

THE UNION, THE NATION, AND THE TALKING CROW:
THE LANGUAGE AND TACTICS OF THE INDEPENDENT ICU IN EAST LONDON

by

William Beinart
and
Colin Bundy

Introduction

Immediately after the 1914-18 war, South Africa (along with many industrial and partly industrialized countries) experienced sharp price inflation and an upsurge of worker militancy. It was in this environment that the Industrial & Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU) was founded. Under the charismatic leadership of Clements Kadalie, the ICU's strength lay "in its loose but appealing amalgam of economic and political demands, attracting support from the ill-defined groups of dissidents characteristic of early industrialisation ...". (1) After gradual growth in most large towns to the mid-1920s, the union expanded rapidly in 1927, largely through the recruitment of agricultural labourers and labour tenants; its membership in 1928 has been variously estimated at between 100,000 and 200,000. But by 1929, under a feuding leadership and amidst charges of financial mismanagement and tactical ineptitude, the ICU fragmented into regionally based groups. Kadalie himself moved to the port of East London, where he presided over the Independent ICU (IICU).

East London's hinterland had been the arena of a century's conflict between settlers and Xhosa chiefdoms. Nineteenth century colonization was uneven, and stimulated different responses: the formation of a relatively prosperous, often Christian, African peasantry, but also a defensive traditionalism. By the 1920s, much of the African rural population was impoverished, yet the cultural cleavages remained deep and were carried into the urban setting. (2) As the nearest city, East London became not only a venue for migrants with homes in the countryside but also a receptacle for refugees from overpopulated black lands and capitalizing white-owned farms.

Industrialization had by and large by-passed East London. In the 1920s and 1930s its role was essentially an entrepôt role: economic activity centred on its harbour, railway, merchant houses, small processing works, and craft shops. It was in relative decline, as its hold over the wool export trade was loosened, and the depression of the 1930s accentuated its plight. If the city as a whole was depressed by the late 1920s, the racial division of wealth and power meant that the attendant social ills were concentrated in two African townships - the East Bank and West Bank Locations - which houses a rapidly growing population. (In 1920, there were c.11,000 Africans in East London; by 1926 there were 17,000; and by 1930 an estimated 20,000.) The locations provided a classic picture of urban slums during rapid but uneven

capitalist development: overcrowding in grotesquely inadequate housing and an infant mortality rate that averaged over 33 per cent in the 1920s (3) were obvious indices. The black work-force included permanently urbanized as well as migrant dwellers; only a minority of the population was in industrial employment; and there was a substantial and growing unemployed and lumpen element.

Conditions in the locations - and the related issue of social control - perturbed a group of influential East Londoners, and the 1920s saw their involvement in Native Welfare Association/Joint Councils/Child Life Protection Society activities. (4) These men and women worked closely with a group of location dwellers, particularly those educated "leaders" who served on the Native Location Advisory Board (Dr W. Rubusana was the most influential of these, who were drawn largely from the Bantu Union and from church associations). While these groups pursued improvements in housing, sanitation, and welfare (within the framework of the 1923 Urban Areas legislation), there was at the same time a greater emphasis in the municipality on more efficient administration and policing of the locations. A good deal of police activity in the locations could be described under such familiar headings as dagga, beer-brewing, permits and passes, and petty crime; there was also an attempt to maintain surveillance over any African activities or meetings regarded as potentially "political" or agitational.

Kadalie and other trade union organizers definitely fell into this category - and between 1928 and 1933 detectives in East London attended hundreds of ICU and IICU meetings and recorded their proceedings. The reports of these meetings consist of details of venue and attendance as well as of verbatim or precis accounts of speeches. There is a concentration of meetings and reports in the first months of 1930, when a general strike was mounted by the IICU. These reports (5) form the basis of this paper. We believe that they offer an unusually detailed archival series on a single topic; and that - used in conjunction with other East London material to hand - they will provide a valuable entry into a social history of East London. That is a longer term project.

In this preliminary paper, we have two aims. Firstly, the paper makes some comments on the language (6) of the IICU organizers in East London. What was the relationship between the ICU rhetoric and an audience extremely diversified in social and cultural terms? The documents reveal a complex interpenetration of different vocabularies and symbols. A tradition of resistance to colonialism, an African nationalist (and pan-African) ideology, the language of class solidarity and of separatist Christianity, as well as the language of Xhosa popular culture, are juxtaposed and interwoven. Secondly, the paper briefly describes the strike of 1930 - and in doing so attempts to say something about the social composition of the IICU in East London, the relations between leaders and followers, and to trace certain shifts in approach, tactics and strategy.

