

1917: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF DAVID IVON JONES¹

by

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Solidarity with the Russian Revolution

On 23 February 1917 (or 7 March by the western calendar), women in Petrograd celebrated International Woman's Day, and used the opportunity to complain about the rationing system. They joined strikers from the Putilov engineering works who had been locked out, and over the next two days the demonstrations grew into a general strike that embraced the town.

Within a week power shifted to a Provisional Government, the Tsar abdicated in favour of his brother, and a Soviet of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers was established. On 3 March the Provisional Government broadcast news of the revolution, and eleven days later the Soviets appealed to the peoples of the world for peace without annexations and indemnities.

The revolution came as a surprise to most observers, and the news that reached South Africa was sparse and refracted through the columns of a conservative press. Even the journals from European socialists, which arrived three to four weeks after the event, were not particularly illuminating. Consequently Ivon Jones had to rely on his own appraisal of events in Russia, and from the beginning was unique in his understanding of what was happening. In the months that followed, he guided the members of the International Socialist League (ISL) through the confusing maze of events with an assured and deft hand. S P Bunting, in an obituary, "Ten Crowded Years of Glorious Life" (International, 6 June 1924), summed up Jones's contribution during this period:

... from the time when the 'Red Light in Russia' first broke through a world of gloom, it was Jones in this country who first seized the full import and was least bewildered by the staggering events of 1917. At once he caught the scope of the Revolution which had been brewing in the Councils of the Zimmerwaldians (with whom he too had been maintaining contact), and when the Bolsheviks came to power he had already helped us to realise that this was no miracle but a great milestone on the march to human freedom in which the workers of South Africa, too, had been and were taking part.

This praise was not exaggerated, even if Jones over-estimated the gains of the proletariat in the first weeks of the revolution, and misjudged the provisional government's control of the state machinery. On 23 March, under banner headlines, "170 Million Recruits", Ivon wrote:

The Socialist International has become a far more tremendous thing by the Russian Revolution. It means that a people of 170 million has swung into line with the great proletariat of all countries, on its march to the Revolution by the side of which all previous ones are but 'shopkeeper's riots' in immensity.

Ivon believed that the Russian workers were in the forefront of revolutionary change. He differed with his friends who said that the Russian workers were too weak to take the revolution further. Noting, firstly, that the capitalists and workers had common objectives in the conquest of political rights, he then cautioned:

We see two streams in this, as in all previous revolutions. The Industrial Capitalist cry is now 'ORDER'. The proletarian driving power cries 'LIBERTY'. But the workers having won their 'Programme of the Day', and the Capitalists the control of the state, the two streams immediately disunite and the class war begins on the last lap to the Socialist Revolution. Now is the dangerous hour ... 'order' ... will be enforced at the cannon's mouth if necessary, 'tearing the side of the proletariat', as Marx once said, if the workers are not organised independently and strong to bear the shock of recoil.

Jones hailed the existence of a "Council of Workmen" (and used the full title, rather than Soviets, because it stressed the centrality of the working class in the struggle). This Council, he wrote, was able to intervene to scotch counter-revolution, even if not yet able to push forward to the Socialist revolution. "Only Russians can feel the thrill of the wonderful deliverance involved in a free press, free speech, and political liberty. Note, however that the right to combine is won as a result of the workers combining." Then, he concluded:

This is a bourgeois revolution, but arriving when the night of capitalism is far spent. It cannot be a mere repetition of previous revolutions. It partakes infinitely more of a victory for the proletariat, as well as for the industrial capitalist. Now the two classes pursue their several ways; one to prosecute the war abroad, the other to pursue the class war at home and the Socialist Republic in all countries. Let us look forward with great hope to the entry of the Russian elemental mass into the International class struggle for human emancipation. The day of its coming seems immeasurably nearer by this awakening.

Ivon returned again and again in the pages of the International to events in Russia, associating the ISL with every forward move by the workers, and acclaiming the revolution as a complete vindication of Marx's ideas. On 15 June, the journal printed a Manifesto from the Berne International Socialist Commission (the Zimmerwaldian anti-war group) appealing for support of the Russian workers. In an editorial foreword, Jones argued:

It should be noted that all the calls to revolutionary action on the part of the European Socialists is crystallised in the one of 'Down with the war! Long live the international action of the proletariat'. The war on war is becoming identical with the international class war.

