

ENTRYISM AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF SOUTH AFRICA:

1923-25

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The Politics of Entryism

The activities of socialist groups, and particularly of small socialist groups, are usually confined to the footnotes of history. Many tend to be ephemeral or otherwise ineffectual. They rise and fall away, giving rise to a host of splinter groupings; they merge with other groups and then split away, engage in diverse and often untraced activities. Where records are retrievable they often show that these groups consist of a few core activists, even fewer publicists, and a small set of devotees who provide the necessary finances and facilities.

There are exceptions. A few groups even grow into large movements embracing thousands, or tens of thousands, of members. Some of them have long histories that extend back over decades. Yet, even in the long-lived socialist bodies there is a large turn-over in membership, with changing programmes (sometimes on central policy issues). Some are hyper-active, their members appearing at every picket line and every community action or rally; others remain marginalized, either by choice or by fortune.

It does not follow, however, that the history of small socialist groups is of interest only to the antiquarian. While small groups are often taken to reflect social conditions, the equation can be reversed and social conditions can be deduced from the behaviour of these groups. It is in this light that I want to look at the issue of entryism in the history of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in the early 1920s.

Before proceeding, something must be said about "entryism". The fact that the concept is more usually used in a pejorative sense, and most usually to relate to the "nefarious" activities of some political parties, should not divert attention from the fact that groups and individuals, in the course of social action, move in and out of larger institutions. The problem for socialist groups lies in their need for a base larger than the one they can create themselves. Members of socialist groups, or at times the group as a whole, have worked in trade unions and co-operatives, entered community bodies, and in South Africa in a later period have functioned inside, or in alliance with, national liberation movements. Such activities are not unusual and usually go unremarked.

It is not my intention in this paper to praise or condemn "entryism" as a principle. The problems are part of a larger debate among socialists on the kind of organizations with which it is permissible to work and the need to preserve the socialist group's identity. But, ultimately, it is my contention that no small, tightly-knit political group can ever be effective unless it finds a milieu in which it can approach persons who are in agreement with its basic aims.

The Earliest Contacts

From their inception, the groups that were formed during the First World War [1] and later banded together to form the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) sought a constituency in which to work and put their programme to work. The common principles on which they agreed - the struggle against capitalism; the rejection of racialism; and an internationalism that was linked to Moscow - confronted them with the need to find a base among the working class.

Yet, from the outset, these groups had to face problems that were unique to the South African situation. Although the country was undoubtedly capitalist, industrialization in South Africa outside the mines was rudimentary. The skilled and semi-skilled workers were mainly white. Africans filled most of the unskilled occupations, from farm labour to domestic service; from migrant labourers on the mines to manual workers in the shops and factories. [2]

Information on the black workers in the early 1920s is not easily obtainable, but in 1924, when there were 19,000 whites and 190,000 blacks employed on the gold mines, one estimate suggests that there were 13,000 white workers and 20,000 blacks employed on the Rand, most in light consumer goods, and in the metal and building industries. The number of African workers in the other provinces was even lower. However, if statistics are not available, a survey of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) does provide a graphic picture of the persons who were recruited into the first black "trade union". This body had its origins in Bloemfontein, where the location inhabitants rallied unsuccessfully behind Selby Msimang, a young intellectual, to obtain a minimum wage for the town. The defeat of that strike was significant on two counts: firstly, it discouraged the extension of the union northwards, and, secondly, it left the field open in which Klemens Kadalie could develop a movement, of the same name but with a different constituency.

The focus of the ICU shifted to Cape Town, where it was more successful. Precisely who re-established the ICU is, in my opinion, open to question. The accepted account, partly retailed by Kadalie, was that a white socialist, Albert Batty, who was seeking an electoral base, had come upon him during a dispute in the street and, without much ado, invited him to participate in organizing the dock workers. He was soon established as union leader and, hey presto, the union was on its way. What happened to others who were organizing dock workers, including Hamilton Kraai and Reuben Cetyewa, formally associated with the ISL, is not told. But even accepting Kadalie's story, the men who were organized were mainly the Coloured workers, and when a strike was called (and won) it was the Coloureds who gained a wage increase. This was the only early industrial action led by the ICU that succeeded. Leaving aside the Masabalala incident in Port Elizabeth, which had its own local dynamic - and which did not lead to the formation of a union branch in any but name - the ICU as an organization seems in the first years to have organized branches mainly in the countryside. The one event in which the ICU figured prominently, by chance rather than design, followed the riot in the Bloemfontein locations in 1925. This led to the establishment of a local wages commission on which blacks (including members of the ICU) were invited to sit. The result was precisely the minimum wage agreement for the town that had been demanded in 1919. [3]

