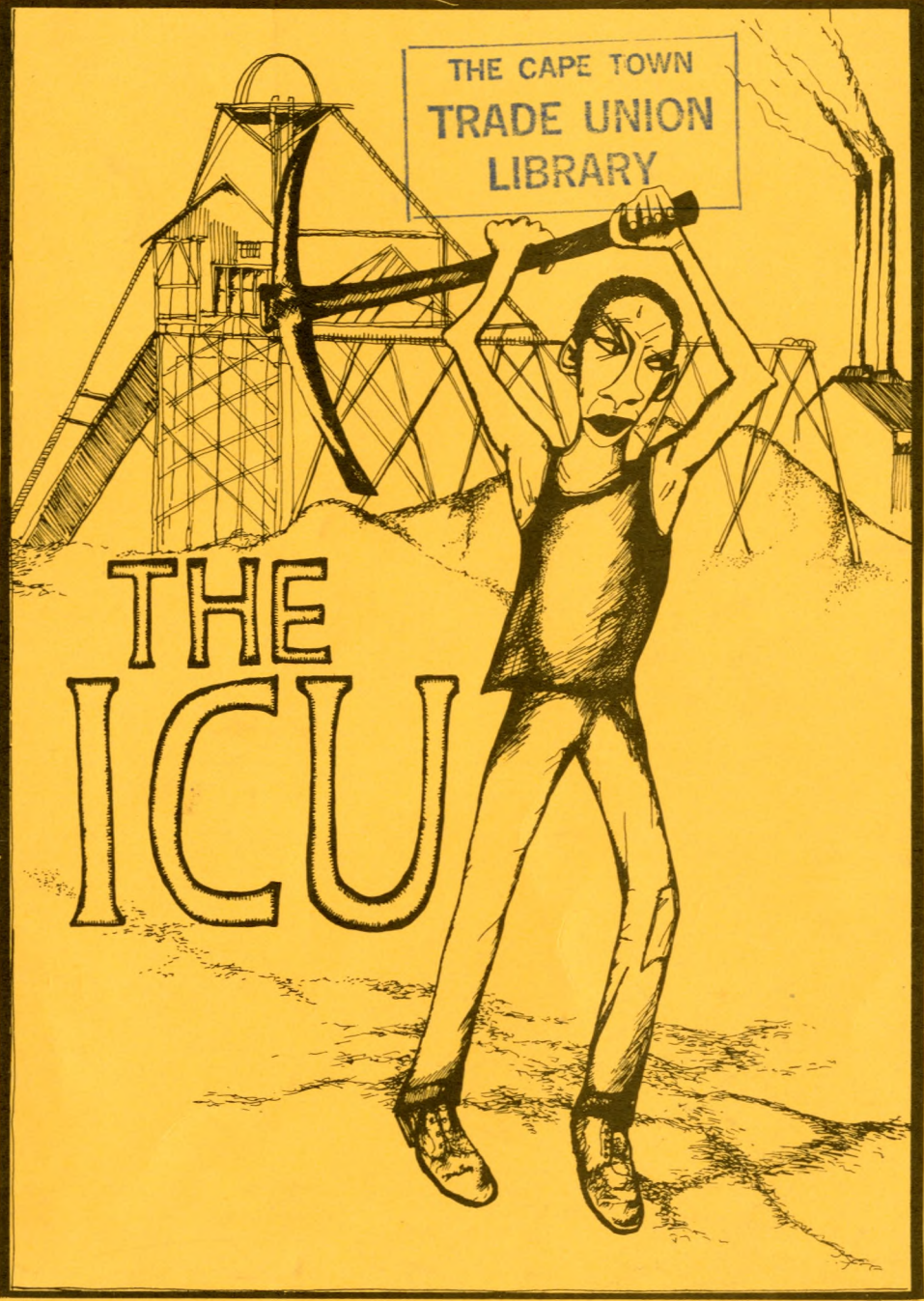


P83/244 TRADE UNIONS - ORGANIZATIONS

THE CAPE TOWN
TRADE UNION
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INTRODUCTION

Black people live and work in very poor conditions in South Africa. They have always protested and resisted this. But at the beginning of this century, these protests were limited to a few groups of workers at any one time. There was no organisation for black workers.

