The theme of this paper emerged out of an attempt to trace and explain the tradition of radical, non-racial trade unionism, which remained a considerable force within the South African labour movement until the early 1950s. An "institutional" history of trade unions in South Africa can only be attempted in conjunction with a wider class analysis of the society. In this regard, recent work has considerably refined our understanding of the nature of the "white working class", and the structural conditions which restricted any alliance with black workers. It is argued that many white wage earners were no longer productive workers, but over time came to perform a policing function within production, and that they existed in an antagonistic relationship to black workers. (2) At a political level this made possible the co-optation of the "white working class", symbolized by the Pact Government of 1924.

Whilst recent writers (3) do allow for the possibility of differentiation in the class determination of sections of the "white working class", it is perhaps necessary to stress that a sizeable group of whites remained productive workers, and that this implies the continued possibilities of independent political action by a section of the official labour movement and of non-racial class alliance in the work place. These possibilities were temporarily and imperfectly realized during the years 1925-30. In a period of rapid change in the nature of the work force and the division of labour, particularly in the consumer products manufacturing sector - shoes, clothing and furniture, a number of industrial unions were founded which adopted a non-racial trade union strategy. Similar unions emerged to represent workers in the laundry, rope and canvas, chemicals and confectionery industries.

I.

The immediate prehistory of this period presents a picture of failure and defeat. In the aftermath of the 1922 Rand Revolt, trade union membership fell from 108,242 to 81,661 (4), and the central co-ordinating body, the SA Industrial Federation, collapsed. The general effect of the failure of the 1922 strike was to make the unions very wary of strike action. This rejection of industrial militancy took institutional form, with the passage of the Industrial Conciliation Act, 1924, which brought trade unionism firmly within a system of conciliation, involving the increasing bureaucratization of trade union leadership. (5)

At the same time, the ICU, under the leadership of Clements Kadalie, had become an agrarian-based populist movement with a large but scattered and unorganized
membership. It has been argued that the only section of the ICU's membership which was capable of being organized effectively was the African urban working class, "and it is in their failure to organize this group that the ICU can chiefly be criticized." (6) Thus the ICU failed to support African workers during the 1927 strikes in Durban and Johannesburg. By this time, Kadalie, supported by the Amsterdam International and the British TUC, and increasingly under the influence of white liberals, had rejected militant trade unionism. In 1927, after expelling communist office-holders from the union, Kadalie declared that "strikes were wicked, useless and obsolete". (7)

II. Secondary Industrialization and the Labour Process

Between 1915/16 and 1929/30 the number of manufacturing establishments in the Union increased from 3,638 to 6,645, whilst the total number employed in private industry rose from 101,178 to 201,180. (8) However, these general statistics for manufacturing as a whole mask certain important distinctions. Thus D. H. Houghton, discussing the expansion of manufacturing during the period 1925-29, makes the point:

Many of the new factories were producing final consumers' goods, often from imported raw materials or from semi-finished products. For example, clothing manufacture from imported textiles preceded by many years the growth of a textile industry, in spite of the fact that South Africa was a major producer of wool. This... is to be explained by the size of the market, the relative amount of capital required and by certain technical factors. (9)

In fact, statistically these consumer goods industries did not grow at a greater rate than secondary industry generally during this period. (10) However, qualitative changes were taking place in this sector. Thus, despite their parallel expansion, the metal and engineering industries remained based on a simple division of labour between the skilled worker and the labourer. A similar division of labour in the consumer products industries was breaking down by the mid-20s. This period witnessed, for the latter, the fragmentation of skilled work, and the reorganization of the labour process on the basis of "semi-skilled" operative labour.

Two conditions were necessary for this development to take place: sufficient capital and technology to facilitate the introduction of repetition techniques, and a market large enough to support mass production. In the first place, the continued expansion of the urban work force created the market. Equally important, the Pent Government's policy of tariff protection safeguarded this potential market for local capitalists.

