

A TRADE UNION ORGANIZER IN DURBAN:

M B YENGWA, 1943-44

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"Black" Trade Unions in Natal

From c.1934 ... many new trades unions were formed in Durban by Black workers (mainly African and Indian) either along racially divided or non-racial lines. Thus a new phase in union organising began after the Great Depression, and it was Durban rather than any other industrial area of South Africa that was the main centre of strike activity. [1]

(Vishnu Padayachee, Shahid Vawda, Paul Tichmanni)

This quotation, taken from a monograph written in 1985 by Vishnu Padaychee et al, holds out the promise of a study of the black wartime trade unions in Natal. However, the publication (as its title indicates) is concerned almost entirely with the organization of Indian workers in Durban in the period 1930-50. There are problems in the discussion of the Indian workers that deserve critical attention, but, as my concern is with the African unions, it can only be noted that there is little or no reference to them in the study.

An examination of the black workers of Natal in the period after the depression (1929-31) indicates that, over and above all other issues, the competition between Indians and Africans in commerce and industry determined the relationship between these two communities. If this factor is ignored the history of the trade unions, at least during the period of this study, lacks one of its most important dimensions.

The different situations in which the two black communities found themselves was a result, at least in part, of the way in which they entered the labour market. The Indians came originally from India and Ceylon as two distinct groups: either as indentured labourers, recruited for employment on the sugar plantations or later for the collieries; or as merchants, teachers, priests, and so on, to offer services to their community. Africans, on the other hand, entered the labour market from adjoining Reserves, first as migratory workers and then as permanent urban dwellers. They worked initially as unskilled labourers, domestic servants, or in the collieries, and a minority entered other occupations, as hawkers, jinrickshas, teachers, nurses, priests, and so on.

The Indian and African workers, often working side by side, came with different cultural backgrounds, languages, religions, and social customs. The fact that the two communities were themselves not homogeneous, and that intra-ethnic (and inter-caste) differences were divisive, did not lessen the tensions between Africans and Indians - either at the work place or in the segregated townships.

Issues of ethnicity and of culture did not always act as a barrier to inter-group co-operation, nor to joint organization, nor joint action. But the barriers existed, and in a society in which racism was ubiquitous this separation of the work force was exploited by employers. By dividing skills and wages on racial lines, and by employing the existing legislation, workers were set against workers. And this pattern was replicated in areas where the two communities lived side by side: hawkers and traders confronted each other across the ethnic divide and, as Iain Edwards has shown, this provided the social setting against which the communal riots of January 1949 must be understood. [2]

Furthermore, legislation divided the workers in the work place and consequently in the trade unions. Africans were excluded from most skilled employment by the Apprenticeship Act, and denied trade union rights under the Industrial Conciliation (IC) Act. Consequently, they had no representation on Industrial Councils and were excluded from participation in the bargaining process that determined wages and work conditions. In some instances, Indian workers joined the white unions and were represented at the Industrial Council, in other cases they formed and led unions to which Indian and African workers were recruited. Even in these cases, it was difficult to maintain unity. Tension between Africans and Indians was exacerbated by competition for the same jobs: by Indian resentment when they were replaced by Africans, and African resentment because Indians had the jobs they coveted. There was similar competition among traders/hawkers in the townships, and this both echoed conditions and reverberated at the work place.

Padayachee *et al* are aware of the problems that emerged from the racial split among the black workers, and they include studies of unions that organized both Africans and Indians. They detail the employer's use of the pass laws to dismiss African workers on strike at the Durban Falkirk (Steel) Co in 1937, to split the work force along race lines (p 96). At the same time the intervention in support of the Indian workers of A I Kaje of the Natal Indian Congress (and of the NIC itself), and the secretary to the Agent-General of India in South Africa, could only widen the gap between Indians and Africans (pp 97-103). The implications are clear, but this is not explicitly discussed in the monograph.

