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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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Title: The New Unionism: Industrialisation and Industrial Unions in South Africa 1925-1930.

by: J Lewis

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J. Lewis

"THE NEW UNIONISM : INDUSTRIALISATION AND INDUSTRIAL UNIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA 1925 - 1930

> "Unlike the old trade unions, they greet every suggestion of an identity of interest between capital and labour with scorn and ridicule. Thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working-class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud "old" Unions".[1]
>
> F. Engels, 1889

Although Engels was writing on Britain in the late nineteenth century, his words capture the atmosphere of militant trade unionism which emerged amongst black and white workers in the secondary industrial sector during the second half of the 1920's.

I. HISTORY

Hitherto, and since its inception in the 1880's, the labour movement in South Africa had been dominated by craft unions, with the exception of the Mine Workers' Union, which increasingly drew its membership from semi-skilled and unskilled whites. These unions, with their activities centred upon the mines, had waged an intermittent and sometimes violent struggle against the mine owners over job reservation, which culminated in the Rand Revolt of 1922. The suppression of the strike by the Smuts government dealt a shattering blow to the MWU, from which it never really recovered. Trade Union membership in South Africa fell from 108,242 to 81,861 in the aftermath of the strike.[2] The defeat also hastened the collapse of the central coordinating body, the South African Industrial Federation, which was already reeling under the increasingly authoritarian direction of its General Secretary, Archie Crawford. On the railways, members of the AEU who had struck were victimized. The general effect of the failure of the 1922 strike was to make the unions very wary of strike action.

This rejection of industrial militancy took institutional form with the passage of the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1924, and the Wage Act in 1925. These measures brought industrial relations very firmly under the law and a system of conciliation. However, these developments benefited the established unions, which were powerful enough to safeguard their interests within the Industrial Councils - those representing artisans, public sector and white collar employees.[3]

Thus, the South African Typographical Union, for example, was to be a consistent champion of the policy of collaboration within the Industrial Councils.

This period also saw the beginnings of independent trade union activity amongst Africans and Coloureds, with the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU) in 1919, under the leadership of Clements Kadalie. In his own words:

"The object of this Union was to organise those workers not catered for by the white Unions into "one big Union"."(4)

By 1927, the ICU claimed a membership of 100,000. However, membership was random, scattered and unorganised, and included large numbers of labour tenants working on white farms. It has been argued that the only section of the ICU's membership which was capable of being effectively organised was the African urban working class, "and it is in their failure to organise this group that the ICU can chiefly be criticised".(5) Thus the ICU failed to give support to African workers during the 1927 strikes in Durban and Johannesburg.

The Report of the Native Economic Commission of 1930-32 refers constantly to a class of 'urbanised natives' who had lost all contact with the land and were wholly dependent for their existence on the wages they received.(6) These workers had been forced into the town by the breakdown of production in the reserves.(7) This must have meant that even the casual migrant worker was now more dependent upon wages. However, the Commission pointed out that the position of the 'urbanised native' worker was rendered insecure by the pressure of large numbers of rural migrants, less skilled and less efficient, and consequently cheaper as far as employers were concerned.(8) Employers preferred to employ Africans from rural areas, "the latter being found more docile and unsophisticated".(9) The ICU failed to take account of these differences because it was primarily concerned with building a wide front of support around the political grievances of non-whites in general. At the same time Kadalie, receiving support from the Amsterdam International and the British TUC, and increasingly under the influence of white liberals, came to reject militant trade unionism. In 1927, after expelling communist office holders from the ICU, he declared that "strikes were wicked, useless and obsolete".(10)

However, coincidental with the political emasculation of the 'old' unions, and the failure of the ICU, the South African economy witnessed a rapid expansion in the manufacturing sector, and this was to lay the basis for the emergence of the 'new' industrial unions.

II. THE GROWTH OF SECONDARY INDUSTRY

"South Africa is in the midst of a far-reaching economic revolution, the keynote of which is the efflorescence of a great variety of secondary industries and the progressive industrialisation of large sections of the population".

L. Motz (1929) (11)

The number of manufacturing establishments in the Union increased from 3,638 in 1915-16 to 6,645 in 1929-30.(12) At the same time the total number employed in private industry rose from 101,178 to 201,180 during the same period.(13) These industries received an initial boost during the First World War when it was impossible to import certain consumer goods. Thus, for example, the furniture industry on the Reef developed in the following way: 3 firms were established in 1912, 2 in 1915, 1 in 1916 and 3 in 1917.(14) By 1929, there were 50 firms in Johannesburg alone.(15) Secondary industry further benefited from the protection policy of the Pact Government after 1924.