It is in regard to questions of capital requirements and technological conditions that it is necessary to distinguish sharply between sections of manufacturing industry: between basic metals and engineering, and the consumer products industries. The former, to establish themselves on a mass production basis, required massive capital investment and the introduction of a complete, new machine technology. Thus during the early 1920s local private enterprise failed to establish the iron and steel industry on a large-scale basis, and the task had to be completed by the state. When ISCOR was founded in 1928, it was with a capital of R7 million. (11) Engineering, before World War II, was organized to undertake repairs and "jobbing" work, largely for the mines and railways. (12) Only the huge stimulus provided by war orders enabled the industry to establish itself on a mass production basis.

In comparison, it was possible for the consumer products industries to transform their "craft" basis with relative ease. The statistics indicate that the average value of firms involved in leather, furniture and wearing apparel was half that of those in the metal industries. (13) In the clothing industry, entrance was comparatively easy. In the late 1930s "a firm producing men's clothes could be run
It is possible to give a fairly detailed picture of the development of the garment industry during this period. Factory production developed out of the bespoke tailoring workshop through a process of increasing subdivision of labour. (17) The original organization of production was on the basis of the journeyman tailor, who would make the garment, aided by a male or female assistant, who would perform the less skilled tasks. Increasingly this gave way to the "set system";

A set on the Witwatersrand generally consists of the foreman or organiser of the set, who is himself a tailor, another tailor, a presser, and a machinist, all males, and two, sometimes three, tailoresses. (18)

Here lies the beginnings of specialisation in the industry:

Where the set system prevails, there are workers who are exclusively pressers or machinists. (19)

By this time, also, wholesale bespoke tailoring factories were manufacturing ready-made garments, as well as producing made-to-measure garments under factory conditions:

The employees engaged on this 'wholesale bespoke' work generally do not know whether they are working on orders for bespoke or ready-made garments. (20)

However, the set system remained firmly within the traditional relations of production, which allowed the journeyman tailor to own the tools of production. It was the merchant tailor, however, who held the power to initiate production. He took the orders and measured the customer. The details were passed on to the master tailor, who either individually or on the basis of the set system fulfilled the order. This system worked entirely in the interests of the merchant tailor, who could force down the price of work amongst the competing master tailors, who were completely dependent upon him for orders. However, such a system involved severe restrictions on the development of the industry. To establish the clothing industry on the basis of modern factory production required that the capitalist take direct control over production, to facilitate the provision of capital and the standardization of products. In fact, by 1928, the majority of the clothing industry was established on a factory basis, and had freed itself from the production relations which characterized bespoke tailoring. (21)

The Labour Force

Manufacturing industry was still in its early stages in South Africa during the 1920s. Thus, in order to accumulate capital for investment, employers sought out the cheapest source of labour. Furthermore, in order to establish production on a basis of large-scale repetition, a particular type of labour force was required - one which was to perform predominantly "semi-skilled" work at wages considerably lower than would be accepted by skilled workers, so breaching the areas of control within the labour process held by the skilled workers. These workers were recruited from the ranks of the newly proletarianized, both black and white, who had been forced off the land as a result of the increasing domination of large-scale capitalist agriculture. The statistics for employment in private industry reveal a distinct pattern of labour recruitment for secondary industry. (22)
Two trends are immediately obvious from these figures: (a) the rapid growth of white female labour, and (b) the growing preponderance of African males as a proportion of the entire work force.

The specific historical circumstances of conquest and the development of the mining industry had resulted in a massive disparity between skilled and unskilled or semi-skilled wages. In particular, continued subsistence production in the reserves had allowed the mineowners to pay African workers a wage below the necessary level for the reproduction of their labour power. (23) Secondary industry could thus benefit from an already established labour market. Furthermore, as F. A. W. Lucas, KC, Chairman of the Wage Board during this period, argued, this disparity in wage rates ("which might be roughly stated as the difference between £1 a day and £1 a week") led to considerable pressure for deskilling and the downward reclassification of skilled work (24):

... the skilled worker's wage was relatively to the native's wages so high that much of the semi-skilled work which formed part of the skilled man's work was handed over to the native, generally without any increase of wages ...