Language and Organization

The IICU in East London attempted to organize a highly heterogeneous and poorly paid population of permanent industrial workers, casual labourers, domestic servants, and the urban unemployed. Much of the union's income seems to have come from collections at mass meetings. It was extremely difficult for the leadership to secure a constant or reliable financial base. In addition, they faced frequent (sometimes well founded) accusations of speculation; they operated within an atmosphere of factionalism; and they were confronted with statutory and informal barriers to the operation of Black worker organizations. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that there was a preoccupation with the need for organizational unity, loyalism, obedience, and financial obligations: many meetings were largely given over to exhortations to join, to pay subscriptions, to remain faithful. The urgings were underwritten with the promise that the IICU could deliver - not only higher wages but also political liberation. Successful trade union organization became an almost obsessive end in itself; unity became not only a desirable goal but also the pre-condition on which the promise of delivery was based. "Smuts and Hertzog would like

to shoot me", asserted Kadalie, "but my last words would be 'stick to your union'."

The language of class solidarity was invoked by IICU leaders ("Workers throughout the world are forming themselves into bodies and take as their motto that employers must be controlled by the workers"), but only infrequently. The fragmentation of the urban population of East London provided an inappropriate social base for an ideology of class-defined unity. Moreover, the context of institutionalized racism and white dominance meant that black nationalism, nation-building, and pan-Africanism were the most frequent and potent idioms of unity. Typically, the message was that "the IICU will help you become a free black nation".

Kadalie himself referred frequently to a recent successful example of nationalism - the rise of an Afrikaner National Party under Hertzog - and called on Africans to surrender local or "tribal" identity in favour of a broad nationalism. Speakers linked the great independent chiefs of the past to urge a militant and pan-tribal nationalism. However, at the same time, and especially in the speeches of local organizers, specific appeals were also made to a Xhosa identity: "the bones of Hintsa will rise and help us." The history of Xhosa resistance during the century of frontier wars had its own pantheon; and the IICU used local chiefs as speakers, cashing in on a lineage of militancy as well as upon the authority chief exerted upon rural and migrant members. At times, it is clear, this approach was a conscious one; Alfred Mnika, addressing the rural people of Mooiplaats, introduced himself thus: "I am Mnika Mwari Isibongo, I belong to Hintsa's family."

If appeals to a Xhosa past resonated especially with traditionalist migrants, a linked tradition had great appeal, particularly to many Christians. Xhosa nationalism was bound up with the century-old tradition of Xhosa Christianity, personified in Ntsikana, an early convert ("Ntsikana, our prophet, told our forefathers not to follow the customs of the white man"). IICU meetings in East London were suffused with the language of independent churches. On the one hand, there was a strong anti-missionary strain, with calls for a black church, a black god, and a "New Reformation"; on the other hand, there was constant use of biblical imagery - Kadalie was the "prophet of God", the "son of Christ", a "black Moses". Utterances based on biblical texts of deliverance or revelation were also a readily available means of conveying the message of militancy or violence. The IICU clearly responded to an existing separatist ideology: trade unionism and the independent church could be fused -

When I speak to you about seeking a new God for the black races, I don't mean that you should not go to churches, I mean that we should form our own church, and all of us must carry the [IICU] yellow tickets.

As well as the language of trade unionism, of nationalism, and of Christianity - which IICU speakers could use either separately or in startling combinations - a further fertile source of imagery was the Xhosa popular culture, which bridged the rural and urban worlds. Most noticeably after the defeat of the strike in 1930, the IICU made an increasingly explicit bid for the allegiance of the "red" farm labourer or peasant-migrant. Kadalie expressed his own pride in being "the leader of the raw natives" (this was good politics, if an unlikely claim); and another speaker said that in the rural areas "red women joyfully dragged their blankets to meet us". This meant that trade unionists addressed audiences who saw no incongruity in being urged to pay subscriptions at the behest of "the talking crow of Kentani", or told of dreams of "locusts riding on an ass" by Selina Bungane, a "kitchen maid" described laconically by a black detective as "an IICU member and prophetess".