The strike at the Dunlop Rubber Company was more complicated than that at Falkirk. The central issue was the company's replacement of Indian workers by lower paid Africans. An equally important issue was the setting up of a company union to break the existing Natal Iron and Steel Workers Union. Workers from both race groups came out on strike, but, despite black working-class solidarity at the factory, African scab labour was brought in from the Reserves and most of the strikers dismissed.

It is thus strange that Padayachee *et al* can say without qualification that "a new phase of organization" was initiated, and that "many new trades unions were formed in Durban by Black workers (mainly African and Indian) either along racially divided or non-racial lines". This obscures the central problems confronting the working class, and *ipso facto* their trade unions in Natal.

From 1934 through 1941, African workers (toget workers aside) were either unorganized or belonged to unions in which Indians predominated. They were usually organized into a special branch, not represented on the union's executive; not present at Industrial Council meetings; and entirely dependent on others to secure them improvements. Africans could not become union secretaries and could not initiate strike action. That is, they were always second-class citizens, mirroring in the trade unions their position in the larger South African society.

The surprising feature of Natal's labour movement is the absence of an independent African trade union movement when such bodies were being established in every big commercial or industrial town in South Africa. Besides the problems raised by the migratory character of much of Natal's African labour force, some of the blame must be laid at the feet of the political movements in Natal, none of whom paid particular attention to the organization of the African working class. Members of the Natal Labour Party, some of whom were more helpful than Labour members elsewhere in South Africa with regard to black unions, were primarily interested in the white (or white-led) unions. The CPSA focussed attention on the white (or Indian-led) unions; the NIC was exclusively interested in questions involving Indians; and the ANC, despite encouraging the formation of unions, made no effort to assist such bodies.

Natal's War-Time African Unions

In investigating the birth and demise of the war-time African unions, two articles in the black press of Natal, *Inkundla ya Bantu* in 1943 and *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1950, offer some initial guidelines. Making allowance for the known bias of both papers, these articles illustrated the chequered history of industrial organization in Natal during the war.

The *Inkundla* article of 30 October 1943 lamented the lack of interest shown by Africans in organizing their own trade unions. The anonymous author's prejudices were apparent. He claimed without substantiation that the explanation lay in the control exercised by communists in Durban, and the Africans' fear that involvement in such unions would prejudice their plea for higher wages. He also said that many unions were organized by Indians who spoke about equality and the identity of workers' interests but did nothing to convince members of their own community that Africans were equal:

They exploit African members to further the case of the Indian and Coloured in getting higher wages and insisting on asking less for the African 'because he is not recognised'.

Inkundla's anti-communism and narrow nationalism was well known, and it was thus no surprise that it advanced the claim that "at the present moment no member outside the Communist Party can successfully work as a trade unionist without creating a clash and division". The issue was more complex than the author indicated, and this will become evident below.

On 30 November *Inkundla* printed a letter from Rowley Arenstein of the CPSA. He denied these accusations but made no reference to independent African trade unions in Durban. Members of the CPSA did not pay much attention to their existence outside the Transvaal, yet, even the writer in *Inkundla*, who obviously wanted African-led unions in Natal, was misinformed about the state of working-class organizations in the province. Over the previous decade colliery workers had participated in several strikes, and the sacking of militant miners by a repressive mine management prevented their forming a union. Then, there was an independent black union of **togt** workers in the docks. In fact, in August 1941, *Inkundla* had commended 1,500 of these workers for securing a pay increase of 8d per day by striking, and in September 1942, under the leadership of Zulu Pangola, the **togt** workers again took strike action.

Also, in January 1942 the Durban African Municipal Workers' Union and a branch of the Johannesburg African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union were inaugurated (*Guardian*, 29 January, 3 February). By October there were at least two Natal-based African unions: of municipal and of iron and steel metal workers. The unions did not make much progress, primarily because antagonistic employers would not enter into negotiations. Inevitably, the newly recruited members stopped paying subscriptions, leaving the unions in sore financial straits. The unions appealed for assistance from their inception. On 20 October 1942 Sydney Myeza, founder and secretary of the Municipal Workers' Union, wrote to Dr Xuma (among others) for help:

You will no doubt realize there is a great general upsurge of Trade Unionism in among the non-european workers evident today, until lately however the Africans have lagged behind the other sections of non-europeans in this respect but today we find that they are awakening to realize what trade unionism means.