On the other hand, this process implies that many African workers, whilst still classified as labourers, were actually engaged on semi-skilled work, indicating an increasingly stable African working class. Roux argues that it was this which made possible the organization of black trade unions in the late 1920s. (25)

The recruitment of white female labour took place for the same sorts of reasons. Veronica Brechey (26) has argued that female labour is particularly attractive to capital at a stage in its development, for two reasons. Firstly, by virtue of the existence of the family, women workers, as wives and daughters, are dependent upon the husband/parents, respectively, for part of the costs of reproducing their labour power. Significantly, bearing in mind Wolpe's work, she goes on to compare the position of married women with that of semi-proletarianized workers "since they too can be paid wages at a price which is below the value of labour power". In fact, in South Africa, it was Wage Board policy to take two-thirds of the man's rate as the standard for women's wages. (27) Secondly, capital introduces female labour in order to restructure the labour process to its advantage. Work traditionally undertaken by skilled, male workers was fragmented, thus undermining positions in the labour process which the latter had come to control.

The same imperatives lay behind the increased employment of juveniles, particularly in the furniture industry. The Wage Board in 1930 declared that the number of unqualified "probationers" employed in the industry was excessive. The Board found that during November-December 1928 there were 596 skilled workers to 734 juveniles and apprentices employed in the furniture industry on the Rand. (28) The process of job fragmentation and deskilling was transforming the apprenticeship system into a cheap labour device. In his report to the 1930 Conference of SATUC, A. M. Winkel makes the point:

The question arises again, is systematic apprenticeship a practical and satisfactory method today, remembering that the young worker is bound by contract from 5 to 6

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years to an occupation wherein mass production and repetition work has replaced technique and skill? (29)

During the 1930s the furniture workers were to lead an agitation for the amendment of the Apprenticeship Act, a move which was strongly opposed by the old craft unions, such as the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the SA Typographical Union, whose skills had not yet been undermined.

III. Trade Union Response

This paper seeks to argue that trade union structure and politics must be understood in relation to the particular labour process. (30) Thus craft (or "closed") trade unionism is based upon the ability of the union to control the supply of labour at a crucial point in the labour process. This is dependent upon the existence of certain skills. The industrial union (or "open") union, on the other hand, in order to gain bargaining power must rely on strength of numbers, ideally enlisting all workers within the particular industry. (31) This form of trade unionism is obviously more suited to the unskilled and semi-skilled worker, and would tend to predominate where wide-ranging deskilling had occurred. These kinds of processes were evident particularly in the development of the Furniture Workers' Union and the Garment Workers' Union during the late 1920s. Skilled workers in these industries saw their position within the labour process progressively undermined, and came to constitute a relatively declining section of the work force in their industries. Initially, they tried to resist what they saw as encroachment by cheap unskilled labour. However the rapidity of deskilling forced them to abandon their craft organization and to seek to protect themselves by extending trade union organization to all workers in the industry, irrespective of colour, and in this way to prevent competition and undercutting.

A history of the early Garment Workers Union (the strongest "new" union to emerge from this period) and its predecessor, the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association, demonstrates many of the arguments which this paper tries to put forward. The WTA had been dominated by master craftsmen, deeply rooted in the British craft tradition. (32) During the early 1920s most still worked in small tailoring shops, and in fact at that time the WTA still included "middlemen" in its membership (tailors who took work from the merchant tailors to sub-contract to others). (33) The membership of the union changed dramatically with the expansion of factory production. In December 1925, a meeting of factory workers was held to elect a committee for the Factory Section of the union. (34) During 1926, Dan Colraine became union organizer. Within four months the membership of the Factory Section was increased by 300, with 90% organization of factory workers on the Rand. (35) By 1928, when Sachs became Secretary of the GWU, the membership was 1,750, of whom two-thirds were in the Factory Section and three-quarters were women workers. (36)