Search as one may, there were no signs of organization among black industrial workers for most of the decade: none among mine workers nor among blacks in brick-making or the metal industries, most of whom were accommodated in compounds which were closed to "outsiders". From 1919 to 1925 the ICU existed almost exclusively in the Cape and in Natal. Only thereafter did it move into the Transvaal but with no record of organization in industry: their groups in the Transvaal formed not in factories but in the townships and, of course, in the countryside. The reason lay not in any default by Kadalie or his organizers (whatever other criticism there may be) but in the fact that the black working class was inchoate, was not congregated in large factories, and was quite unformed.

For the small CPSA, there were insoluble problems. By training and inclination they sought the workers on the shop floor - and because this brought them into contact with the trade unions their contacts were almost all white. Secondly, in their use of the electoral machine (as required by the Comintern), their constituency outside the Cape was exclusively white. Thirdly, even if they wished to organize in the community, they were excluded by law (and also by inaccessibility) from entering black locations. In 1919, when Ivon Jones was tried in Pietermaritzburg under war-time regulations for distributing leaflets, he said under cross-examination that he had never been into a location or a Reserve. This was undoubtedly the

case for most white Communists until the late 1920s.

The consequence for the ISL and InSL, and later the CPSA, was marked. Try as they would, they made little headway in their attempt at recruiting black workers. This despite the fact that the ISL was the first political body to form a black workers' organization, participated in the early post-war Rand strike, protested in Cape Town over the Bulhoek massacre, and so on. The issue was not easily decided [4] - but, ultimately, the belief that the white workers would form the base of the struggle for socialism governed CPSA policy-making.

Then came the General Strike of 1922 - and, despite some initial equivocation, the CPSA came out in favour of the white miners. [5] The nature of the strike has been a controversial issue now for nearly seventy years, evoking sharp reactions among socialists who are still divided on the role of the white miners in their struggle against the mine-owners. Although precipitated by a wage cut and demands that the cuts be restored, the issue was widened by the claim of white miners that they would be replaced by blacks at a fraction of the wages they were being paid. Wages and the colour bar were inseparable and, in the ensuing battles, racial tension rose in the Transvaal. There were attacks on race grounds, and the capitalist press took delight in highlighting such encounters. None the less, Ivon Jones, writing from Moscow, maintained that:

It was not a conflict of whites against blacks, but a pure class struggle between the politically conscious workers, who happened to be white, and the capitalist class ... The international offensive of capitalism spreads to the colonies ... In South Africa it takes the form of a demand on the part of the Chamber of Mines that the mining regulations be altered to allow cheap native labour into more skilled positions. This means larger gangs of natives working under fewer skilled whites ... a demand for the general reduction of wages [and] a reduction of one fifth in the number of white workers ... Hence it was for the white workers a question of very existence.
(*Communist International*, 1922)

For the CPSA it was also a question of "very existence". They believed the white miners to be "politically conscious workers", and backed them, underestimating the impact of racial antagonisms opened up by the strike.

The one vocal critic inside the party was Frank Glass, secretary of the Cape Town branch. His view must be stated, not only because of the position he took then, but also because of the role he was to play later in supporting the call for entry into the SALP. Writing in the *International* (17 February), Glass stated that the white workers were too backward, their trade unions too weak, and the party's forces too insignificant to make a revolution - and part of the reason lay in the racism of the white workers which disqualified them as leaders of a united working class. The evidence, however, is blurred. Glass, as a loyal member of the party, would not have opposed the strike, and the Simons state that he spoke in Cape Town in favour of the miners. [6] Whatever his reservations, after the bombing of the Rand, Glass attacked the savagery with which the strike had been crushed. A resolution he drew up was presented to a mass meeting in Cape Town condemning the brutal suppression of the Rand strike, demanding that no person participating in the strike be executed or deported, and that Martial Law be raised immediately. Claiming further that the Government had shown its "utter incapacity to rule South Africa in the interests of the majority of its citizens", he called for its immediate resignation. Lastly, it called for a Commission of Enquiry to investigate events on the Rand to "counteract the mass of lying calumnies which have been hurled at the Rand Workers by the Capitalist Press".