Then, soon after the First World War ended, a new movement appeared. It spread through the land like a veld fire. The people began to talk of their liberation, their new leaders and their organisation - the Industrial and Commercial Union (the I.C.U.). As a farm labourer from Standerton said:

"Man we thought we were getting our country back through Kadalie."

work in south africa in the 1920's

In the 1920's, there were only a few factories in South Africa and many of these were small. Most blacks worked on the farms or in the mines. Those who worked in the towns were mostly working in the factories or as domestic servants. Workers were not very skilled. Their wages were low and their working conditions terrible. There were many strikes

and protests by African workers. These strikes were usually stopped by force, often by the police.

Workers had to work for many hours a day. Farm workers especially had to work from early morning till late night for six days every week. Workers got few holidays, no pensions, and no compensation for accidents and injuries. They could be dismissed whenever the bosses wished.

Those who worked for the white farmers lived very miserably. Men got about R1,20 per month, and women 50c per month. Most industrial workers earned R6 to R8 per month. Domestic workers earned as low as R1 per month on white farms and up to R6 in the towns.

In those days, bread cost 3c per loaf and mealie meal 1c per pound. So, a man might work on a white farm for a whole day and earn enough to buy only one loaf of bread or three pounds (about one and a half kilograms) of mealie meal.

Most town workers were migrants. They returned to their homes after their contracts had ended. Most migrant workers still had families and land in the reserves, and contracts were short - usually three months or six months. Conditions

in the rural areas were very bad. So workers at this time had demands about wages and conditions at work, and also about the lack of land and conditions in the rural areas.

Soon after the mines started in South Africa, white workers started to form trade unions. But black workers did not have trade unions yet.

FORMING THE I.C.U.

CAPE TOWN

In 1919 the first trade union for black workers was formed by Clements Kadalie and some dock workers. This union was called the Industrial and Commercial Union (I.C.U.). Black people did have a political organisation, the A.N.C. But Kadalie felt that a political organisation was not enough for the workers. He felt that black workers needed a trade union too. The first workers organised in Kadalie's union were the Cape Town dock workers. They went on strike for higher wages. The army was used against the workers. The strike money soon came to an end, so Kadalie called an end to the strike. Soon afterwards the dockworkers got increases. So workers saw that by uniting

they could win their demands. This lesson was important for the future of the I.C.U.

CLEMENTS KADALIE was born in Malawi to an important family of chiefs. He went to Livingstonia Mission School, where most powerful black families in Malawi sent their children. Then he trained to be a teacher. When he was 18 he left home. First he worked in Rhodesia. He had many jobs, mainly on the mines. He moved to Johannesburg, where he also worked as a mine clerk. When he went to Cape Town he worked as a packer and delivery man. His education helped him to become the main leader of the I.C.U.



BLOEMFONTEIN

In Bloemfontein, Selby Msimang was organising African workers too. They were organising to get better wages, and also to improve working conditions and township living conditions. Msimang was arrested and charged under the

Riotous Assemblies Act. This caused big demonstrations. Eventually the charges against him were dropped. And he continued to help the people to organise. They also joined Kadalie's union.

SELBY MSIMANG was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1886. He was trained to be a teacher. He got a job with a lawyer in Bloemfontein, where he worked as an interpreter and clerk. He helped to organise the people to fight low wages and high taxes. After he left the I.C.U. he was active in the A.N.C. until 1953. Then he helped to start the Liberal Party. He is now 93 years old and lives in Pietermaritzburg.



The I.C.U. wanted to organise all workers. But they did not think of forming different industrial unions. Workers in different industries like textile, clothing, food, engineering, as well as domestic workers, farm workers and mine

workers, would all belong to one general union. Many of the workers were migrants who worked for wages only for part of the time.

The I.C.U. wanted to work for the social improvement of all black people - for better wages and better working conditions. What the I.C.U. wanted was this:

- A minimum wage of R10 per month
- Work for 5 days per week and half a day on Saturday
- 8 hours work per day maximum.

These things are all part of an economic struggle. They also spoke out against bad living conditions in the townships, bad transport facilities, lack of education for blacks. They also wanted to oppose the laws which discriminated against black people, like the pass laws for Africans, and the laws which limited the amount of land for Africans to live on. They even thought of buying land for black people to farm on. These things were all part of a political struggle.

EARLY HISTORY

In 1920 the I.C.U. had their first conference. They decided it was important to organise farm workers and women workers. At this time, the I.C.U. wanted to make sure that it represented these workers. At the conference they also condemned the pass laws, white capitalists and the racist white trade unions.