Myeza then claimed that the two unions (of municipal workers and iron and steel metal workers) "provided a fairly well organized industrial centre". But they needed financial support to pay organizers, to secure offices and office equipment to embark on the work they

intended taking up (Xuma papers, ABX 102042). There is no indication that Dr Xuma responded and it is doubtful whether the unions got support from other quarters.

Yet, within two years, there were at least nineteen African trade unions (as well as the dock workers' union). Some were branches of Transvaal-based unions, and a few were "B" branches of unions with a mixed membership, but the others were Durban-led, independent unions (Ballinger papers, Cape Town). Five of the independent unions met in conference in October or November 1943, and formed the Natal Federation of African Trade Unions (NFATU). J D Nyoasa of the African Bakers and Confectionery Union (based in Johannesburg), in his opening address condemned ten African unions in Natal "who belong to Europeans and Indians. That is what Wilson Cele [secretary of the Sugar Workers Union] and Philemon Tsele [national organizer of the Railway Workers Union] want, as they follow the line of the Communist Party." He moved the formation of the NFATU so that Africans could solve their own problems. "They did not want mixed unions because other workers had better privileges, and better wages. Africans wanted to run their own affairs, and want equal rights with the unions of whites, Indians, and coloureds." The NFATU was established and a council elected with D G Mdluli (African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union) as president, Thomas Mofokeng (Iron, Steel and Metal Workers Union) as vice-president, Hubert Sishi (Hotel, Flats and Tea Room Workers Union) as secretary, and Myeza vice-secretary (*Ilanga*, 6 November 1943).

The unions were initially all centred in Durban, where 67 per cent of all industries were situated. T H Gwala, writing in *Inkululeko* of 3 December 1945, said that there had been no unions in Pietermaritzburg before 1944. In that year five unions, or branches of unions, had been formed. A branch of the Distributive Workers Union was also started in Ladysmith in November 1944.

There are no indications that the new unions were dissatisfied, because existing unions were not militant enough. The trade union organizers harped on racial issues, and claimed that Africans could handle union affairs as effectively as any other representatives. In 1976 I interviewed J D Nyoasa in Geneva, and in answer to my questions the same points were made. There was no intimation that the new unions wanted more militant action, or that they were dissatisfied with the CPSA brake on strikes because of the war effort. The predominant motif of Nyoasa's comments was that Indians had kept Africans out of jobs and the new unions were formed to assert African rights in Natal.

There was a spate of strikes in Durban throughout 1942, not dissimilar to industrial action elsewhere in South Africa. Workers with no past history of strike action took part in these stoppages. In some cases workers were dismissed or replaced, and in a few they won some concessions. But there were no great successes. In a special report on labour in Natal, dated 17 November 1942, the Society of Friends of Africa stated:

Conditions for employment of Non-Europeans, especially Africans, in Natal have for a long time been regarded as among the least satisfactory in the Union. This applies not only to industry ... but also to agriculture, these two fields meeting in the growing and crushing of sugar cane, which, though a rural occupation should be scheduled under the industrial laws of the country.

Wage rates for the lower paid or so-called unskilled workers in Durban, Pietermaritzburg and the smaller urban areas of Natal have always been exceptionally low. This has been due to a number of factors of which the most decisive has been the assumption by employers of labour in Natal that their lower paid workers are migratory labour coming in for limited periods of employment with the requirements of an individual and not that of the average family ...

The low level of remuneration for unskilled workers in a city like Durban, aggravated as it is by the rising cost of living, is bringing with it not only the inevitable nemesis of tragic ill-health ... but in steadily rising discontent that has gripped Non-European races throughout the world under the pressure of this war ...