His comments were apposite. The Manifesto called on workers to "fight the revolutionary fight, for bread, for freedom, and for peace", and asked: "Will the revolution kill the war, or will the war kill the revolution? The answer to this question depends on the attitude of the proletariat of Europe in these days of universal trial."

The International Socialist Commission had accepted the ISL's application for affiliation, and their call for socialists to rally in support of the Russian revolution, against imperialism, and for an immediate armistice, persuaded the ISL to send a delegate to a peace conference convened for Stockholm. When the invitation was first received, Ivon had protested that the ISL did not have the resources to send a delegate. He reversed his stand to show solidarity with the Russian workers,

who "had applied a spark to the whole world-wide movement which cannot be smothered", and, subsequently, Andrews was appointed as the ISL delegate. The ISL also intervened to stop a nomination meeting adopting Creswell as the South African representative (International, 27 July).

Andrews got a rousing send-off from some 200 socialists from across the country on the 5th August. New ground was broken again when B L Sigamoney, secretary of the Durban Indian Workers Union, and R V Selope Thema, of the SANNC, spoke during the proceedings. Andrews sailed in August, as representative of the groups that had been present at the meeting: the ISL, the Cape Social Democratic Federation, the SA Peace and Arbitration Society in Cape Town, the Durban Indian Workers Union, the Kimberley Socialists, and the Native Workers Union in Johannesburg (ibid., 10 August), the precursor of the Industrial Workers of Africa.

Despite the "triumph" of the ISL, Creswell travelled to Europe to represent the SALP. However, the Stockholm conference was abandoned owing to official and unofficial pressures - including the blacking of British ships by Havelock Wilson, the Seamen's union secretary, to stop British delegates sailing. Andrews attended an Allied Socialist Conference in London, but was only allowed observer status, and dismissed the proceedings as a farce. He stayed a year in Europe, at the request of the ISL, meeting members of British socialist groups, engaging in speaking tours for some of them, and absorbing new ideas (particularly on the shop stewards' movement). He met Maxim Litvinoff, the Soviet representative in London, and served as a conduit for messages from the Russian revolutionaries to the ISL (Cope, p 192).

The Bolsheviks opposed the Stockholm conference, saying that it would only detract from the revolutionary tasks that lay ahead, but the ISL knew nothing of this when they sent Andrews abroad. Ivon spoke of its possibilities in a letter to Evans² on 19 August:

Do you think the continuance of the present tremendous carnage is justified on any score of 'Liberty', Justice or Right? I suppose you have noticed however that the cumulative processes of war is driving society towards International Socialism was foreshadowed in the vote of 184,600 British workmen to participate in the Stockholm Congress ...

Lloyd George, with his ruffian talk of knockout blows, still dominates Europe, and still, for the 'honour' and 'prestige' of statesmen, young men must go dumb driven to the slaughter. Tell me not they go gloriously. The kernel of the matter for which they fight, when stripped of fine words, is not glorious but sordid. The one ray of hope for the poor chaps in the trenches is the Stockholm Congress of European workingmen.

The Rule of "King Mob"

The ISL remained a tiny, isolated group, unable to recruit among most sections of the whites, and not yet able to (or, indeed, seeking to) recruit blacks. The white English-speaking workers remained overwhelmingly loyal to the crown, and the anti-war propaganda in the International only antagonised them; the Afrikaner workers, who might have been won over on the war issue, were repelled by the appeals for unity with the black working class.

Individuals who had been in the small Socialist Labour Party, and Anarchists of the local Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), had joined the ISL soon after its formation, and were initially very active, but most demurred when the ISL supported the Bolsheviks, or were estranged by the League's participation in municipal or parliamentary elections. Others were antagonised when black workers were organised, and together with foundation members they left the League. It was

only among sections of the Jewish community (those who had "danced in the streets of Johannesburg at the news of the fall of the Tsar") that recruits were won in the wake of the Russian Revolution. To accommodate them, a Yiddish-speaking branch was formed in August 1917. However, after the victory of the Bolsheviks, the support from this section also withered, and only those committed to revolutionary change stayed in the League (Report, p 56).