PORT ELIZABETH

The next support for the I.C.U. came from the Port Elizabeth dock workers. A worker called Masabalala started to organise the I.C.U. in P.E. and soon 4 000 out of 20 000 workers in P.E. were organised. They heard about the successful Cape Town dock strike. So the P.E. dock workers also went on strike for higher wages. The municipal authorities tried to stop the strike by violence, and Masabalala was arrested. Hundreds of people demonstrated outside the prison, demanding Masabalala's release. The police and some P.E. whites panicked and started shooting. 23 workers were killed, a riot started, and workers wanted to call a general strike.

Msimang went to P.E. from Bloemfontein, to try to help to sort things out. As a representative of the P.E. workers, he got the police to release Masabalala. Again he took the workers' demands for higher wages to the bosses. This time the bosses agreed to give a small increase.

Also in 1920, 70 000 African mine workers went on strike on the Witwatersrand. They asked white mine workers to support their strike. But the white mine workers refused, and even scabbed in the strike. In the end the strike was stopped violently by the police. This strike was an important show of African worker solidarity. But it had nothing to do with the I.C.U. The I.C.U. had gained many members all over the Cape Province - up as far as Queenstown. But it had very few members in the Transvaal.

The I.C.U. had their second conference in 1921. They again said that they opposed racist trade unions and pass laws. They demanded that the government get rid of the land laws, the farm labour system and the mine labour recruiting system. They decided to ask the government to give support to the relatives of the people who had been massacred at Bulhoek. (Thousands of black people had settled at Bulhoek near Queenstown in May 1921. They came to hear the words of a prophet who lived there. They ignored

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government officials who insisted that they could not stay. Finally, the police tried to move them by force, and killed 180 people.) The I.C.U. also wanted the government to announce national holidays for black workers on May 24 (in memory of the Bulhoek massacre) and October 23 (in memory of the P.E. riots).

After this 1921 conference there were disturbances in the townships of East London and Bloemfontein. These disturbances were influenced by the ideas of the I.C.U., and they were supported by the I.C.U.

organisation

In a very short time thousands of workers joined the I.C.U. These people came from everywhere in South Africa. The I.C.U. had supported political protests in the townships, and it had also supported strikes for higher wages. They had made strong statements about the oppression of black workers and these statements appeared in the newspapers. This is why so many workers were attracted to the I.C.U.

As the I.C.U. became more and more popular, the government tried to stop it from organising. Many of its leaders were often arrested and detained, and some were banned or banished to far-off places. But it was not only these things which caused real problems for the I.C.U.

The I.C.U. did not have a clear programme of organisation. There was no training or discussion with the rank and file worker members of the I.C.U. Often workers began militant struggles themselves. Many times when this happened they called in the I.C.U. When they got involved in struggles, the I.C.U. officials made speeches at big meetings. They did not discuss the issues with the workers. And so the workers never made the decisions. They only supported the decisions of the officials. This method of organisation made it difficult for any of the workers to learn to be leaders in their struggles.

Most I.C.U. policy decisions were made at their annual conferences. Usually it was the officials, and not the workers, who attended the conferences.

the i.c.u. and the a.n.c.

When it was formed, the I.C.U. asked the A.N.C. for support. They felt that it was important for the trade union and political organisation of black people to work together. Some people in the A.N.C. also thought so, and gave their support. Some A.N.C. members were I.C.U. officials.

But the official policy of the A.N.C. did not recognise the need to organise black workers outside of the A.N.C. So officially the A.N.C. could see no need for a union like the I.C.U. In those days, the A.N.C. was dominated by a group of leaders who were against militant struggle.