(Xuma papers, ABX 421117a)

Although large-scale industrial unrest might have been expected, there were no recorded strikes in 1943, and only four in 1944, and two in 1945. Few of the strikes lasted more than one day, none of them had any impact on production, and the industrial scene was (at least outwardly) peaceful. [3]

There were some obvious reasons for this lack of work stoppages. Most of the white-led unions eschewed strikes and, after 1941, those unions controlled by the CPSA or in which the CPSA had any influence discouraged any action that might hinder the war effort. The NFATU attitude to stoppages during the war is uncertain, but the unions were inefficient and unable to campaign. Inevitably, the federation collapsed, and the unions were little more than paper organizations.

Facts about African trade unions in Natal - of dates of launching, of successes, or of collapse - are hard to get. It was claimed that at one stage there were 23 African trade unions in Natal. Yet, according to Ringrose, only twelve trade unions were entirely African in composition by 1946; and only seven in 1948. [4] By 1949 this was reduced to five. [5]

Looking back on the period, H I E Dhlomo, writing as "Busy Bee" in *Ilanga Lase Natal* on 18 February 1950, said:

There was a time when quite a number of capable and enthusiastic African young men were in charge of many trade unions in the city. They made quite some noise about the virtue and power of trade unionism. And they were correct because organised labour can do much for the liberation of a people. The African workers of our cities can be the spearhead of our national organizations.

The problem with mixed unions, he said, was that Africans could never be secretaries of registered unions by law. Those working in mixed unions were associated with whites and Indians as members of the CPSA - and that opened them to attack by ANC leaders, who accused them of being "agents of Moscow, and henchmen of the Indians". He then claimed, without adducing any evidence, that:

The African trade unionists tried to emulate the Indian trade unionists who ousted the old and moderate Natal Indian Congress leaders and they, together with African intellectuals, tried to organise the people. But the trade unionists and intellectuals could not agree among themselves about who would take the official positions.

The ANC leadership was too astute politically for these people, he wrote, and they also threatened to organize their own trade unions. There was even talk of resuscitating the ICU. That was not all:

But even on purely trade union matters, African trade unionists had many difficulties and obstacles. First there was the problem of the efficiency and ignorance of some trade unionists themselves. In some cases this led to a misuse of funds. In others it resulted in bad judgment and poor administration.

He continued: some co-operated with the Indians, because they were not formally recognized and could not appear before wage boards. Others decided that they could carry out all the functions of trade unionists and carried on. Over and above these difficulties, they could not find suitable offices, and could not manage on the subscriptions (paid tardily) by their members:

One by one, the once enthusiastic and fervently political young men dropped out of the trade union movement. Today all is quiet on this front. Only a few African trade unionists are left in the field.

This was no analysis and, except for the togt workers, the history of the Natal African trade unions remains untold. [6] The Transvaal-based Council of Non-European Trade Unions estimated African trade union membership during the war as 150,000. The figures they gave were for unions across the country, but excluded Natal. Perhaps this was in deference to the mixed unions, or perhaps there was little to record. Nyoasa, when interviewed, said little about their progress, and Ringrose, who made many claims for these unions in his book, provides no information on their activities. I have found no information about the workers who joined the independent unions, and no union papers. This might seem to close the subject until such information becomes available.

It is fortuitous that a personal account of trade unions in Durban became available through interviews with M B Yengwa. I had no knowledge of Yengwa's association with a trade union, and in recording his story I was concerned to learn about the Congress Youth League in Natal. It was then that I heard of his experience as an organizer in a mixed trade union. A fuller account followed in the recording by Beverley Naidoo [7] - and this makes it possible to provide one account of trade unions at the time, and to catch the flavour of working-class organization that is not available in organizational records. Yengwa's account (with some interpolations) is taken from the two interviews.

Interviews with M B Yengwa [8]

M B Yengwa was born in 5 December 1923. His father had been active in the early anti-pass campaigns of 1919 and, although poor, had maintained his independence by working with a span of oxen that belonged to a co-operative. His mother had been a teacher, until forced to stop work owing to ill health, and the family moved to the town. Yengwa was sent to school despite the expense involved, and in 1942 completed secondary school. He sought work and even applied to the Native Affairs Department - and, had he been accepted, his life would have been very different. "BH: You would have been giving out passes? MB: That's right. I would have been giving out passes and shouting at poll-tax payers, and that I would have regretted."