The various idioms of mobilization used by IICU leaders should not submerge their role - and self-conviction - as trade unionists, nor their concern to prescribe precise and instrumental action at appropriate times. Outgunned as African workers were, there was an objective need to maintain united and non-violent action at times of confrontation, and the January 1930 instructions exemplified a recurrent emphasis on non-violent tactics: strikers were not to carry sticks or any other weapons; they

must abstain from alcohol; and so on. Despite this stress on pacific procedures, despite the admiration for Gandhi, and the sense of the need for union discipline, the theme of violence constantly surfaced in the speeches and meetings. There was a persistent recitation of the history of violence, of the everyday experience of the callous brutality of inter-racial contacts, and predictions of an imminent "great war" between black and white. Not only is the language itself frequently lurid, but there is a submerged realization in the speeches that violence might ultimately be the only means of altering the balance of power.

The Strike of 1930

The 1930 strike mounted by the IICU in East London has been described dismissively by Wickins: it

can only be regarded as a failure. Though perhaps for a day or two as much as 80 per cent of the Black labour force of the city stayed away from work ... the stoppage was short-lived and partial ... [The strike] had been ill-conceived and hastily executed without preparation. (7)

In common with other accounts of the strike, Wickins assumes that the strike effectively came to an end with the arrest of Kadalie and the strike committee eleven days after it began; that when (on January 28th) Kadalie "sent orders to the strikers to return to work ... They did so." (8) This fails to recognize some of the most interesting features of the strike: in particular, the breach between the strike committee leadership and the rank and file; the prolongation of their stoppage by some strikers for six months; a display of spontaneous mass civil disobedience; the social composition of the strikers; and the significance of the support forthcoming from women domestic servants. (This last feature was noted by Monica Hunter.) Wickins's description of the strike is certainly at variance with one penned by the magistrate of East London in his confidential report to the Holloway (Native Economic) Commission in 1931. He spoke of a strike "which lasted nearly six months and involved some thousands of natives" and which saw "a large number of men and women out of work and penniless". (9)

The strike began on January 16th 1930, on the expiry of an IICU ultimatum, as a withdrawal of labour by employees of the South African Railways and Harbours. The call was for a wage rise from 3/6d per day to 6/6d. The strike committee held a series of daily meetings, attended by two, three, and four thousand people (and on one occasion 8,000 were reported); it sought funds from a variety of external sources as well as from local subscriptions. There was a pronounced emphasis on discipline and obedience to the leadership in the speeches made at the strike's outset. Kadalie

told them that he was going to be General. I have made many strikes in this country, we have got to be orderly not to walk about the streets, you must stay in the locations ... I want to make it clear to you that we are not going to fight with sticks, the others have aeroplanes and guns.

A few days later he returned to the theme:

We are the leaders, we are your Generals ... We are going to form our own little Government, employ our own police to do the picketing ... There will be no drink because we cannot control you when you are drunk.

And Peter Mkwambi urged his listeners

to remember that the strike organisation is like a train, it only has one head and I want you to listen to the Strike Committee, remember we are fighting with our brains and not sticks.

There was a great deal of popular sympathy for the SARH strikers, and on the third day of the strike Kadalie said the Committee had decided "to lay the position before the women of the location". Amidst loud support from the women he called on them

to be the pickets in their own homes, they must stop their husbands and their sweethearts from going to work, should he be a coward and go to work you must refuse to cook food ...

On the following day, a general strike was announced. Four days into the general strike, on Saturday 24 January, a crowd of 4000 gathered, including a "commando" of about 1000 men described by the police as "marching in sections of fours". Kadalie and other speakers made a series of militant speeches, promising that on the Monday picketing would be greatly increased. On the following day, Sunday, Kadalie and the entire Strike Committee were invited to a private negotiating session with Major Lister, District Commandant of Police. Upon arrival in his office, they were surrounded by armed policemen, arrested, and charged with incitement to public violence.

On January 28 Kadalie and his Committee colleagues made a court appearance, and a letter from them was read to the large crowd gathered outside. It said that the Strike Committee had decided that the strike must be called off, and that all workers must return to their posts: "You must go back to work immediately and earn money to subscribe to our defence." The Daily Dispatch reporter noted that this message was not well received by many in the crowd of 3,500. (10) On the next day Alex Fifana and John Moiza wrote on behalf of a "Rank and File Committee" refusing Kadalie's advice: "We shall not return to work until our employers comply with our demands." (11)

This breach persisted in the months that followed. Unfortunately, little evidence is available for this phase of the strike - but what does exist may be summarized. It appears that women, especially domestic servants, were an important element in those that stayed out on strike. Further, from various accounts, it seems that the rank and file strikers were drawn largely from the ranks of casual labourers, from marginally employed and lumpen elements. Police said that there were many "habitual unemployed and kwedines" at the meetings. There do not appear to have been similar formally organized meetings on the lines mounted by Kadalie; instead (a report of 27 February said)

There appears to be a more or less continuous gathering of natives on the football ground, and it is stated that the atmosphere is cloudy with impending trouble. Scrub women and casual labourers, at work during the day, join the gathering in the evenings, and appear to support the non-workers. (12)

Further, during February, the strikers increasingly raised issues other than wages: the system of location permits, the pressure on beer brewing, location housing, and so on.