AFTER 1922

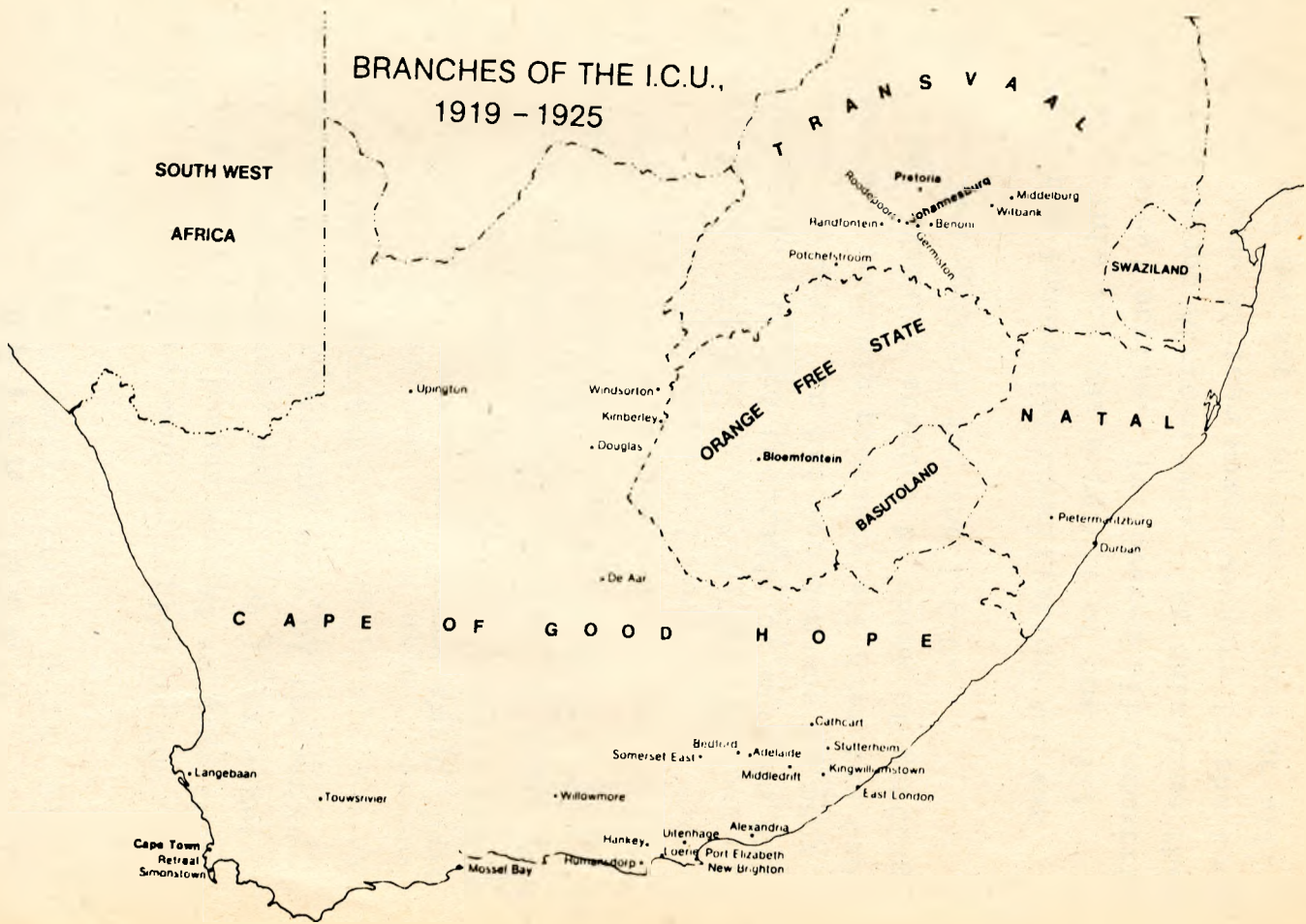
In 1922 white miners went on strike on the Witwatersrand. The bosses wanted to give their jobs to black workers, and to pay lower wages. The strike led to riots and many of the white workers attacked Africans.

The I.C.U. was of course very angry about these attacks on Africans. They criticised the colour bar which the white workers wanted to keep. They supported the government's use of force in ending the riots.

By this time, the I.C.U. was a very big organisation. It had thousands of African and Coloured members. It had won demands in many strikes and township protests all over the Cape Province. Kadalie started to think of getting official recognition for the I.C.U.

In 1924 the Industrial Conciliation Act was passed. This Act was a result of the 1922 mine workers' strike. It covered all industrial workers except African men. (At this time there were not many African women workers in the towns) The Act did not apply to farm workers at all.

BRANCHES OF THE I.C.U.,
1919 - 1925



It allowed for registered white, coloured and Indian trade unions. It also allowed for Industrial Councils, where the bosses and worker representatives would negotiate about wages and working conditions. But no representatives of African workers were allowed on these Industrial Councils.

The I.C.U. was the only true representative organisation of black workers. So Kadalie wanted the I.C.U. to be included in the new Industrial Conciliation system. But he was not trying to make the workers so strong that the government would be forced to recognise the I.C.U. He did not even consult with the members of the I.C.U. about this question of recognition. Instead he tried to make the government believe that the I.C.U. was very respectable, and that it would not make trouble for the government if it was recognised.