The story is taken up in the BN tape:

It was by accident rather than by conviction or any desire to improve the lot of workers that I was first drawn into the trade union movement. [A] member of my father's church told me about a job which had become vacant in the Liquor and Catering Trades Employees' Union. The definition of 'employee' in the IC Act of 1924 excluded Natives, so the LCTEU was a union for Europeans, Indians and Coloureds. The Chairman was invariably white, and the secretary Asian. It had, however, a 'Native Section' which required an organizer. It was in the interest of Whites to have Africans organized and so prevent themselves from being undercut. A type of job reservation already existed since the Liquor Act automatically prevented Africans from being employed as waiters in fully licensed hotels. The Union's main members were drawn from Indians and Whites who were employed in the more skilled work as waiters, chefs, chamber maids and houskeepers (who were

always white). Africans were chiefly employed as unskilled labourers - kitchen hands and bedroom 'boys'.

"I wasn't aware, however, that the vacancy in the 'Native Section' had been created by the dismissal of the previous organizer, Hubert Sishi. He had been inciting African employees to form a completely separate union which wouldn't be controlled by Whites and Indians.

"... My interviewer was the secretary, Samuel Joseph, who immediately impressed me with his authority and dignity as well as his knowledge of trade union affairs. He was a highly articulate and able organizer who had risen from the ranks of waiter at a licensed hotel to become an acknowledged leader of the hotel workers in the hotel industry in Natal. When I showed him my matriculation certificate he was impressed and engaged me immediately!"

(Samuel Joseph was "a member of the Executive Committee of the trade union leadership of the Natal Indian Congress. He was opposed to the Communist Party, but this was never discussed at the union." [BH tape])

The BN tape continues:

"On employing me, Samuel Joseph stated that I was not to engage in politics and I was particularly warned not to join the Communist Party. Since I had never heard of it before, I accepted the condition without reservation. Interestingly enough, when one of my mother's brothers, a minister in the Lutheran Church, asked me where I was working and I told him I was a trade union organizer, he took a long time to respond. At last he said directly, "My son, you must never become a member of the Communist Party!"

Yengwa resented conditions at the union offices in the prestigious Colonization Chambers in West Street. As an African, he was not permitted to use the lift to the third floor, although Samuel Joseph could. Yengwa's duties were to collect subscriptions, and act as interpreter during investigations into disputes by representatives of the Industrial Council. "At Colonization Chambers there was a general office, where all union members except Africans came to pay their monthly subscriptions or lodge their complaints. The African section members came to a separate room. My duties were to attend for a short morning period to any workers' problems such as dismissals without notice, or underpayment of wages, and to bring any irregularities to the attention of Mr Joseph. I would then leave the office shortly after ten, carrying my little leather bag filled with a receipt book and membership cards."

Yengwa found many workers opposed to the union "because of the work of the previous organizer, Hubert Sishi. On being dismissed, he had taken revenge and began exploiting the underlying weaknesses of the Union's structure for wrong, highly emotional, tribalist reasons. Sishi tried to persuade workers to defect from the LCETU because it was led by a 'Coolie' - a derogatory, imperialist word. We fought his tribalist manoeuvres and he lost. Soon he was recruited into a singularly racist and tribalist niche, himself becoming a 'Bantu Radio' announcer."

I found two African organizers already working for the Union. Eliezer Cele ... and Japhet Mthembu ... Cele and I were allocated specific areas of operation, mine being central Durban and the Beach front. Thembu, as Samuel Joseph called him, was not given a specific area but [allocated] hotels where there was a high concentration of employees. There were a couple of hotels with liquor licences, like the Marine and the Royal, that employed up to a hundred workers each.

[On the first day Mthembu accompanied Yengwa.]