He then used the events of the strike to explain the nature of government in simple terms. It is not certain when he wrote this article, but it was probably published before he left Cape

Town. I quote from his typescript. [7] Headed "Death to Capitalism: Avenge Your Slaughtered Comrades", the opening sentences referred to the slaughter of March 1922, and compared it to the shootings of July 1913, Port Elizabeth and Bulhoek. Then, to explain why the ruling class acted in this vicious way, Glass discussed the nature of the struggle between capitalists and the working class, using as texts Marx's *Wage, Labour and Capital* and the *Communist Manifesto*. The task of government, said Glass, was to maintain the ruling class in power and suppress the periodical uprisings of the oppressed class. Ultimately, the oppressed classes had always triumphed, replacing the old society with the new - but hitherto all societies had been based on inequality. In the twentieth century the "slave class of modernity" had the task of "destroying for ever all slave relations by destroying the system of the private ownership of the means of production ... [7]

In the modern period, he wrote, there were giant upheavals that "rock Capitalism to its very foundation". One such example was the Rand Strike. Then, deviating from the position he had taken earlier, he said:

From the point of view of immediate practical advantages, the Rand Strike cannot be said to have been a success, but, viewed in the broad perspective of the general progress of the Labour Movement, it has undoubtedly been productive of much good. The workers have gained practical knowledge and experience in the field of action. The remorseless fact of the class-struggle, together with the real function of the Government in that struggle, has been driven home with sledge-hammer force. The futility of attempting to better their conditions under Capitalism; the urgent necessity for class-solidarity irrespective of colour, race or creed, in the face of the Capitalist attack, are lessons, let us hope that have been equally well learnt.

In conclusion, Glass spoke confidently of a forward movement of the working class and the destruction of the existing system. The tensions in Glass's approach are evident and it was thus no surprise when, two years later, in March 1924, on the second anniversary of the strike, he wrote an article in the *International* in praise of the miners in their struggle with the Chamber of Mines. The revolt, he said, would

... ever be remembered as one of the most glorious episodes in the proletarian struggle in South Africa, if not, indeed, of the world. It is indelibly stamped on the pages of universal working-class history as is, for instance, the Paris Commune of the year 1871. As with the Paris workers in that year, so in 1922 did the workers of this country receive their first real baptism of fire and blood.

In both these articles Glass followed many of the views expressed by Ivon Jones (see above), who had said that the strike was "the first great armed revolt of the workers on any scale in the British Empire". Jones went further, voicing criticism of the racist attacks on blacks, but claiming that these were isolated events and exaggerated by the press. Glass was strangely silent on the matter of race: claiming only that, "Alone of all Labour organisations, the Communist Party justified and defended the heroic workers of the Rand", and he contrasted this with the Labourite and trade union leaders who, dissociating themselves from the events of March 1922, had said "You shouldn't have gone so far".

At some point in 1922 Frank Glass left Cape Town for Johannesburg. There he acted as an organizer for the CPSA and also entered the trade union movement as General Secretary-Organizer of the Witwatersrand Tailors Association.

The Entryist Tactic

In the aftermath of the strike of 1922 the CPSA found itself increasingly isolated. The white workers of the Rand had suffered a massive defeat and, after burying their dead and calling for the release of those in prison, there were few who would have dared to call for further battles. There was no more talk of direct working-class action to oust the capitalists, and nobody perceived in the black workers their possible allies. Rather, their thoughts turned to the next general election and of campaigning alongside the Nationalists against their common enemies: the mine-owners and Smuts, their champion. The communists found that they had little room for manoeuvre and had no viable plans for increasing their membership or planning new campaigns. It was under these circumstances that the party accepted the directive of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November 1922: namely, that it was necessary to call for a united front of the working class in order to win the organized working class away from the social democrats. [8]

To apply the tactic, the party could only turn to the South African Labour Party. For many, this seemed an absurd move which negated the very principles on which the ISL and the CPSA had been based. The SALP was an exclusively white party, which prided itself on being the first to have called for the complete segregation of the country, the repatriation of all Africans to the Reserves and of Indians to the Indian continent. Yet, the demoralization inside the CPSA was so extensive that only a few party members (apparently grouped round Wilfred Harrison and Manuel Lopes in Cape Town) spoke out against work inside the SALP.