Other pressures on members were also great. Meetings called by the ISL (particularly in the open air) were often broken up by soldiers, while the police stood by. One particularly nasty episode was reported under the headline "Mob Law on May Day" in the International of 4 May. The ISL had, in its leaflet announcing the celebration, called upon workers to end the war and re-establish the working class international, and among the speakers billed to speak was Bud Mbelle. A hostile crowd gathered in front of the Town Hall, and after some scuffles, in which several socialists were beaten up, the meeting was abandoned. Soldiers "arrested" Bunting and Jones, and marched them to the Town Hall "to give an account of themselves". There they were fortunate in being rescued by an army captain. The police did not intervene, and would not offer protection to League members - standing by when the social evening that was to follow the meeting was also broken up.

Worse was to follow. On 19 October, under the heading "King Mob", the International reported an increase in attacks on League speakers since 7 September, at the regular Sunday evening meetings, culminating in attacks on the previous Sunday (the 14th). Once again, the police kept away until the fight was practically over. Men and women were beaten up - League members giving as well as they got - and Sam Barlin (who was to represent South Africa, together with Ivon, at the Third conference of the Communist International in 1921) was threatened with lynching.

The League was threatened from all sides. Those who broke up League meetings declared that it was not because of the ISL's anti-war stance but because it was organising blacks; the police arrested Barlin and H Barendregt, and said that they could not interfere to preserve law and order. The Chief Magistrate hinted at dire penalties if the ISL "persist(ed) in defending (themselves) against violence caused through 'exciting public feeling'". The Trades Hall Society, already determined to punish the ISL for inviting blacks to their meetings, banned all its gatherings on its premises, and gave notice that the League vacate its office in the building.

The League's isolation was demonstrated in January 1917 when Colin Wade secured only 32 votes at a Parliamentary by-election for Troyeville, Johannesburg - against Creswell, who won with over 800. This, said Ivon, was because the SALP had won the small property holders and craft unionists, and "came immediately after the League gained working class rock-bottom at its annual Conference" (International, 2 February). The "great mass of the proletariat which was only represented by 32 votes in the Troyeville contest, happens in South Africa to be black, and therefore disfranchised and socially outcast. The ISL (had) no hope of looking to the Labour Party constituents ... for any large backing". The task of the ISL was "to awaken the native wage-earner, and ... his white prototype ... within Industrial unionism.

The decision to alter the focus of organisational work was facilitated by contact with Africans at meetings. Ivon entered into this with missionary fervour, saying in his letter of 24 November 1917 to G E Evans:

Our work is tending more and more in the direction of lifting up the masses of the native workers. But we are deficient in knowledge of the native languages, and it is part of my next year's scheme to acquire a 'book' knowledge of their 'tongues' if I can get relieved (of official duties).

Our anti-war agitation I may say has taken quite a second place to this, the awakening of the native wage earners to a sense of their historic mission of human emancipation.

"Wake Up, White Workers"

In all that Ivon and his comrades wrote, in letters, or in the International, there was little reference to the changing face of industry in South Africa. In his Report of 1921, Ivon devoted a short passage to "Industries", saying that:

In a country of a million square miles, agriculture is of necessity a staple industry, though the old Boer farmers' methods are obsolete, and there are vast tracts of land held up idle by the licensed syndicates in combination with the mining houses.

The Gold Industry of the Transvaal, with its Witwatersrand gold reef sixty miles long, is a world-renowned phenomenon. The Reef, with the town of Johannesburg at its centre, provides the economic stimulus for the whole country. The diamond mining industry of Kimberley and Pretoria, the coalfields of the Transvaal and Natal, the Sugar Estates of Natal, sum up such industries as affect the world market. The Railways are owned by the State. (p 42)

Statistics were not easily accessible, and this undoubtedly accounted for the sparse description; but it gave no indication of the economic development of the country during the war, and no information on the growth of the black proletariat.

The number of black workers on the mines stayed constant at 180,000 during the war years, but in manufacture it is estimated that the number of establishments and employees nearly tripled between 1911 and the early 1920s. Furthermore, between 1915-16 and 1918-19 the number of firms increased from 4,000 to 6,000; the number of white workers employed in manufacture rose from 39,500 to 53,600 and of black and coloured workers from 61,600 to 89,500. Wages paid to black workers over the war years were pegged, or rose only slightly; but retail prices rose at an estimated 31-39 per cent. Consequently, workers clamoured for higher wages and were responsive to calls for organisation.