His task was to introduce me to the workers as their new organizer and it was he who taught me the ropes. Carrying out little leather bags of the type used by school boys, we set out ... to the Marine Hotel. The workers' quarters were right inside the hotel premises. The gate was locked and entry and exit from the premises were strongly controlled. Mthembu gave a low whistle and called softly and rhythmically 'We Zaba-nja-na ...!' A corpulent middle-aged man emerged cautiously from the buildings, bare footed and wearing a khaki 'boy's' suit.

'Oh! It's you Mthembu.'

... The premises were big, facing two streets. The 'boy's quarters' were very overcrowded, with eight to ten double bunks to a room with furniture, chairs or wardrobes. Zabanjana Mkhize from Umkomaas magisterial district was the induna or 'boss-boy' at the hotel.

Mkhize supervised the work of the bedroom staff and arranged weekly days off and annual leave. Although he could not employ or fire, he could recommend workers (usually from his own district) and this was usually agreed to by the manager of the hotel.

Once seated, perched on the sides of a lower bunk bed - bending the neck in case our heads knocked against the upper bunk - the greetings began.

'We greet you Mkhize.'

'Yes, we greet you Mthembu.'

'How are you [plural] Mkhize?'

'Oh, we are still around despite famine at home due to the drought. I have never experienced such famine, I swear by my sister ZaseMbo.'

'Oh, it is all over the world you of eMbo. You are not the only ones. Even at KwaNaba the sun destroyed all the mealie crops. We do not know how we shall survive.'

'Indeed, Mthembu. Indeed it is so.'

'Mkhize, this is Yengwa, my young man, the new organizer who has been sent by Mr Joseph. He is not Sishi, who is out to deceive people and break away from the union and form another one led by himself. Can you call all your men to come and renew their tickets and join the union please.'

'Oh, person of Bathenjini, save us from the tsotsis. No one will believe Sishi, except the gullible.'

All the men were still on duty in the bedrooms. Inside the men's sleeping quarters were traditionalist young women dressed within a distinct Baca fashion, a red ochre dress length wrapped around the waist with a large knot right on the navel and large grass anklets worn around the lower legs. The large anklets made a young woman walk with the graceful limp of a pullet about to be heavy in laying. There was a controlled silence and restraint inside the men's rooms so that 'Abelungu' (the white men) wouldn't complain that the natives were making a 'chattering noise' and draw the attention of the 'Menenja' (manager). He would certainly have evicted the women from the premises or had them charged for trespassing and unlawfully entering an urban area.

Men began to drift into the rooms just before mid-day and when all had come together Mthembu began to speak. He wiped off his forehead, nose and moustache - a typical Pavlovian reflex {sic} I was to find when he was about to launch into a serious speech:

'Men of Marine hotel, I have come to introduce my young man, Yengwa, to organize you into a union. He has been sent by Mr Samuel Joseph and has good credentials. I felt I should let you know his face so that you may know who he is when he comes to collect union fees from you. As you know some of you have been confused by selfish people: asking you to abandon your old union led by Samuel Joseph and join the new one led by Sishi. Who is Hubert Sishi? A mere boy born yesterday. Only yesterday I taught him how to organise workers and he failed to do his work properly and got dismissed.'

He continued attacking Sishi and extolling the virtues of the Indian-led union, and in conclusion said:

'Now I leave Yengwa to work with you. Trust him. He is from the same district as mine, the son of Mthonzima, of Klibhiklolo [Heavy Tree, Contemptuous Derision]. Now anyone who wants to renew tickets come forward. Anyone who is new and is willing to join the union, let him join.'

One of the newly recruited workers, M Sekhonde from Umkomaas [Mkhomai], put a statement and question.

'We are all done for by this Nyonyan [union]. People were true when they said "The inheritance of fools is always usurped from them by cunning". How will this Nyonyan benefit me? Will it help me and my children when I am sick and when I am unemployed? I ask you, Mthembu, and you young man ... By the way, I have forgotten his name. Myengwa?'

The workers corrected him in unison.