It is interesting to chart the changing response of the WTA to perceived threats from other sections of workers. In 1924 the union called for the replacement of "Kaffir pressers" by whites. (37) The same point was made, together with an alleged threat of Asians to white standards, in evidence to the Cape Town Conference on unemployment called by the Secretary for Labour. (38) There were also complaints that firms were increasingly employing white, girl machinists to do the work of trouser-makers. (39) However, in August 1926 the union's constitution was altered to admit non-Europeans (40) (i.e. Indians and Coloureds, since Africans were not eligible to join a registered trade union). Also, from 1928, Sachs gave moral, and often tangible, support to the black Clothing Workers' Union, formed by Gana Makabeni. (41) By this time, the GWU was also actively organizing female machinists. The threat of undercutting and job-fragmentation, which accompanied repetition techniques of production, forced the WTA to open its ranks to an increasingly semi-skilled work force.

The South African Trade Union Congress, formed in 1925, and under the secretaryship of W. H. Andrews, did much to foster new industrial unions. These
unions included the Furniture Workers, Sweetworkers, Leather Workers, Canvas and Rope Workers, and a Reef Native Trade Assistants Union. (42) Bill Andrews's support for industrial unions should be stressed. During the war he had worked in Sheffield with J. T. Murphy, an engineering worker who took a leading part in the shop stewards movement and in the struggle for industrial unionism. Andrews was undoubtedly influenced by this experience. (43) If Trembath and Gitsham's book on Labour Organization (published 1926) is at all representative of trade union thinking at the time, then it would seem that the theory of industrial unionism was in the ascendency: 

... it is safe to say that the vision of the future is the organization of all the workers on industrial lines with some controlling council for the whole of South Africa. (44)

These "new" unions were able to make progress, freed from the conservative hold of the older craft unions, which refused to join SATUC, allegedly because of left-wing control and the absence of a colour bar. (45) Also, some of these older unions, particularly the AEU and the Mineworkers' Union, were declining in membership over this period. (46)

One of the most striking features of the SATUC period was the attempt, for the first time, to organize women workers (almost exclusively white). The leading figure was Fanny Klennerman, who attended the first SATUC conference in 1925 on behalf of the newly formed Women Workers' General Union. The WWU was instrumental in the organization of the Sweetworkers' Union and a Waitresses' Union, as well as aiding women workers in the distributive trades. (47) The militancy of the "new unions" is exemplified in the methods adopted by the WWU: 

The WWU is increasing its strength and influence and is adopting the method of lunchtime meetings outside the various shops, works and factories in order to bring home to the women workers the need for organization and the fact that there is a union catering for them and willing to take up their cause. (48)

The first African industrial unions began to appear early in 1927, largely owing to the initiative of Communist Party members Weinbren and Thebidi. (49) These first unions included a Laundry Workers' Union, a Bakers' Union, the Clothing Workers' Union and the Mattress and Furniture Workers' Union, usually growing in parallel with a sympathetic registered union. In 1928 the South African Federation of Non-European Trade Unions was formed, which, at its height, claimed to represent 15,000 black workers. (50)

The late 1920s was a period of considerable industrial militancy amongst African workers. In 1927, 4,418 "non-whites" went on strike (as compared with 740 whites), whilst for 1928 the figures were 5,074 and 710, respectively. (51) The pattern seems to have been one of strikes in response to the victimization of trade unionists, and strikes designed to enforce payment of the legal wage rates laid down by the Wage Board. In May 1928, African workers brought Leonard's Laundry to a standstill after the victimization of one of the employees. Although forced back to work by the police, the strikers secured his reinstatement. (52) During the same month the Native Clothing Workers' Union successfully co-ordinated a one-day strike in three Johannesburg factories to demand full payment for Good Friday. (53) On September 25 1928, 170 African, Indian and Coloured workers at the Transvaal Mattress Company struck to enforce the implementation of a Wage Board determination. "Before nightfall the employers had capitulated and advised the Mattress and Furniture Workers' Union (non-European) that the demands of the workers would be fulfilled." (54) In October, African furniture workers at the Louis and Metz factory struck successfully for payment for overtime. (55)