Andrew Dunbar, writing on the working class in the International on 1 December 1916, referred to an article in Abantu-Batho on the conditions of black workers - a change, he wrote, from that paper's

Native Contingent flagwagging, aping of Europeans, adulation of pro-native-landlord protests against Land Acts, old-fashioned bookish aspirations for the vote as the be-all and end-all, and snobbish cravings by an educated few for social recognition by an educated few

...

The article was redolent of anarchist philosophy, which carried some weight in the ISL at the time, but its significance lay in Dunbar's conclusion that the Congress paper "sounds at last the initial rumblings of a spontaneous, indigenous class-conscious industrial movement in South Africa". He quoted from the paper, portions of which provided information to League members on the conditions of the working class:

The unskilled labour and all kinds of drudgery, both on the mines and in urban areas, are done by the native people ... They are the mainstay of the country's industries and the backbone of the land's prosperity ... And they are the hardest worked and the least paid ...

Native servants, at business places, private offices and private homes, are extremely overworked. In laundry work especially ... done mostly by women, there is a regular sweating-system ... Bundles of washing of

extra-ordinary quantities ... are required to be done within a certain time at quite a low wage - a bundle that takes the whole day to wash being paid for with one or two shillings. Some steam laundries ... do not give time even for meals, a woman starting to iron at seven in the morning on to six at night without a break ... The same ... obtains at some big offices in town where natives commence duties at quite early hours and are not allowed a single hour for preparing and taking their meals till late at night.

The usual rate of pay (in all work) is from 7s.6d. to 15s. a week. Out of this a man is expected to pay his rent, feed his family and himself, pay taxes, provide for doctor's bills, dress decently with his dependants, and do a thousand-and-one other things. It is impossible! He must be driven to do extreme things in order to get a livelihood or meet domestic requirements. Talk of crimes of theft, illicit liquor dealing or even violence! ...

The time was ripe for trade union organisation - and, if white trade unionists excluded blacks, a separate black union had to be started. In an article entitled "Wake Up, White Workers" (24 August 1917), Ivon quoted from a recent conference of the South African National Union, at which it was stated that the blacks were becoming the real working class, with the whites tending to become an "overseer class". This completely vindicated the call for the solidarity of all labour, he said: the ISL had not been premature in its stand, but had leeway to make up:

The choice is even now being offered to the white workers of becoming police boys for the capitalists or of standing shoulder to shoulder with the Native proletariat in its emancipating march.

The only hope for the white workers to prevent their degradation into "a police boy class", he concluded, was the coming Conference of Industrial Workers, which could give rise to a rank and file movement cutting across race or colour.

The white workers did not respond, and the ISL went ahead with the formation of a black workers' union. However, except for one intervention, Ivon played no direct role in the union. On 29 June the International announced that Ivon "had overtaxed his powers" in assisting Andrews, the candidate in Benoni for the Provincial Council. Ivon wrote of this to G E Evans on 19 August:

I have been kept to the house for 4 or 5 weeks, with another breakdown, although I was able to do a little writing for the paper in the latter half of that. I have to go much more carefully than I used to, as the strenuous life of the last three years in the labour movement, mainly in my Secretarial Capacity, has robbed me of my old stamina and strength. Through the kindness of friend Bunting, however, I have not been at a loss where to lay my head, and have had a chance to recuperate.

When he returned, he was still secretary of the League and editor of the journal, still wrote, and spoke at some meetings - but his only direct involvement in the new union was the writing of a propaganda leaflet. Its effect was explosive, but when he wrote on 24 November, and spoke of organising black workers, this was not yet known:

The year that draws to a close marks a period in my plans. It has been a very chequered one for me, with sickness for two months and the cloud and shine of the

work we do. Next year I wish to be relieved of the secretaryship and editorship of the International and have notified my committee accordingly. But so far there is no one to take my place, and if no arrangements can be made I shall have to stick to the plough to the end of another furrow. But I am making a big bid for release and a chance to get my health back to its 'pre-war' state. I have brought the little paper through 111 numbers, beyond our wildest hopes when we started.