On February 21, a dramatic episode took place. Twelve people were charged for being in the location without permits. A week later

The native clerks pointed out that it was difficult to sort out the bona fide applicants because all the loafers, hooligans, kaffir beer traders, etc., had joined the ranks of the strikers, and the strikers claimed equal treatment for them. (13)

A crowd of about 3000 marched from the location into the city centre and gathered outside the courtrooms; a deputation announced that

If it was the intention of the authorities to apply the [permit] regulation to strikers, large numbers would be liable to arrest, including the majority of demonstrators, who had come to surrender themselves.

The senior magistrate said there was no intention of "interfering with genuine strikers"; the rank and file committee undertook to pay the fines of the twelve, who were then released. This action by the committee, and their subsequent decision to take out permits themselves, cost them some popular support; by February 27 they were said to have "become out of favour" in the location. Most of the strikers - those who could find re-employment - straggled back to work by May and June; the last reference to "bitter-enders" is on 16 July.

Clearly, Kadalie and the IICU leadership had lost ground. To reassert the union's standing, to recover its membership, the leadership now embarked on significant shifts of emphasis and tactics. These included: a greater role by independent church leaders; more explicit appeal to women; an explicit drive for rural membership; and a greater reliance on traditional leaders. (Inasmuch as these changing tactics were successful, they are probably responsible for the fact noted, but not explained, by Wickins that the IICU "continued to enjoy considerable support in East London, where, well into 1931, subscriptions were running at something like £100 a month ...".) (14)

The greater use of religious imagery, and the more frequent appearances on IICU platforms of churchmen, was partly a simple attempt to fill the vacuum created by the arrest of Kadalie and the Strike Committee. A Rev. Nonkonyane was ubiquitous in late January and early February. (He saw his role as placatory, and at a meeting on 10 February, when the gathering became restive and threatening, he told the police present that he could no longer control them.) In his report on the meetings of 1st and 2nd February, Detective-Sergeant Mandy said they were "purely religious gatherings"; but by February 4th he made this comment on a meeting held the previous day:

The meeting was conducted on purely religious lines, the speakers reading and quoting relative passages from the bible ... Some of these passages though couched in biblical terms and quotations have practically the same meaning as conveyed by the inflammatory speeches of Kadalie and his Strike Committee.

And, on June 29, the same detective wrote a brief special report in which he concluded that

From the general run of all the speeches made at those meetings, which were purely religious, it would appear that the Independent ICU are adopting different tactics using Christianity as a means of promoting good feeling between the members ...

Another shift which is apparent stemmed from the staunch support for Kadalie and for the strike amongst the women of the location. A number of "location issues" were increasingly taken up by the IICU leaders. The brewing of beer nicely illustrates this. On January 18, Kadalie told his audience that if the strike succeeded women would no longer need to brew (i.e. to supplement their wages). By May/June, however, the emphasis was quite different: beer-brewing was seen as a right to be defended. "Why should not you sell beer?" asked Joel Magade. "Liquor is poisonous but Kaffir beer is not." The IICU attempted to take up with the Justice Department cases of police entering homes to search for beer.

Another consequence of the strike was a closer alliance between the IICU and the traditional Gcaleka leadership. One week into the strike, chiefs Pakamela and Sigidi (from Kentani and Idutywa, respectively) addressed large crowds in East London. The rightful owners of the land, they said, were the "red natives"; Pakamela appealed

to all Africans to "unite into one strong body" - and added that God would strike down any who scabbed. This enrolment of the chiefs as IICU orators reflected the salience of the migrant hinterland in East London's work force - and that hinterland became much more important in the months that followed.

The IICU leaders acquired a motor car, and used it to send delegates into the Ciskei and Transkei. By July it was boasted that 5000 members had been enrolled at Kentani and 4000 in Idutywa. Other Transkei chiefs - it was announced in August - were writing to the IICU asking for meetings in their districts. Rural issues were addressed. At the same meeting that saw Mnika introduce himself as belonging to Hintsa's family, he promised that the district secretary would speak on "why we cannot have intonjane and makweta dances"; in November 1930, Magade castigated "people who are wearing European clothes" as "Hottentots", and told his hearers to "follow the rites of your ancestors", citing the authority of the prophetic crow of Kentani. The IICU also entered litigation on behalf of rural members threatened with loss of lands.