The use of lightning strikes over immediate issues indicates effective shop-floor initiative, and the considerable success of this tactic demonstrates the bargaining power of the workers. The effective militancy of African workers is demonstrated by the strike at Donner's Laundry in October 1929. The strike, which was 100% solid, was called over the issues of working conditions and the failure to
implement Wage Board determinations. "The boss offered to reinstate all but two on conditions demanded by the union, but these terms were rejected and the strikers took their passes and subsequently obtained employment in other laundries." (56) This statement indicates that the black unions were working in a favourable employment situation. Conversely, it can be argued that the depression undermined the position of black trade unionism and led to the collapse of the FWFTU. It is probably also true that this decline was hastened by the internal conflicts in the Communist Party, and the ultra-left policies pursued by Wolton and Bach. In the same way that the ICU had tied its fortunes to the careers of a few individuals, so the Federation was too closely linked to the CP to survive the internal conflicts of the latter.

This paper has tried to suggest that, in certain sections of secondary industry at least, the interests of black and white workers were not necessarily antagonistic. In these industries white workers remained productive. In fact, in the case of white women workers, they were specifically employed for their potentially higher rate of exploitation. White workers in these sectors had not yet assumed predominantly supervisory roles. Thus there was no antagonism arising out of questions of "authority" in the work-place. It was also a period during which craft sectionalism was being broken down. In the face of rapid deskilling, and the introduction of repetition methods of production, the old sections of skilled workers - e.g. the tailors and cabinet makers - abandoned exclusive craft unionism in favour of an all-inclusive industrial unionism. Thus, in the consumer products industries, white and black workers were less differentiated by questions of craft or skill. Contemporary communists certainly believed that the possibility for non-racial working class alliance existed (57), and the incidence of joint strike action by black and white workers seemed to substantiate this view.

In May 1928, 400 white workers (75% women) from Germiston's three clothing factories struck over the victimization of three workers. The Native Clothing Workers' Union, which was 100% strong in Germiston, offered to bring its members out in support. Some 120 African workers struck in solidarity. As a result of these actions the three dismissed workers were reinstated. (58) However, only a week or two later, the white workers failed to assist black workers in a similar dispute, involving the dismissal of a black. In this case the Chairman and the Secretary of the Clothing Workers' Union, Gena Makabeni and Thebidi, and four others were charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act, whilst 75 of the strikers were charged under the Masters' and Servants' Act, and each sentenced to ten days' imprisonment, or a fine of £1. (59) There were other examples of inter-racial solidarity. In 1928, the African workers at the Ideal Laundry struck in support of a white woman employee who had been victimized. (60) In 1929, a mutual defence pact was agreed between the black Furniture Workers' Union and the registered union. The pact was observed by African workers in October, but in November, during a strike of 200 African and Coloured mattress makers, the white workers scabbed. The leadership of the registered union contemplated resigning in disgust over the incident. (61)

Despite the backwardness of white workers, there is evidence of genuine solidarity. This showed itself in terms of trade union organization when the garment, leather, furniture and canvas unions dropped their colour-bar against Coloureds and Indians. (62) It might be argued that this was merely a ploy to protect the position of white workers in these industries. Even so, those who were admitted benefited from trade union membership. Furthermore, the GWU and the Furniture Workers' Union (63) held joint meetings with their African parallels, whilst the European and African laundry workers' unions actually both affiliated to a joint executive committee. (64) Although mixed unions had existed for many years in the Cape, these activities marked a breakthrough on the Rand, and it might be argued that this contributed towards the beginnings of a more "enlightened" racial policy on the part of the TUC. In 1929 SATUC recommended to its affiliated unions "the enrolment of all employees in their respective unions, irrespective of race or colour ... or, alternatively that a policy of parallel branches in the unions be adopted". (65)