JOHANNESBURG

But the I.C.U. was not representative enough of all black workers. They had no members among the mine workers. This is why the I.C.U. was not connected with the strike of the African mine workers in 1920. And they did not have many other members on the Rand. So they moved their

head office from Cape Town to Johannesburg. Thomas Mbeki addressed many mass meetings in the Transvaal.

THOMAS MBEKI was one of the first people to join the I.C.U. in 1924 in Johannesburg. He was a member of the Young Communist League. He educated himself at the Communist Party night school. When the communists were kicked out of the I.C.U. in 1926, Mbeki left the Communist Party so that he could stay in the I.C.U.

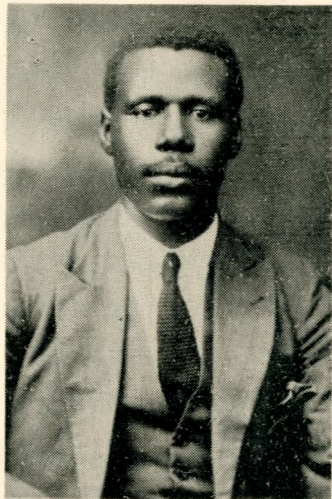
But in the meantime members in the Cape were beginning to lose interest in the I.C.U. It was a long time since the last I.C.U. struggle had been fought. Every year big resolutions were passed at I.C.U. conferences. But there was still no mass action against the pass laws, or other laws criticised by the I.C.U. The officials were too busy organising new areas. Also black workers had to pay high joining fees and the I.C.U. weekly subscriptions were high (male industrial workers: 20c enrolment fee, plus 5c per week; women workers and farm workers: 10c enrolment fee, plus 2½c per week). In the old I.C.U. areas in the Cape, many workers stopped paying subscription fees to the I.C.U.

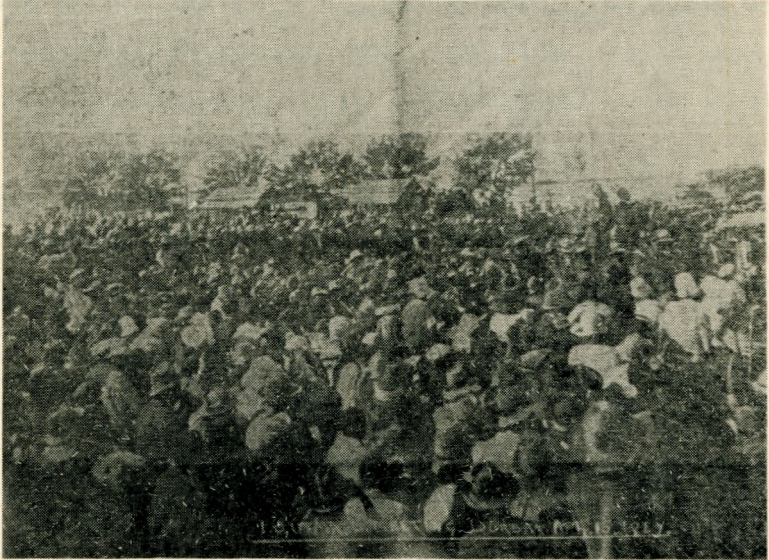
organising farm workers

NATAL AND TRANSVAAL

In 1925, A.W.G. Champion went to organise a branch of the I.C.U. in Natal. He was very successful there. The I.C.U. organised thousands of members. Most of them were farm workers. Champion's method of organising was to use the law. Many workers in Natal won court cases against their bosses. Some bosses were fined for beating their workers. Others were forced by the courts to improve working conditions for their workers.

A.W.G. CHAMPION was educated at Adams College in Natal. After Standard 6 he was expelled for being rebellious. For 2 years he was a policeman. Then he worked as a clerk at Crown Mines in Johannesburg. From 1920 he was head of a trade union of all mine clerks. In 1925 Kadalie asked Champion to leave the mines and to work for the I.C.U. Then Champion became secretary of the Natal branch. He was not a good speaker but he was a good organiser.





I.C.U. mass meeting of 10 000 workers
in Durban.

On farms all over Natal, the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal, thousands of workers heard about the I.C.U. We have seen how farm workers were the lowest paid workers in South Africa. They also received some rations. But these rations could not feed all the family.