The Industrial Workers of Africa

The first report of an Industrial Union (International, 5 August 1917) stated that Gordon Lee of the ISL started the Indian Workers Industrial Union (on the lines of the IWW) in March, with about twenty workers in Durban. B L E Sigamoney became the secretary, and represented the union at the ISL meeting of 5 August, when Andrews was chosen to go to Stockholm. However, members of the union were subjected to harassment, their employers threatened them with dismissal, and their meetings were broken up by soldiers. Although it continued for a few years, it did not survive.

There are also indications (from the intervention by R C Kapan at the ISL meeting in March) that others had tried to form unions. They failed, and then the Native Workers Union was formed in Johannesburg, and renamed the IWA some time after the meeting of 5 August. From its inception it was riddled with police informers, who were elected to its committee and sent in detailed reports of the organization. This was ironical on many levels. Because they kept the minutes, there now exists a record in the Department of Justice files, of attendance, of speakers, and subject matter of these meetings - or at least what was understood by the police of what was said.⁴ On several occasions the policemen recorded statements about the need to keep spies out of the organization, and it was these men who were ultimately responsible for translating IWA propoganda into the vernacular!

The first meeting reported in police files took place on 19 July 1917, at the shop owned by Jacob Neppe, in Fordsburg. There were ten whites, all from the ISL, and 20 Africans, including two police spies dressed as miners. The group met weekly, with attendance fluctuating between a dozen and over fifty. Besides the whites who came from the ISL, most of the audience were Africans, and this included members of the SANNC (Herbert Mgane, Bud-Mbelle) and members of the Transvaal APO, which had been revived in April⁵ (Talbot Williams, Mr Adams and George Crowe). Horatio Bud-Mbelle was secretary in the early stages of the organization, but he seems to have resigned this office, and his place was taken by a policeman. Among the members were T William Thibedi (who was to rise to prominence in the Communist Party as an organizer), R Kapan (an African who lived in Troyeville - the scene of the ISL's electoral disaster), A Cetyiwa and H Kraal (who later left for Cape Town, and organized the dock workers before Clements Kadalie arrived to start his Industrial and Commercial Workers Union - or ICU).

Dunbar spoke at the early gatherings and his message was couched in syndicalist terms. On 19 July he was reported as saying that, "if mineworkers strike and are prepared to go to goal and continue striking, the Government will have to talk"; and at the next meeting the report was to the effect that:

... the only thing they want us to do is to come in Union with all the white workers and be organised together and strike ... all the workers, white and black, should come together and make meetings ... and fight against the capitalists and take them down from their ruling place.

He said that white workers were also ill treated by the capitalists. The first thing Africans had to do was "to strike for the abolition of the Pass Laws ... The Natives should come together and at the end of the month they should refuse to go to the Pass Office to register their passes ... he was sure the Native Affairs

(Department) cannot arrest the whole lot of them, it can only arrest a few". Once the pass laws were abolished, it would be possible to organize with the whites and strike. "We can gain what we want, if we strike for everything, we can get everything."

The talk was not always of trade unionism. On 16 August, Bunting argued that the SANNC was too middle class, and not interested in the working-class struggle. In a series of questions, Bunting elicited from an African at the meeting that Congress consisted of "Exempted natives, shareholders, and a couple of lawyers". Bunting summed up by saying: "So they organise themselves, so as not to have their lands and exemption certificates taken away from them. They don't want to get their race free from slavery."

On 20 September, an exclusively black gathering was convened, to challenge the role of whites: in particular, whether the socialists were leading them astray. Ultimately, the meeting decided to accept whites, so that members could learn from "the white men socialists". Apparently the group was satisfied after this meeting (although it is not clear where the police now stood: Were some being won over, as one report in the Justice Department files suggest?), and moved the following week to form itself into a socialist workers' group, not as a political organization but an industrial body - to be known as the Industrial Workers of Africa. Office bearers were elected, and it was decided to publish a propaganda leaflet in Zulu and Sotho.