These responses by the IICU indicate the pressures from below - and they remind one of the fragmented, variegated population in East London itself. The IICU was not - could not be - a trade union based on a single trade; nor was it a "general union" of all urban workers. Its social base was broader and less coherent. Hitherto analysis of the ICU has been preoccupied with organizational problems; this paper has suggested that consideration of the language of the IICU reveals something of the milieu and methods of the movement.

The trade union overlaid and was influenced by older forms of organization and consciousness amongst migrants and other urban workers. The IICU organizers sought to combine militant class action and black nationalism, and to substitute this combination for more parochial, particularist forms of consciousness. The 1930 strike suggests that they had some limited success in this endeavour - although the leadership clearly lost control over a more militant rank and file element as the strike progressed. Faced with state repression and hamstrung by financial difficulties, the IICU leaders had to remain sensitive to the diverse forms of expression and symbols in order to attract and maintain a following. The incorporation of separatist church ideology and the use of Xhosa traditions and culture intensified, most markedly in the speeches by local officials rather than by Kadalie and the other national leaders.

In South Africa today, black trade unionism, unemployment, and police surveillance lie close to the heart of the struggle. The fifty-year old documents on which this paper is based have some thing to say about these issues. They are also part of an historical legacy of resistance, and the legacy has not yet been fully claimed. One ICU stalwart who clearly had a concept of a "usable past" was A. W. G. Champion. Addressing a meeting in East London on December 12 1930, he said:

What I want you now to do is to keep your native
Cape history. It must be written and kept for
future generations.

-----oOo-----

Notes

- (1) Martin Legassick, Class and Nationalism in South African Protest: the SACP and the "Native Republic", 1928-34 (Syracuse University, 1973), p. 7.
- (2) The classic account of this cleavage, dubbed "red" and "school", based on East London material, is P. Mayer, Tribesmen or Townsman (Cape Town, 1961).

- (3) In 1928, infant mortality figures reached a staggering 543 per 1000. See the Report for the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) for East London (EL) for 1928, in Cape Archives (CA), 3/ELN vol. 624. For the response to the problem, see, e.g., Daily Dispatch, 9 December 1929, editorial.
- (4) When the EL mayor introduced C. T. Loram at the inaugural meeting of the Native Welfare Association in the city, he said: "The situation in South Africa is rapidly becoming critical. Such events as the Lovedale strike, the Port Elizabeth riot and the Queenstown land seizure are but the outward and visible sign of a change of attitude on the part of the natives. We should be guilty of negligence to ourselves, our town and our country, if we failed to read the lessons contained in such events. The Native ... is thoroughly discontented and ... it is the part of wisdom to enquire into the causes of his discontent ... It is surprising how little we know about our natives. How they work or don't work we know, but how they live in towns or the country, how they die, what they are thinking, and many other things about them we do not know, and these are the things which we ought to know and which we must know if we are to make this country safe for them and for us." (CA, 3/ELN, 1092, notes of speech for 20 January 1921)
- (5) These reports are at CA, 1/ELN 86 file c3(1), and 1/ELN 87 file c3(2). All quotations which follow, unless attributed elsewhere, are from these files. Where relevant, the date of the meeting and/or the report is indicated.
- (6) This perspective originated in an invitation to present a shorter version of this paper to the History Workshop conference on "Language and History", Brighton, November 1980.
- (7) P. L. Wickins, The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (Cape Town, 1978), p. 197.
- (8) The quotation is from M. Hunter, Reaction to Conquest (2nd ed., London, 1961). Her account of the strike, pp. 568-70, is fuller and more sympathetic than Wickins'.
- (9) CA, 1/ELN 86, 12/60/2, document no. EL 2/225/31, Resdt. Magistrate, EL, to Secretary, Native Econ. Comm., 16 February 1931.
- (10) Daily Dispatch, 28 January 1930.
- (11) Ibid., 29 January 1930.
- (12) CA, 3/ELN 3: the extract is from a report dated 27 February 1930. It is not clear who the author of the report is; but the document is stamped "Public Health Department", and it may have been the MOH.
- (13) As (13) above.
- (14) Wickins, op. cit., pp. 196-7.