitifully paid women piece-workers who, lacking a guaranteed wage, had to appear at the factory each morning in case there was any work, reportedly reacted with joy to the increase they received when the strike was settled two months later.<sup>47</sup> Similar instances of solidarity occurred repeatedly. For example, during a 1957 strike at the Spekenham meat factory, legal for the coloured workers but not for the Africans,<sup>48</sup> the coloured union raised money to pay the fines imposed on African participants.

This solidarity extended to efforts to divide workers on the basis of gender. In 1959, when workers at LKB were notified that the pay cuts decreed in Wage Determination 179 of the previous year were to begin with men in the carpentry shop, these men filed out and submitted their reference books for discharge. As the strike spread to the entire factory, the managers tried to call separate meetings for men and women. The women refused to be separated and chastized management for its divide and rule policies:<sup>49</sup> in particular, for telling the men that the women already had accepted the cuts.

The Wage Board recommendation for the food industry announced in July 1943 provoked another round of strike action. Instead of raising salaries, the proposals degraded certain categories of work from higher paid "general workers" to "labourers".<sup>50</sup> When managers of the Rhodes Fruit Farms Canning Factory attempted to implement these recommendations, a lightning strike forced them to restore all cuts.<sup>51</sup> Local strikes at Wellington and Stellenbosch shortly thereafter reflected the general discontent that the determination had created.<sup>52</sup>

The success of the union also generated new grounds for protest among the workers as numerous union activists were victimized; being female sometimes seemed to create particular management disfavour. A labour official investigating the degrading and firing of a number of women involved in the union called in Annie McKenzie, one of four who had been dismissed, and demanded to know why she had called on people to strike. When asked why he had singled her out, the official replied "it was because she appeared to have brains".<sup>53</sup> Frances Beard was penalized somewhat differently: by being demoted from a supervisor to an ordinary worker. In fact, according to union arguments, she ought to have been classified as a forewoman because her work entailed instructing others.<sup>54</sup>

Women's dominance during the late 1953-early 1954 strike in Wolseley further illuminates their significance in union affairs. Although primarily a dispute about pay, early in the negotiations another grievance was raised: the company's decision to hand out wages on Saturday instead of Friday. Primarily affecting women, this new policy left them no time to buy food for the week because of early shop-closing on Saturday. Whether this decision riled women particularly is uncertain; but their heavy involvement, apparent from the start, is not. The Cape Times described the action as a strike of "several hundred Coloured and Native women", a depiction verified by arrest figures: of the 131 people tried for striking illegally, only 18 were men. Nor were the women involved only those who lacked domestic responsibility. The 380 strikers arrested on January 21 1954 included ninety-six women with small children for whom relatives and friends pooled their funds to raise bail money. Perhaps more significant than women's predominance among those who ceased work, the leaders of the action were exclusively female. The three workers dismissed from their jobs as the union's "leading members" were all women: Annie McKenzie, Rachel Williams, and Margarita Bastiaan, and the three others credited with ensuring regular strike committee meetings and keeping up worker morale were Rachel Sass, Janetta Crotz, and Sophie Kriger.<sup>55</sup>

The union's successes in the early years did not imply an absence of problems, internal or external. Some branches were better organized than others, and the strength of branches varied over time. Falling behind in collecting subscriptions was not uncommon, but became a serious problem at times when Conciliation Boards were appointed and the Labour Department checked union registers to ascertain whether the union was sufficiently representative of workers in the industry. In 1953, for example, in a memo headed SOS, Alexander reminded Paarl officials to see that all workers were paid up. Implying the need for on-going organization and communication, she noted: "The trouble is that our members have forgotten what the Union has done for them, and they do not realise what their lives would have been without the union. They also do not realise what the Union is still capable of doing for them if they stand together!"<sup>56</sup>

The seasonal nature of the work force also presented continual organizing problems, as Frances Beard recalls. Not only did many work for no more than six-month periods each year, but the same people were not necessarily hired year after year. "The first people to come there get a job. And so each year we must start educating the workers again." Furthermore, branches sometimes lay dormant

during the off-season, possibly finding it difficult to maintain their momentum at a time when only the most skilled, best-paid workers were employed. "Every year", Beard explained, "we used to get some new people on the committee too, because those others were perhaps gone, or they won't be taken back into the factory when work starts again because the managers know them now as union people."<sup>57</sup>

Despite its unquestioned success in many areas, the structural difficulties imposed by geographical dispersion and the problems of organizing a seasonal and partly migrant labour force were impossible to overcome completely. And, by the late 1950s, severe new external pressures compounded these difficulties. For one thing, the expansive conditions of the early 1940s had come to an end; in 1958, a government study concluded that the food and canning industry had entered a period of stagnation.<sup>58</sup> A wave of dismissals reflected this economic crisis. But political pressures created equal concerns; Ray Alexander, Becky Lan and other officials had been banned, and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956 threatened to expel African and coloured workers from the higher level positions that a few had managed to attain, in order to replace them with whites.<sup>59</sup> Two years later, the Minister of Labour, disregarding union objections, introduced Wage Determinations Nos 179 and 180, which actually reduced the wages then in effect.<sup>60</sup> Further blows came in 1959 with amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act that increased pressure for racial segregation in the union and a government declaration that the canning of fruit, vegetables, meat<sup>61</sup> and fish was an "essential service", making strikes in the industry illegal.