Moreover, there were few alternatives. There was no place for the predominantly white party in the South African Native National Congress, which had an exclusively black membership (and which eschewed the radical approach of the CP), and work with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) was still a matter for the future. There was one other organization, centred in the Transvaal, called the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives, and Bunting explored the possibility of joining it. It had been set up at the suggestion of members of the Stokes-Phelps Commission on Education which toured the country between February and April 1921. They were perturbed by what they perceived as evidence of increased racial friction and suggested to liberal whites that, following similar experiences in the USA, they set up bodies to bring the ethnic groups together for informed discussions.

Local Councils, composed (theoretically) of equal numbers of whites and Africans, although limited in number to less than forty, maintained contact through cultural, scouting and sport facilities with the majority of politically active Africans. When formed, the stated objective was to lessen friction between whites and blacks and to improve conditions under which Africans lived. The factors that led to the organization of these groups was the belief that the situation in the country was volatile and that only the winning of the hearts and minds of the educated Africans could avert an explosion. There was also an opinion, expressed less openly, that there was a race for the "soul" of the African - and that if this race was not won by Christians, the Communists would surely win. Given these premises there was little possibility of Communists being invited to join the Council. None the less, Bunting made such an attempt. He spoke to Herbert Hosken, the secretary in Johannesburg, and on 16 June 1923 he wrote confirming his verbal application for membership. [9] The outcome was never in doubt: Bunting was not accepted in the body.

An application for affiliation was also sent to the SALP in April 1923, but was rejected. The reasons for this rejection are complex. The SALP had approached the ISL in 1919 and suggested that the war issue, which had led to the initial split, was no longer a political factor and the two groups should unite. The ISL had rejected the approach. By 1922 the CPSA had moved even further from the SALP and during the strike the mainstream of Labour had found common cause with the Nationalists. Both Labour and the Nationalists used the rhetoric of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism and this opened up the possibility of an electoral alliance between Labour and the Nationalist Party in the forthcoming general election.

The CPSA was again in a quandary. The main enemy was seen to be Smuts, the representative of the mine-owners and the man who had brought out the airplanes to bombard the strikers. When the general election was called in mid-1924, the membership believed that the obvious path was to support the Labour-Nationalist alliance and topple the Smuts government. Yet, it seems as if the party was either divided on policy or moved towards the right as the election date came nearer. Roux, in his biography of Bunting, claims that a minority on the party executive (Bunting, Roux and W Kalk) had difficulty in getting any reference to blacks in the CPSA election manifesto, only managing to add two points to the list of demands after much argument: a call for the abolition of the pass laws, and a call for "the extension of educational facilities to all sections of the population" (p 65).

W H Andrews, among others, considered the party's appeal to Africans either inappropriate or irrelevant. However, earlier in the year the Johannesburg branch of the CPSA printed a leaflet, "*Watchman, What of the Night?*": an appeal pointedly directed to the white workers which adopted a view far more radical than that quoted in Roux's book - and not mentioned elsewhere. [10]

Pointing to the possibility of an election in 1924, the "*Watchman*" leaflet spoke of the deleterious effects of the defeat of the 1922 strike on the workers and called on every worker to see that Smuts was defeated. The writer would have preferred workers to be in the Communist Party but, because that was impossible, called for a vote for the SALP or the Nationalists. "We have got to make perfectly sure of winning this event ... But winning elections is not enough", he said. The trade unions had to be built up; the Industrial Conciliation Bill had to be fought because it was an impediment to strike action; and the unemployed had to be organized lest they be used as scabs. Even this was insufficient. The black workers could neither be removed nor ignored, he said.