"The policy of protection is becoming deeply ingrained in the national consciousness, and is having decided effects in the introduction of new industries. The home market for the products of the local manufactories is assuming growing proportions, with the gradual disappearance of the old prejudice against the home-made article, the improvement of the quality of the latter, and, most important, the increasing purchasing power of the population, not excluding the non-European elements".

L. Motz (1929) (16)

A change in the industrial infrastructure was bound to influence the nature of working class response. The 1935 Industrial Legislation Commission noted:

"The trend of industrial development during the past few decades has been such that it is much more convenient for employers to negotiate with one large union representing all classes of workers in their industry, rather than with a number of separate craft unions representing only sections of their workers".(17)

The Labour Force

The enlarged labour force needed for these industries was recruited from the ranks of the newly-proletarianised, both black and white, who had been forced off the land and into the towns, by economic hardship, government policy, and the increasing domination of large capitalist agriculture.

The statistics for employment in private industry reveal a distinct pattern of labour recruitment in secondary industry.(18)

CENSUS YEAR	WHITES		COLOUREDS		AFRICANS		ASIATICS	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1915-16	34,938	4,586	11,983	3,288	34,682	383	10,212	1,106
1929-30	45,168	13,234	17,975	6,791	69,216	679	8,764	502

Two trends are immediately obvious from these figures: (a) the rapid growth of white female labour, and (b) the preponderance of African males. These trends would be proportionately stronger for the Reef since the majority of Coloured and Asian workers would be employed in the Cape and Natal, respectively. It will be argued that these groups - white women, and black male factory workers - played a prominent role in the 'new unionism'.

II. SKILLED AND UNSKILLED

Wage labour in South Africa has been characterised by a massive disparity between the wage levels of skilled workers and those in unskilled or semi-skilled work. This situation arose out of the specific historical circumstances of conquest and the development of the mining industry. In particular, high wages were necessary to induce skilled workers to come to South Africa, whilst continued subsistence production in the reserves allowed the mineowners to pay Africans (who constituted the majority of unskilled labour) a wage below the necessary level for the reproduction of their labour power.[19] Secondary industry could thus benefit from an already established labour market.

The Report of the Industrial Legislation Commission of 1935, drew attention to the degree of disparity in wage rates:

As at 31st May 1935:

INDUSTRY	AREA	SKILLED	SEMI-SKILLED	UNSKILLED
Furniture	Rand and Pretoria	2s. 5⅜d - 2s. 9⅛d p.h.	8½d. - 1s. 10½d p.h.	6d. p.h.
Laundering Dyeing and Cleaning	Principle Industrial Centres	£6 p.w.	£1.5s. - £1.10s. p.w.	£1.2s.6d. p.w
Sweet Manufacturing	Principle Centres	£6 p.w.	£3 p.w.	£1.4s. p.w.

The rates contrast sharply with ratios for other countries. For instance, the average hourly earnings of male unskilled workers as a percentage of skilled rates amounted to 75% in the U.S.A. in 1927.[20]

Mr. F. A. W. Lucas, K.C., Chairman of the Wage Board, argued that this disparity between skilled and unskilled wage rates ("which might be roughly stated as the difference between £1 a day and £1 a week") led to considerable pressure for deskilling and for the downward reclassification of skilled work.

"... the skilled worker's wage was relatively to the native's wages so high that much of the semi-skilled work which formed part of the skilled man's work was handed over to the native, generally without any increase of wages.... This process also tended to push the skilled man in some industries into entirely supervisory positions".[21]

Chairman of the Wage Board (1928)

The tendency towards job fragmentation in order to take advantage of cheap labour was also noted by the Native Economic Commission:

"Work which, if the divergence between the wages of skilled men and of labourers were similar to the difference in Europe, would be done by the skilled man and thus help to keep up the number of posts for skilled men, is in South Africa, wherever possible, lopped off the skilled man's task and assigned to native labourers".[22]

This process had a number of implications for the various sections of the labour force employed in secondary industry.

(a) <u>African Workers</u>

In the first place it meant that many African workers who were categorized as labourers, in fact, carried out semi-skilled work. This implies the development of an increasingly stable African working class, which in turn had implications for trade union organisation. Thus Roux writes:

"It was found that the African workers in the so-called "secondary" industries were easiest to organise. Though often classed as unskilled, they are really quite skilled and it is not easy to replace them at short notice. They are usually location residents and have their wives and children with them, though they may not have severed completely their ties with the countryside. They constitute the nearest approach to a Bantu proletariat in South Africa. In contrast to the more shifting and semi-peasant miners, building labourers and railway construction workers here today and gone tomorrow, always preoccupied with cows and land, these urban workers were comparatively quick to grasp the idea of trade union organisation".[23]

The Native Economic Commission found evidence of a blurring of skill classification on the basis of colour.