'Yengwa!'

Sekhonde continued asking questions.

'How long shall I pay a shilling per month? Till I die? Does the Menenja know you are organizing us into the Nyonyan? Did the King [Paramount Chief Solomon ka Dinuzulu] give you permission?'

Sekhonde's vicious attack on the very idea of a trade union left me perplexed and dumbfounded. I wondered how Mthembu would answer these hostile questions. Wiping his face with his hand, he launched at the critic aggressively.

'Look here my child, you are going to suffer from hunger. I am an old man, as you can see. Do not break away from the majority of workers in this hotel. The union is a strong protector of your rights and a fighter for better wages and conditions in your employment. Now, to answer your questions. The hotel industry does not die. There will always be bosses who earn high profits from the industry and there will always be workers who are exploited. Before the union was formed, workers were earning very low wages. Now they are earning £3 per month. Before the union they were working long hours without week breaks or year breaks. Now, as a result of the work of the union, workers are getting the benefit of one day off per week and two weeks off per year. You ask me about the boss. Do you think your boss is going to be pleased when you are going to fight through your union for higher wages and better conditions? Zabanjana Mkhize used to earn £2 per month but now through the

union's struggle he earns £3 and has two weeks' annual leave. Don't tell us about getting permission from your boss to join the union. Have you ever heard of an enemy giving permission for his adversaries to join forces together against him? The workers are always at war against the bosses for higher wages and better conditions.'

Mthembu avoided the direct question of whether the King had given permission.

'I find this question amazing because Sekonde is very far removed from the Zulu royalty. Umkhomazi district has no contact with royalty. Yet he still expects royal consent. Don't tell me about the king. Solomon died long ago and as a matter of fact I went to see the ingonyama Mshiyeni ka Dinuzulu, the Regent. When I told him I was an organizer of the union, he was very happy and commended me for helping the workers, his father's subjects.'

It was true that Mthembu had been to see Prince Mshiyeni ka Dinuzulu at Msizini ... In fact Mthembu was a popular dignitary at the court of the royal house and he took me along to pay respects to Regent Mshiyeni ...

It seemed Sekhonde still had lingering doubts about the wisdom of joining the union:

'We have been deceived by empty promises that we were about to get our land free from John L Dube, and that we were about to get higher wages, like Europeans, from Kadalie.'

At this stage Mkhize and all fellow workers attacked Sekhonde, saying: 'Keep quiet and listen Sekhonde. Did you hear what Mthembu said? No man can deny that the union is for the workers' interests.'

That was my introduction to my work as a trade union organizer.

In talking to BN, Yengwa said that

Being employed in a trade union ... helped me widen my political horizons. Most Africans from the rural areas did not know what a trade union movement was all about, some thinking it was an 'insurance' company organizing compensation against dismissal from employment or for accident or death ... I was earning a modest sum of £8 rising to £12 a month, which I considered a reasonable amount, and thought politics [i.e. joining a political party] would be a professional hazard ...

In my interview I asked Yengwa about the value of working in a mixed union. He said he had objected to the "Branch system" which kept Africans apart from white and Indian workers - but added that when Africans were finally invited to a meeting they could not really participate, because they had difficulty in speaking English. He thought there were over a thousand Africans in the union [9], and it was argued that they could discuss their problems more freely in their own branch, and get better representation when they made their complaints to members of the Industrial Council.

He also said that there were two limitations that Africans in the industry had to face. Firstly, they were employed almost exclusively as unskilled workers, and were paid less than Indians. Also, they were not employed where the money was - at licensed hotels. Secondly, Africans were not recognized as employees under the IC Act, and consequently had to be represented by Indians at negotiations with the employers. As far as he could remember, Africans got no wage increases while he was an organizer.

At one point in the discussion Yengwa acceded to BH's questions that Sishi might have been right in calling for an independent union: "Yes, he was quite right but he had made his point." Yengwa also said that two years after he began work he met Nyoasa, who tried to win him to the independent unions - but Yengwa believed that, without being able to negotiate directly with the employers, Africans were left effectively unorganized.