With all our years of experience here, can we hope that the white workers by themselves will beat the enemy? How can you expect to win a strike, for instance, when only one man in ten comes out - which is what we tried to do in 1922? Remember the native worker is not just a neutral. He has become today a powerful tool in the hands of the masters who, while we were indifferent or hostile, have been sedulously spreading their net to capture him.

He warned that the black workers had started their own organization as "self-protection against 'white' oppression". It was essential that the black worker be won over to the working-class movement and that he be assisted in improving his lot. But, he warned, this was only part of a world-wide problem "inherent in the capitalist system itself, which on a world scale pits worker against worker in a futile struggle". Yet, with the dissolving of Parliament, this appeal was set aside and the party avoided the colour question, deciding not to field candidates lest they split the vote of the anti-Smuts camp. Only in Parktown (Johannesburg), where the government candidate was unopposed, did the CPSA nominate a candidate. Glass was chosen but he withdrew when Labour entered the hustings.

The Nationalist-Labour alliance defeated Smuts at the election and formed a coalition government. This raised new problems for the CPSA. Although the party had urged voters to support the anti-Smuts government, they balked at the idea of Labour buttressing a government that was dedicated to upholding the capitalist system. S P Bunting, who drew up the CPSA's election manifesto, said that the party had come "To Bury Caesar, not to praise the Pact", and that a vote for the Pact was "a step towards Worker's control of the means of production and self-determination in a Workers' Republic". Now, after the election, the CPSA called for Labour to stay outside the government and act, instead, as an independent force that would hold the balance of power in Parliament. [11] All to no avail. Labour joined the cabinet and there was no evidence of disaffection among its ranks, leaving communists even more isolated than before.

Later that year, in September/October, the CPSA nominated two candidates in the Municipal elections: H Perreira in Hanover Street (Cape Town), and Glass in Jeppers (Johannesburg). A third communist, T Chapman, stood as an independent in Benoni. Perreira and Chapman received 128 and 131 votes; Glass received a more creditable 259 votes against 589 votes for his Labour opponent. Although the party report claimed that this showed that there was an increasing number of voters who were "favourable to the principles of the Communist Party", there could have been few illusions about the immediate prospects of party growth.

In his election manifesto and "election address" Frank Glass said that his message was directed to the working class "and not to the big property-owner" whose vote "he did not expect or wish to get". In any other country his programme would have been unexceptional: demands for an end to poverty and unemployment; an end to slums and to corruption; the building of "a community of really free and equal citizens". But in South Africa this was unreal - avoiding all mention of black disabilities and directed at only the one section of the population that had the vote.

Glass claimed in his notes that the only working-class party in South Africa was the Communist Party. The SALP, he said, was little more than a Liberal Party, not entitled to use the title "Labour". Yet, on 27-28 December, when the CPSA met in conference, Glass was the main speaker who urged (against the majority) that the party affiliate to the SALP. Glass rested his case on the fact that, unlike Europe, the communists had made little headway in English-speaking countries (the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa), while social democratic parties had grown in strength. He did not offer any reason for this difference: but only said that the difference was observable. This had led to the formulation of the United Front tactic, designed to break down the isolation of the communist parties. The British and American parties had broken down isolation and gained an influence through working with or within other parties. The CPSA had to take the same course if it was to win the workers to its ranks - not only through formal application for affiliation but by entering the trade unions and Labour Party branches. If this were not done the party would "remain a comparatively small propaganda sect, isolated from, and consequently possessing no decisive say in, the affairs of the [working class] movement".

Glass was talking about winning white workers, but was careful to note that the party had to find its way to both black and white masses. He even said that through the SALP there would be access to Coloured and African voters - and there is no indication that he cast any aspersions at the black worker, as stated subsequently by communist historians. In fact, an unknown informer at the conference, reported in the Department of Justice files, ascribed remarks with a racist slant to W H Andrews!

This time the resolution on affiliation was narrowly defeated and Frank Glass resigned from the executive committee of the party. The thinking of both Andrews and Glass appears to have been reinforced by a letter written to the former by Ivon Jones, dying in a sanatorium in Yalta. Jones had suggested that the CPSA be dissolved temporarily and that communists regain their position among workers via the trade unions. Meanwhile, a nucleus should publish a journal and through this protect the interests of the black workers. He also urged the South African communists to establish a book shop. Jones's advice seems to have influenced Glass, and this is borne out in one of his last reminiscences just a few weeks before his death. In answer to questions I asked in a letter, Glass said that he could remember little of the events in South Africa, and then remarked on the fact that Andrews used to read Jones's letters to him, and these were always filled with optimism over the future of socialism.