The "new" unions revived the techniques of industrial militancy, which had lain dormant since 1922. Evidence of the militancy of the new unions has already been given. The GWU, for instance, led over 100 strikes, two of which brought the entire
industry on the Witwatersrand to a standstill, between 1928 and 1932. Although the union was later to make full use of conciliation machinery, Sachs maintained that the strike weapon should never be given up. (66)

It is, then, in the peculiar industrialization of the 1920s that one must look for the origins of the radical, non-racial tradition in South African trade unionism. This tradition was carried forward for two decades by a group of trade union organizers which included names such as Sachs, Weinbren, Merkel and Kalk, from the registered trade unions; La Guma, who helped organize unions in the Cape during the 1930s (67); Moses Kotane and Gana Makabeni, both workers, who were to play a leading role in the revival of black trade unionism during the late 1930s and the war years. The impact of the "new unionism" is best demonstrated at the Cape Conference held jointly by the Cape Federation of Labour Unions and SATUC in 1930, which resulted in the formation of the Trades and Labour Council, specifically on a non-racial basis. The new unions, in the words of Simons and Simons, "had begun to change the balance of forces in the movement". (68)

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Notes

(1) Based on an earlier paper published in SAIB, Vol. 3, No. 5, "The New Unionism in SA 1925-30".
(2) H. Wolpe, Economy and Society, Vol. 5, No. 2.
(3) R. Davies, JSAS, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 66, footnote 118.
(6) P. Bonner, SAIB, Vol. 1, No. 6. Bonner has since revised his position to the extent of stressing the ICU's success as a populist movement, rather than its failure as a trade union.
(7) SA Worker, 7.1.27.
(8) Union Statistics, I-3, G-6. Some attempt has been made to compensate for the change in definition of "manufacturing" introduced 1924-5.
(10) Union Statistics.
(11) Houghton, p. 120.
(13) Union Statistics.
(14) An 313-48, Board of Trade & Industries Report No. 303, para. 54.
(18) Ibid., p. 371.
(19) Ibid., p. 373.
(20) Ibid., p. 371.
(21) E. S. Sachs, Garment Workers in Action (1957), p. 7. In 1928, two-thirds of the membership of the Witwatersrand Tailors Association was in the factory section of the union.
(22) Union Statistics.
(26) Capital and Class, No. 3, pp. 45-66, "Some Notes on Female Wage Labour in Capitalist Production".
(31) Ibid., p. 98.
(33) WTA Minutes, 3.7.23.
(34) Ibid., 7.12.23 - the other section was for "Bespoke Tailoring".
(36) E. S. Sachs, Garment Workers in Action, p. 7.
(37) WTA Minutes, 21.7.24.
(38) Ibid., 21.8.24.
(39) Ibid., 11.8.24.
(41) E. S. Sachs, Garment Workers in Action, pp. 86-7.
(42) TUCSA records, 1925-6.
(47) TUCSA Minutes, 16.3.26.
(49) Roux, Time Longer than Rope, p. 207.
(50) J. A. Grey Coetzee, Industrial Relations, p. 27.
(51) Union Statistics, G-18.
(52) SA Worker, 11.5.28.
(53) Ibid., 11.5.28.
(54) Ibid., 24.10.28.
(55) Ibid., 24.10.28.
(56) Ibid., 31.10.29.
(57) SA Worker, 1.1.29 - Programme of the CPSA, adopted by the 7th Conference. However, the weakness of the CP's analysis was its belief that all white wage earners were objectively part of an anti-capitalist alliance (H. J. & R. E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950 [1969]).
(58) SA Worker, 25.5.28.
(59) Ibid., 22.6.28.
(60) Ibid., 22.8.28.
(61) Ibid., 30.11.29.
(63) *SA Worker*, 31.10.29.
(64) *Ibid.*, 27.7.28.
(66) E. S. Sachs, *Garment Workers in Action*, p. 171.