"There is a slow but increasing infiltration of more advanced Natives into the non-manual occupations".[24]

There is also evidence that a small number of Africans were performing highly skilled work.[25]

Whilst the Pact Government provided jobs directly for 'poor whites' on the railways and in the post office, the Industrial Councils and the Wage Board were expected to maintain a 'civilised' standard of wages for unskilled whites in industry. The Chairman of the Wage Board argued that part of his job was to "fix steps in the wage gap for semi-skilled work",(28) and that this would provide jobs for unqualified whites (as well as providing an incentive for Africans). However, this intervention by the state was strongly resisted by employers. As regards the Industrial Conciliation Act, employers were able to circumvent its provisions by merely dismissing white workers and substituting blacks.(29) (In 1930 the Industrial Conciliation Act was amended to allow wage agreements to lay down wage rates for workers not defined as 'employees' in the original Act, i.e., for 'pass carrying natives').

Furthermore, the records of the Trade Union Congress (SATUC) are full of complaints from unions, such as the Garment Workers or the Furniture Workers', to the effect that employers refused to honour industrial council agreements and wage determinations, consistently underpaying workers and ignoring agreements on the rates of qualified to unqualified labour to be employed. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early struggles of the 'new' industrial unions were around these issues. (It will be shown below how industrial legislation related to the African Unions.)

Manufacturing industry was still in its early stages during the 1920's, and large-scale factory production was not yet dominant.(22) In order to accumulate capital employers were forced to keep wages as low as possible. In certain industries this was achieved by employing female labour and juveniles. This also warded off political pressure by providing jobs for 'poor whites'.

(i) White female labour - was concentrated in certain industries. For example, in tailoring and clothing the number of white women employed increased drom 1,687 to 3,238 between 1925/6 and 1929/30. The number employed in sweetmaking increased over the same period from 583 to 1,063.(31) A female work force was particularly welcome to employers since women were traditionally unorganised and underpaid in relation to men. In fact, the Economic and Wage Commission (1925) recommended that the Wage Board should take two-thirds of the man's rate as the standard for women's wages. The 1935 Industrial Legislation Commission endorsed this policy and showed that it had been carried out by the Wage Board.(32)

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The same process was transforming apprenticeship into a cheap labour device. In his report to the 1930 Conference of SATUC, A M Merkle makes the point.

"The question arises again, is systematic apprenticeship a practical and satisfactory method today, remembering that the young worker is bound by contract from 5 to 6 years to an occupation wherein mass production and repetition work has replaced technique and skill?". (39)

During the 1930's the Furniture Workers were to lead an agitation for the amendment of the Apprenticeship Act, a move which was strongly opposed by the old craft unions, such as the AEU and SATU whose skills had not yet been undermined.

The vulnerability of skilled workers in secondary industry attracted them to trade unionism, and in certain cases they were to play an important although contradictory role, within the 'new' unions.

IV. THE EFFECTS OF INDUSTRIAL LEGISLATION

(a) The Industrial Conciliation Act, 1924

The 1935 Commission agreed that:

"The promulgation of the Industrial Conciliation Act marked a definite revival in trade unionism. This is recorded by Gitsham and Trembath (Labour Organisation in South Africa, 1926):

'... the Act has tended to foster the growth of trade unions among those workers who were previously badly organised. Several new Unions have grown up or have become stronger since the Act was passed, for example in the Confectionery, Furniture and Leather Industries. In fact, employers have often encouraged workers to organise so that proper representatives may be appointed on industrial councils'". (40)

The point is that in order to benefit from the provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act, it was necessary to organise along industrial lines, since agreements were negotiated for the industry as a whole. This avoided the situation which many of the older unions faced of having to negotiate through joint trade union bodies, often weakened by division of interests between the individual unions. It is interesting that the S.A. Industrial Union (successor to SAIF, and organised on the 'one big union' principle) was refused registration precisely because it claimed to represent all workers, and could not represent any one industry in particular. (41)

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of Natives to make a successful application within the terms of the Act and the regulations, and since the promulgation of the amended regulations no application from Natives has been received by the Board".(45)