Many farm workers were squatting on white farms. Others were allowed to stay there as labour tenants. This meant that they had to do some free work for the farmer, to pay for their rent. Sometimes they were allowed to graze their own animals on the white farms. But, where this happened they were often charged for this. Or, in return for grazing their animals, they would have to work for the farmer for many months every year and receive no wages.

Farm workers also had no job security. When they lost their jobs on the farms, they also lost their homes. So they were very badly exploited. This is why the I.C.U. really appealed to the farm workers.

Many farm workers heard stories about the I.C.U. But they did not know very much about it. It was difficult for the I.C.U. to organise masses of farm workers. They did not live close together like workers in the cities. Farm workers believed that the I.C.U. would help them, but they did not know how this would happen. They did not really understand what the I.C.U. was. They only knew who the leaders were, because they addressed big meetings.

Thousands of farm workers used to travel to I.C.U. meetings held on Sundays in the rural areas. Sometimes there would be 2 000 or 3 000 people at these meetings in the country. The farm workers thought that somehow the I.C.U. would come and kick the white farmers off the land. Then they would be able to farm the land for themselves.

The white farmers became very scared of the I.C.U. They thought it was a communist organisation. They asked the government to help them fight the I.C.U. Some farmers even started paying higher wages to their workers. They did not want their workers to have reason to join the I.C.U. And they forced workers off the farms if they thought they belonged to the I.C.U.

THE DECLINE OF THE I.C.U.

kadalie moves away from the workers

Two different political lines had developed in the I.C.U. Kadalie and others wanted the I.C.U. to be recognised as a respectable trade union. Because they wanted to be recognised by the government, they wanted to prove that they were not troublemakers. So they became afraid to support strikes, and afraid to confront the government about too many of its laws in public. This was the right wing line of the I.C.U. Another group in the I.C.U. wanted the I.C.U. to get involved in more militant activity. They wanted more mass action which would involve all the worker members of the I.C.U. This was the left wing line.

Of course, the left wing's ideas were not good for Kadalie's plans for the I.C.U. Most of the people with these ideas were also members of the Communist Party of South Africa (C.P.S.A.) In those days the C.P.S.A. was a legal political party in South Africa. In 1926 the members of the C.P.S.A. were kicked out of the I.C.U.

In 1927, Kadalie went to Geneva in Switzerland. There he represented South Africa's black workers at an international trade union conference. Then he went to England. He got a lot of advice from British trade union officials on how to organise the I.C.U. Kadalie felt that the line of these British trade union officials was to make militant economic demands, but to keep away from political struggles. He thought that if the I.C.U. now also kept away from political issues, they might be recognised more easily by the South African government.

So when Kadalie came back to South Africa, the I.C.U. started to keep away from political issues like the pass laws, bad living conditions, or lack of education for blacks. They were only prepared to support economic demands concerning wages and working conditions. But even in this economic struggle they were afraid to be too militant.

Kadalie met with Hertzog, the Nationalist Prime Minister. The I.C.U. was the only organisation which represented black workers' interests. He hoped that this would get government recognition for the I.C.U.



Durban I.C.U. members outside an I.C.U.
office.

growing weakness

In 1927 the I.C.U. had the biggest number of members they had ever had. They claimed to have 100 000 members altogether. In Natal alone they claimed to have 30 000 members.

But by this time there was a split between the I.C.U. officials and the ordinary worker members. Some farm workers were still winning court cases against their bosses. But the other members were not gaining much out of the I.C.U. There were a lot of strikes in Johannesburg and Durban at this time. But the I.C.U. would not support these strikes. After the communists were kicked out of the I.C.U. the organisation did not use the strike weapon any more. The thousands of members were weak and powerless.

the i.c.u. splits up

So in 1928 many more I.C.U. members left the organisation. Even the thousands of farm worker members were getting tired of waiting for something to happen. Also, the officials were all fighting each other. There were many rumours that officials were stealing I.C.U. money. Some of these rumours were true. And it seemed that some of the officials had too much power.

They got a trade unionist called Ballinger to come from England and sort out the affairs of the I.C.U. Ballinger found that the I.C.U. was not being administered properly. There were no clear records of how the organisation's money was being spent. There was not enough control over all the officials. The whole organisation started to split up.

Kadalie formed another small union called the Independent I.C.U. This union was based mainly in East London. The Natal branch under Champion became an independent union, called the I.C.U. yase-Natal. Ballinger kept the I.C.U. going for those few members who were left. This was now called the I.C.U. of Africa.