Andrews and Glass withdrew from the Central Executive in December 1924, but it is not known whether they formally resigned from the CPSA. Both the Simons and Roux (in his biography of Bunting, p 68) say that Glass left the CPSA. Furthermore, according to Roux, Glass left the party immediately after the conference, and then made a statement during an

interview to the *Star* that Africans could not appreciate the noble ideas of communism. I searched through the *Star* but could not find this interview. However, there was a letter signed by Roux, as General Secretary of the CPSA, on 4 March 1925, written in response to press reports. He said that neither Andrews nor Glass had left the party, and that Glass had resigned as treasurer because of pressure of trade union work. It is possible that this letter was itself only a half-truth, to cover an uncomfortable position. Roux's subsequent ascription of racist statements to Glass seems to be totally incorrect. As mentioned above, the statements Roux put in Glass's mouth were actually made by Andrews.

After the December conference, many members of the CPSA drifted away and were not heard of again. But Glass was secretary of the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association and together with Andrews played a prominent part in the white trade union movement. On 27 March the *Star*, claiming that the communists had captured control of the trade union movement, carried the news that Andrews had been elected secretary, and Glass treasurer, of the trade union federation, the South African Association of Employees' Organizations.

Frank Glass's subsequent political activities are not clear. He might have joined the SALP (which communists were allowed to do on an individual basis). However, he would have been isolated there after the events at the March trade union conference. Creswell, the SALP leader and Minister of Labour in the Nationalist-Labour Pact government, sought support for his Wages Bill and his proposed Emergency Powers Bill at the assembly. Glass moved the motion repudiating the latter, describing the measure as "oppressive", and called for its withdrawal. Only an amendment to postpone the introduction of the legislation for a year, which got overwhelming support, stopped the complete rejection of the Bill. [12]

Glass does not seem to have resumed work in the party, but we know that he moved from a position of leadership in the white trade unions to a precarious position in the major African trade union movement - the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa. In September 1925 he and Andrews appeared on an ICU platform, and successfully called for support for the British seamen who had walked off the ships in protest against a wage cut. This appears to have been the prelude to a change in Frank Glass's, if not Andrews', appraisal of the working class in South Africa.

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Notes

- 1 I refer primarily to the International Socialist League (ISL) in Johannesburg and the Industrial Socialist League (InSL) in Cape Town.
- 2 I do not pretend that this is an accurate picture of population occupations. I exclude the Coloured workers in the western Cape who also occupied positions as artisans or worked in light industry, and Indians who worked in the sugar mills, coal mines, and so on.
- 3 This despite the difference between the demand and the final settlement. In 1919 the demand was for a minimum wage of 4s 6d per day. The wage agreed after the 1925 riot was 3s 6d per day.

- 4 See the debate between S P Bunting and Ivon Jones *et al*, reprinted in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 1.
- 5 The strike is discussed in some detail by Gwyn Williams and myself in a forthcoming biography of Jones, using hitherto unpublished documents. I quote from the relevant section.
- 6 J H and R E Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950* (Penguin, 1969), p 294. Unfortunately, they do not footnote this item and it is not possible to check their statement.
- 7 This must remain a guess because the typescript is undated, and in any case it is not known when Glass left for Johannesburg.
- 8 S P Bunting, who had been a delegate at the Comintern Congress, endorsed the International's directive in an "Open Letter" in the *International* of 30 March 1923.
- 9 This letter was found in the papers of J D Rheinallt Jones, the dominant figure in the Joint Council movement.
- 10 This leaflet was almost definitely written by Glass and was found in his papers at Concordia.
- 11 "A Vital Issue: Should Labour Enter the Cabinet?" - a leaflet directed to delegates at a special conference of the SALP on 29 June 1924.
- 12 The constitution of the Association, a list of resolutions to be introduced, and the minutes of the Congress are included with the Glass papers at Concordia.