Ivon Jones and Barron Wright (probably a misrendering of Barendregt) were asked to write the text, and co-operate with a publication committee that included Msane and the acting chairman, Hosea Phooko, who were to translate the text. Ivon wrote the leaflet, and when Msane and Phooko failed to do the translating two policemen on the IWA committee undertook the task and followed Ivon's version, closely. The original, reprinted on 15 February 1918 in the International, read:

WORKERS OF THE BANTU RACE! Why do you live in slavery?
Why are you not free? Why are you kicked and spat upon
by your masters? Why must you carry a pass before you
can move anywhere? And if you are found without one,
why are you thrown into prison? Why do you toil hard
for little money? And again thrown into prison if you
refuse to work. Why do they herd you like cattle into
compounds,

WHY?

Because you are the toilers of the earth. Because the
masters want you to labour for their profit. Because
they pay the Government and Police to keep you as
slaves to toil for them.

If it were not for the money that they make from
your labour, you would not be oppressed.

But mark! You are the mainstay of the country. You
do all the work, you are the means of their living.

That is why you are robbed of the fruits of your
labour and robbed of your liberty as well.

There is only one way of deliverance for you, Bantu
workers. Unite as workers, unite! Forget the things
that divide you. Let there be no longer talk of
Basuto, Zulu, or Shangaan. You are all labourers. Let
Labour be your common bond.

Wake up! And open your ears. The sun has arisen,
the day is breaking. For a long time you were asleep
when the great mill of the rich man was grinding and
breaking the sweat from your work for nothing. You are

strongly urged to come to the meeting of the workers and fight for your rights. Come and listen to the good news and deliver yourself from the chains of the Capitalists. Unity is strength. The right is great against the many pass laws that persecute you, and the low wages and the misery of existence. Workers of all lands unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to win.

Ten thousand copies were printed and, at an IWA meeting of 25 October, Ivon advised those who undertook its distribution to proceed secretly, and with caution. At subsequent meetings it was reported that bundles were given to friends, and distributed in Pretoria, Rustenberg, in the mine compounds, and across the Witwatersrand.

The leaflet was well received, by the SANNC, by members of the APO, and by workers who were attracted to IWA meetings. On 9 November two members of the APO (Williams and Crowe) who had heard Bunting, Dunbar, Barendregt and Ivon, at an APO meeting on 8 September, were present. At Williams's invitation nine members of the IWA were elected to attend an APO meeting to speak to its members.

The Abantu-Batho response was enthusiastic, if surprising. In an exchange, in which the Congress paper warned workers to "Beware of Labour Cranks", the International of 19 October responded by attacking the paper as the mouthpiece of the Chamber of Mines, and called on Africans to organize industrially and fight for themselves. This was now forgotten, and workers were urged to support the IWA, to struggle for higher wages and "arrange hours of work and all the rights of the workers". The coming meeting between the APO and IWA members was announced, and support given for the idea of amalgamating African and Coloured workers in one organization (International, 30 November 1917).

One last response must suffice. On 6 December, a newcomer who had been given the leaflet said at an IWA meeting:

he found the contents to be very useful to him as it read about what had been a trouble to him for some time. So he thought to come to the meeting and hear what was said there.... since he came in he found they were talking of fighting for our rights and the increasing of our wages, liberty, etc. The natives were hard working men and only received 1s.8d. per day, out of which he has to support his wife and children, he has no place to live in and must live anyhow. We should surely fight for our freedom and kick everything out of our way and fight for what we want.

Representatives of the Transvaal National Congress, the APO, and the IWA met on 21 and, again, on 28 December, to consider joint industrial action by African and Coloured workers. Williams provided the lead, and it was decided to appoint a committee of the three organizations to co-ordinate industrial action (International, 4 January 1918: Reports of two Native Constables, December 1917). The committee, if it met, was overtaken by events. In June, forty-nine "bucket boys" (night-soil removers) came out on strike, and were sentenced to do the same work as convicts, and in July 15,000 black miners came out on strike in three mines. It appears that the strikers were organised, or masterminded, by Talbot Williams (R Cope, Notebook). If this was indeed the case, the police in the IWA would have informed the authorities, and this would explain the remarkable story, also contained in Cope's account, that in June Williams "got cold feet", and, being assured of protection, made a signed confession to a magistrate and promised to do all in his power to stop the strike. Williams moved to the Cape, and was employed as an agent of the Nationalist Party. "One must live", he was reported as saying in the International of 8 November 1918, when his death in the influenza epidemic was announced.