The previous year Kadalie had sent Robert Sambo to Buluwayo to start the Rhodesian Independent I.C.U. This organisation was like Kadalie's I.C.U. in its early days. It was still spreading to Salisbury and the Rhodesian mines. In the 1930's this Rhodesian Independent I.C.U. was very strong, but after the Second World War the national liberation movements became much more important.

The I.C.U. yase-Natal still had a lot of support from workers. This was because of their successful legal struggles. But after 3 or 4 years



Clements Kadalie (left) and A.W.G.
Champion (right).

the government started to take heavy action against political activity in Natal. The I.C.U. yase-Natal broke down under this pressure. The other small I.C.U. unions had also broken down by this time.

By 1932, there was very little left of the I.C.U.

WHY WE REMEMBER THE I.C.U.

But the I.C.U. did not leave South Africa completely unchanged. It was now clear that trade unions for black workers were important. Black workers had won important demands for the first time, through the I.C.U. The I.C.U. was the first non-racial organisation in South Africa. It had African members, and coloured members in the Cape - for example, the dock workers. It was also concerned about oppressed workers not only in South Africa but also in other African countries. Also, the I.C.U. did not recognise tribal divisions. It was the first organisation for Africans which was both political and economic. The I.C.U. was even recognised overseas. And for the first time, the rest of the world became aware of the bad conditions for black workers in South Africa, through the I.C.U.

Of course, there were many problems with the I.C.U. We have already mentioned many problems. It was a worker organisation that was dominated by men who were not workers. There were never any women leaders in the I.C.U. The I.C.U. made a good start. But it moved backwards when Kadalie started looking for respectability. This became more important than looking after the workers' interests, and many of the good things about the I.C.U. changed.

But these problems could not take away the impact the I.C.U. had already made. Black workers saw how the political struggles and economic struggles were connected. The I.C.U. had not managed to carry these struggles very far. But it had started to light up the way.



SOME QUESTIONS

1. Why did Kadalie form a general union, and not an industrial union? Was this a mistake?
2. Was the I.C.U. a proper trade union?
3. Why did the I.C.U. get so much support in its early years? Why did this support drop off so suddenly after 1927?
4. What were the main reasons for the decline of the I.C.U. What reasons had to do with the conditions of that time? Was it because of the leadership? What lessons are still there for us in the workers movement today?
5. Was the A.N.C. right to say that the workers did not need a separate organisation?

Here are three stories about the activities of the I.C.U.

BLOEMFONTEIN 1925-1930

In 1925, the I.C.U. held many meetings in the Bloemfontein location. Wages were very low (less than R1 a week). Also the women were angry with the police who raided houses for beer and threw any beer they found into the street. Kadalie and other I.C.U. speakers visited the Waaihoek location. They said that the workers in Cape Town had united and won higher wages. The people in Bloemfontein must do the same. Kadalie's words were:

"Agitate until parliament trembles."

One Sunday the women held a demonstration in the centre of the location to protest against the beer raids. 3 000 people attended. The police and some whites came into the location "to restore order". They opened fire and shot one man dead. The people collected stones and chased the police away.

That night meetings were held all over the location. People decided not to go to work the next day in protest against the shooting. Pickets blocked the roads early in the morning to stop scabs from going into the town. 22 000 were on strike.

A deputation was sent to demand that the men who shot their brother should be punished immediately. The people also said that the police must move away from the entrance to the township. The police refused.

Whites in Bloemfontein got scared. They came with their guns to join the police. But the location residents would not disperse until their demands were met. The police and the whites helping them marched towards the township. They fired their guns into the crowd and killed four more people. 24 people were injured. More than 50 people were arrested, many of them women. The I.C.U. and the A.N.C. paid for lawyers to speak for them in court.

These attacks did not break the unity of the people. The I.C.U. continued to hold meetings and to organise. Mass demonstrations put forward the demand for a minimum wage of 35s per day. A strike seemed possible, so the City Council sent the Bishop of Bloemfontein to hold negotiations over wages. A mass meeting agreed to this. But the Council refused the demand of 35c a day. The workers then told the I.C.U. representatives to withdraw from the negotiations.

Kadalie spoke at a demonstration of 10 000 workers in the location in March 1926. (See the picture on page). He said that the workers should demand that the government wage board step in and force the Council to accept the minimum wage of 35c per day. This aroused the hopes of many workers.