While branches always varied in their effectiveness, these pressures certainly made an impact on the union. The Annual Report of 1958 noted that Morning Star had not appeared for six months, while Oscar Mpetha of the AFCWU lamented the following year that Paarl lacked "the same spirit as they had before". He wondered whether this was due to the banning of Comrades Ray Alexander and Frank Marquard.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, the response to new organizing efforts in East London was described as "poor" as a result of employer intimidation and police interference, while a letter to the Port Elizabeth branch expressed shock that its officials had not notified the central office of the employers' intention to introduce Wage Determination 179.<sup>63</sup>

In April 1959, in the midst of these pressures, a disturbing event occurred. Intruders who designated themselves as the Klu Klux Klan vandalized the head office, destroying typewriters and adding machines, setting fire to a duplicating machine, tearing up and pouring ink over files and writing obscene slogans on the walls in Afrikaans and English. In a deliberately symbolic act, they destroyed the English dictionary, but not its Afrikaans counterpart. This violent assault, coming at an uneasy moment, must have made members and leaders alike feel that, under contemporary South African conditions, their principles were growing increasingly dangerous to maintain.<sup>64</sup>

- 1 As part of a larger work on women industrial workers in South Africa, this chapter refers several times to the Transvaal garment workers. For further information, see my article in the edited collection by Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa (London and New York: Longman, 1987).
- 2 This is the first of two closely connected chapters on the food and canning workers. The second chapter, which discusses more fully policies on race, politics and community involvement and presents the concluding argument on women's participation, was discussed at the seminar.
- 3 Richard Goode, "For a Better Life: the Food and Canning Workers Union 1941 to 1975", BA (Hons) thesis, University of Cape town, April 1983, pp 3-5.
- 4 Ibid., Table 2, and Guardian, 4 September 1941, citing a Star article of 6 July. In addition, during the five years of the war, the number of factories in the industry nearly doubled.
- 5 Union of South Africa, Board of Trade and Industries, The Fruit and Vegetable Canning Industry, Report No 296 (Pretoria, 1947), p 7.
- 6 Goode, op. cit., pp 7, 12, 16, 19, 20. Similar concentration took place in the fish industry at this time.
- 7 Union of South Africa, Report of Commission of Inquiry Regarding Cape Coloured Population of the Union (Pretoria, 1937), UG 54-1937, pp 69-70.
- 8 Ibid., p 69.
- 9 Ibid., p 123.
- 10 Native Laws Commission of Enquiry, Minutes of Evidence, Vol V, Evidence of H J Simons, Cape Town 19.9.46, p 293. I am indebted to Deborah Posel for this reference.
- 11 Ibid., p 15.
- 12 Tom Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945 (London and New York: Longman, 1983), pp 48-49.
- 13 Lodge, op. cit., p 55; and Tom Lodge, "Political Mobilisation During the 1950s: an East London Case Study", in Marks and Trapido, op. cit., pp 330-31.
- 14 Guardian, 15 December 1939.
- 15 Food and Canning Workers' Union, I, 15th January 1942, p 3, and Union of South Africa, Department of Social Welfare, "Report of a Committee of Enquiry Appointed to Enquire into Conditions Existing on the Cape Flats and Similarly Affected Areas in the Cape Division", 1942, p 45. The minimum effective wage was £3.19.11 for women and £4.6.8 for men.
- 16 Guardian, 18 June 1942.
- 17 Guardian, 15 December 1939. See also 21 August 1941, and "Elizabeth Mafekeng", FSAW, F (1).
- 18 Cape Times, 29 November 1941.
- 19 "Report on Organization of African Workers in Port Elizabeth by A Lynn Saffery for the South African Committee on Industrial Relations", Johannesburg, 17 April 1942. RR 63/42. A L Saffery Papers.
- 20 Letter to Mr Ivan L Walker, Secretary for Labour, from the Secretary, 27 August 1942.