Continuing his discussion with BN, Yengwa said that after three years he became dissatisfied, not because of pay, because he had received increases and got a higher wage than his two colleagues. Also, Joseph had given him the more important work. But he was suffocated by the "subtle apartheid atmosphere of the underlying job reservation [in the union]". The typist was a white girl; Mr Pillay, the part-time bookkeeper for the native section, was usually drunk when he arrived. Also, Yengwa had studied book-keeping for matriculation and typewriting at Sastri College for six months.

'Why can't you give me an opportunity to develop my skills?' I asked.

'I'm afraid the white typists are fully occupied in their work. It would be inconvenient for them to have their typewriters taken away', Joseph replied.

'What about my book-keeping? I can do books well enough with my pen.'

'Oh, Bonnie, don't bother about these things. You are the best organizer we've got. Pillay is on the way out. He's an alcoholic, as you can see. If I give you a job book-keeping, what will happen to the workers in the hotels?'

Mr Joseph was unimpressed with my plea. I recall having the last word, saying: "Frankly I would prefer practising book-keeping than trudging up and down the road to collect fees along Marine Parade.'

A few months after the conversation we were introduced to Applesamy Ramsamy Naidoo, sitting at the desk as our new bookkeeper. This single incident convinced me that my chances of developing my skills and gaining promotion in the trade union structure were virtually nil. It was a professional cul-de-sac. In addition, a young Coloured woman clerk ... [was] recruited to become a clerk in the office ... issuing membership cards. She came from Northern Zululand, and from her handwriting it was clear that she had barely passed through intermediate school. Yet she qualified for a place in the office, while I was still walking the streets.

Yengwa enrolled in evening classes at the University of Natal to obtain a BCom degree. He was given time off by the union and holiday leave to attend the required winter school. After passing his first year, including book-keeping, he was encouraged to do the books for small shopkeepers. As a result, he gave notice to Samuel Joseph. His trade union career was over.

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Notes

1. Vishnu Padayachee *et al*, *Indian Workers and Trade Unions in Durban, 1930-1950* (Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Durban: Westville, 1985), p 83.
2. This is to be found in Edwards' current research, some of which I have read in typescript. Selected parts were presented at the History Workshop, Johannesburg, and at Oxford and London, in 1987.
3. Padayachee *et al*, pp 86-87.
4. H J Ringrose, "Trade Unions in Natal", *South African Journal of Economics*, 18, 3, September 1950; and *Trade Unions in Natal* (Cape Town, 1951), p 55.
5. Botha Commission Report (on African trade unions).
6. D Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: dock-workers of Durban", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1979.
7. Taped interviews, London, with Masabalala Bonnie Yengwa, by B Hirson (1977) and Beverley Naidoo (1986/87).
8. Where necessary, the initials BH and BN indicate which interview is being quoted.
9. This is improbable. See Appendix A, in which the total number of workers in the hotel trade was estimated as 1,000.

Appendix A

Industries in Natal - 1936-43/44 *

<u>Industry</u>	<u>No of workers (all racial groups)</u>		<u>Whites</u>	<u>Indians</u>	<u>Coloureds</u>	<u>Africans</u>
	1936	1943/44	1943/44			
Stone/Clay				12%		67%
Wood works		4,000	600			2,700
Metal/Engineering				1,200		6,000
Food/drink/sugar/tobacco		17,400	5,600	3,000		9,700
Hotels/Bars		1,000				
Clothes/Textiles		6,900	1,000	3,800	700	1,400
Chemicals		6,500	2,000			3,500
Construction						4,000
Rubber		3,000				1,600
Domestic Workers						n.a.
Total	54,666	80,100				
No. in private factories (1944)				16,000		37,500

Appendix B

African urban population, Durban: 1936 68,700
1946 113,000

* Extracted from R H Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal* (Cape Town, 1950), pp 81-93. Smith gives individual totals by industry, where available; clearly there are additional workers included in the totals but their location in individual industries is not specified.