Kadalie had given support to Hertzog's government in the white elections. When Hertzog won he expected him to help black workers. But Hertzog was not interested. He passed even more oppressive laws and did nothing to raise the wages or improve the conditions of black workers.

Hundreds of workers flocked to join the I.C.U. in Bloemfontein. The solidarity of the workers over a two year period made the City Council support their demand for the wage board to set a minimum wage. But the wage board moved very slowly. After three years it set a minimum wage of 30c a day, rising to 35c only from 1930. Even the Mayor called this a "bare minimum living wage in Bloemfontein."



Kadalie speaks at the I.C.U. demonstration of 10 000 people in Bloemfontein, where the Wage Board was asked to intervene in a pay dispute.

THE I.C.U. AND THE FARMWORKERS IN THE TRANSVAAL

After 1926, the I.C.U. held big meetings in the Transvaal countryside. Kadalie would say - "I have come to liberate you."

The meetings were very big. The police often tried to break them up. In Nelspruit, the police tried to arrest people but as an I.C.U. newspaper reported:

".. the chiefs with their regiments came forward and 9 000 people sang Nkosi Sikelele Afrika and they demanded they should all be arrested.. the police spoke among themselves wanting to know where they are going to put all these people, and it was said they should all go.. there were three cheers and they left for the Location and the people's son spoke.."

At the meetings the leaders told the people many things. In Carolina, workers were told to demand higher wages "because if you get a lot of money you can be dressed neatly, and others must call you 'Mister'. You are now called 'kaffir' because you are poorly dressed." In Middelburg, Mbeki told the people to be proud and "to walk on the pavements side by side with the whites." An old woman remembers:

"The people began to be free to move on the pavements, away from the streets of cars. They were made to walk on the pavements, walking side by side with the whites and rubbing shoulders with them. Mbeki .. brought us to this position for we used not to mix."

But the I.C.U. leadership made many promises which they could not keep. The people were soon disappointed in the I.C.U. After a few years many left the I.C.U. The people were poorly organised and without the force of the people, the leaders could not force white farmers to give better wages and conditions. One old man sadly remembers:

"The I.C.U. all ended up in speeches."

THE INDEPENDENT I.C.U. IN EAST LONDON

In January 1930, the workers on the SAK & H demanded a rise in wages from 35c to 65c per day. The government refused. Kadalie told the workers - "We are your generals." - and he ordered a strike.

The I.I.C.U. called on the women:

".. stop your husbands and sweethearts from going to work. If he is a coward and goes to work you must refuse to cook food."

Soon they called a general strike of all the workers in East London.

A few days later the police locked up the whole strike committee. Then Kadalie told the workers - "You must go back to work immediately and earn money to subscribe to our defence."

But the workers refused to go back. They formed a rank and file committee and said - "We shall not return to work until our employers comply with our demands."

Workers began to raise other demands too - about housing and permits and the right to brew beer.

The strike was not won, and workers' demands were not met. But the workers showed great solidarity and courage. Many different groups of workers were on strike for up to six months. Even more important, the rank and file showed that they were able to produce a militant leadership from amongst themselves.

Other booklets in this series will cover the following topics:

1. History of the white mine workers' struggle from 1886 to 1924 (including the white mine-workers' strike of 1922).
2. The trade union movement in the 1930's
3. Black worker organisation during the Second World War (including the black mine workers' strike of 1946).
4. SACTU & TUCSA
5. Histories of some interesting individual trade unions (eg Garment Workers Union).
6. History of black workers' struggles from 1965 to 1976 (including the 1973/74 Durban strikes).
7. History of workers' struggle from 1976 to the present time (including the Wiehahn reports and government legislation, the registration issue and 1979/80 worker struggles).

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I.C.U. POEM

We are building up a union,
With which we hope to save the land
I.C.U. are its initials,
In its ranks we take our stand.

We shall show by workmen's councils
How to banish sweated ills
How to raise the blackman's status
How to conquer strife that kills:

Union means an all-in movement
None outside to scab upon us;
With folded arms we'll stand like statues
Sing our songs but make no rumpus.

That is how we ll win our battles
Make good our claims to rights;
We have no other weapon left us
Brains not Bombs shall win our fight.

Forward then in one big union
All in which we're organised
Solid phalanx undivided,
No more shall we be despised.

I.C.U. spells workers only,
I.C.U. - fraternity
I.C.U. means liberation;
I.C.U. - "Labour holds the key."