- 21 Guardian, 8 January 1942.
- 22 "Quarterly Branch Minutes", p 9.
- 23 "Minutes of Second Quarterly Branch Delegates Conference", FCWU, Cape Town, 6 July 1952, p 8.
- 24 FCWU, Circular Letter No 15/48, 18 October 1948. By the late 1950s, only food workers in large urban centres could collect unemployment benefits. From 1946 to 1951, however, those in the country areas had contributed to the fund; they were excluded from benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1949. The Minister of Labour displayed the political pressures he was responding to when he ruled in 1959 that unemployed seasonal workers in canning "must seek work on the farms". Quoted in New Age, 22 October 1959.
- 25 This alternative work is mentioned in several different sources: Richard Goode, "Struggle and Strikes in the Cannery: the Great Wolseley Strike", unpublished paper, Cape Town, p 6; Frances Beard, personal communication, 27.1.1984; "Elizabeth Mafekeng", p 2, FSAW, F (1).
- 26 According to BTT, "Fruit and Vegetable Canning", p 7, during the war, whereas the number of Europeans increased by 139 per cent, the number of non-Europeans rose by 521 per cent, shifting the ratio from 3.2 to 1 in 1938/39 to 8.3 to 1 in 1944/45.
- 27 The statistics are from Langeberg Kooperasie Beperk, List of employees present and absent on 27.1.48. ARB 1052/679.
- 28 The proportion of coloured workers would have remained higher in the Cape than elsewhere.
- 29 The proportion of coloured workers would have remained higher in the Cape than elsewhere.
- 30 By the late 1950s, a Grade V category had been added; during negotiations, according to the Cape Times, employees argued for an absence of sex or age differentiation for this category because employers were hiring lower-paid females and juveniles "for work that should be done by men".
- 31 These differentials are calculated from lists for the districts of the Cape, Wynberg and Simonstown. FCWU, 1947. SATLC Dd 9.39.
- 32 R Lan, "Objections of the Food & Canning Workers' Union to the Wage Board's Recommendations for the Metal Containers and Allied Products Industry and the Preserved Food Industry in the Union of South Africa", 25 November 1955, p 1.
- 33 FCWU, 1947. The other group of women in the industry, predominantly white, worked as clerical employees. Although beginning at the same wage as male clerks (interestingly, £1 16s 11d, less than that of women moulders and packers), by their sixth year, as qualified employees, their wages of £3 9s 6d were only 60% of those of qualified men.
- 34 Between 1945 and 1960, the ratio of lower paid to higher paid workers increased, according to Board of Trade and Industries, "Investigation into the Fruit and Vegetable Canning Industry", Report No 676, August 1960, p 45.
- 35 Food and Canning Workers Union, IV, 2 (August 1945), pp 2-3.
- 36 Frances Beard, as told to Barbie Schreiner, My Spirit Is Not Banned (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), p 23.
- 37 Goode, "Struggle and Strikes", pp 7-8.
- 38 Rex Close, New Life (Cape Town: Food and Canning Workers' Union, 1950), pp 27-32, and FCWU, "Proud Record of Ray Alexander".

- 39 "Proud Record"
- 40 "Minutes of Special General Meeting", 3 October 1953.
- 41 See Goode, "For a Better Life", for a detailed chronology of these developments.
- 42 Annual Report, FCWU, submitted to the 13th Annual National Conference, Cape Town, 28-29 August 1954.
- 43 Baard, op. cit., p 23.
- 44 Guardian, 4 September 1941. Three months later Arendse became organizer for the Paarl branch and vice-president of the union.
- 45 Guardian, 20 August 1942.
- 46 Cape Times, 29 November 1941.
- 47 Guardian, 23 December 1941 and 12 February 1942.
- 48 Muriel Horrell, South Africa's Non-White Workers (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1956), p 82.
- 49 Goode, "For a Better Life", p 112.
- 50 Guardian, 22 July 1943. The next determination for the industry, in 1958, recommended wage rates lower than those most employers were paying.
- 51 Guardian, 13 January 1944.
- 52 Guardian, 27 January 1944.
- 53 Letters from R Lan to the Divisional Inspector, Labour Department, 11 January 1954, 18 January 1954, 20 January 1958. SATLC. Dc 8.108.
- 54 Letter from Oscar Mpetha, General Secretary, to Mrs Francis Baart (sic), 12 July 1951, RA/VY, REF, AFCWU/127/51; and letter from O Mpetha to the Branch Secretary, AFCWU, Port Elizabeth, 25 September 1951, OM/VY, REF, AFCWU/51.
- 55 See "Statement by Food & Canning Workers Union Relating to the Contraventions of the Industrial Conciliation Act by Messrs Wolseley Fruit Canning Company of Wolseley", p 1; Cape Times, 15, 17 December 1953; Goode, "Struggle and Strikes", p 46; Goode, "For a Better Life", p 88; Morning Star/Ikwezi Lomso II, 2 (February/March 1954), 2; and Annual Report, FCWU, 28-29 August 1954, p 6. Six of eight members of the strike committee were women.
- 56 Letter from Ray Alexander, Cape Town, 8 September 1953.
- 57 Baard, op. cit., p 25.
- 58 Union of South Africa, "Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Policy Relating to the Protection of Industries", Pretoria, 1958-59, UG 36/1958, p 58.
- 59 L Abrahams, "Memorandum Submitted to the Industrial Tribunal: Labour Position in the Western Province in Terms of Section 17 (8) (g) of the Industrial Conciliation Act, 1956", 14.11.1958, p 1.
- 60 Annual Report, FCWU, 12-13 September 1959, p 2.
- 61 Goode, "For a Better Life", p 105.
- 62 Annual Report, 1959, p 10, and Minutes of Branch Executive Committee and Shop Stewards Meeting of FCWU, Paarl Branch, 22.4.1959.
- 63 Minutes of Management Committee Meeting, FCWU, Zuider Paarl, 29 November 1959,

p 4.

64 See Minutes of Special Management Committee Meeting, FCWU, 28 April 1959, p 1,  
for an account of the attack.