(c) The Role of the State

A discussion of industrial legislation prompts the question as to the role of the State. Kaplan has argued that the establishment of the Pact government in 1924 marked a decisive victory for 'national capital', in alliance with the white working class, over mining capital.(46) I would tentatively suggest that this thesis is borne out in the field of industrial legislation. The ICA did no more than draw the ring, within which the registered unions (largely white) and employers (representing 'national' manufacturing capital) could fight it out without resorting to strike action. The Wage Act, it could be argued, did more to raise the level of wages. But often minimum wages were set as low as £1 p.w., and employers who disobeyed a wage determination were treated quite leniently by the courts. Most important of all, this legislation did not challenge the ability of the employers to make full use of cheap labour, at the expense of white workers. In fact only in the mining industry was legislation passed to enshrine a colour bar, and fixed ratio of white workers. Farming (representing 'national' agricultural capital) was not touched by this legislation. (It is however true, that in return for tariff protection, manufacturing industry was expected to maintain a certain ratio of 'civilised' to 'uncivilised' labour. Even so, it could be argued that tariff protection and not the manufacturers themselves, was financing 'civilised' wages).

The policy of the Pact Government towards white labour was to safeguard white workers already entrenched in the mining industry, and to solve the problem of unemployed, unskilled whites at its own expense (by ensuring jobs on the railways, post office and in the municipalities) rather than by penalising the newly emerging manufacturing sector. Furthermore, the jobs provided for 'poor whites' would have been partly financed out of taxation paid by the mining companies.

V. THE 'NEW UNIONS' IN ACTION

(a) SATUC

Although it had no colour bar, SATUC was almost completely composed of all-white unions. It originated with the convening of a special congress of trade union representatives by the Minister of Labour, Col. Creswell, in March 1925. Even the name first chosen for the organisation - the S.A. Association of Employees' Organisations' (changed at the 1926

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The theory of 'Industrial Unionism' was influented in the organisation of the Building Workers' Industrial Union (1916) and the National Union of Railway and Harbour Services (1916). However, neither union was able to overcome craft and sectional differences within its respective industry. By 1926 there were eight unions operating in the building industry, and nine on the railway.(54)

Perhaps the most important function of SATUC at this time was to lend its influence and personnel towards the organisation of new unions. These unions included: the Furniture Workers 1925,(55) the Sweetmakers Union 1925(56), the Boot and Shoemaker Union 1925(57), the Reef Native-Trade Assistants Union (1926)(58) (this was organised by Solly Sachs), the Canvas and Rope Workers Union 1927(59), the Transvaal Leather Workers Union 1929(60) (organised by A.M. Merkel after the collapse of the Transvaal Branch of the National Leather Workers Union. In 1926 the National Union had a membership of 3,000.)(61)

One of the most striking features of the SATUC period was the attempt, for the first time, to organise women workers (almost exclusively whites, in the Transvaal at least) during this period. The leading figure was Fanny Klennerman, who attended the first conference in 1925 on behalf of the newly-formed Women Workers' General Union (WWU), and demanded that Congress give support to her organisation. The WWU was instrumental in the organisation of the Sweetmakers' Union, and later organised cafe employees in the face of intimidation and attempts by the employers to establish a 'company union'.(62) A Waitresses Union was eventually established, although this was short-lived. The WWU also aided women workers in the distributive trades, and consistently championed women's interests in the male-dominated TUC. The point is made by an incident when Fanny Klennerman, as secretary of the Waitresses Union, wrote to ask NEC of SATUC to request the Minister of Labour to appoint a woman to each of the four subsidiary Boards of the Wage Board. The meaning not being clear to the men on the NEC, it was agreed: "that the letter be sent back for further explanation".(63)
The militancy of the 'new unionism' is exemplified in the methods adopted by the WWU:

"The WWU is increasing its strength and influence and is adopting the method of lunch hour meetings outside the various shops, works and factories in order to bring home to the women workers the need for organisation and the fact that there is a union catering for them and willing to take up their cause".(64)

(b) FNETU

The first African industrial unions began to appear early in 1927, largely due to the initiative of communist party members like Wienbren and Thebidi.[66] These first unions included the Native Laundry Workers' Union, the Native Bakers' Union, the Native Clothing Workers Union and the Native Mattress and Furniture Workers Union[66], usually growing parallel with a sympathetic registered union.

It would be interesting to know to what extent these unions, which were active in the Johannesburg area, developed out of the earlier ICU. Certainly most of the leadership had held office in the ICU until Kadalie's purge against C.P. members. Also, the Johannesburg branch of the ICU, representing exactly those urban industrial workers which the ICU had failed to organise, seems to have been sympathetic to the expelled communists. At a branch meeting, immediately after the expulsions, a resolution was passed demanding that the matter of the expulsions be referred to the national conference of the ICU. This was achieved despite Kadalie's efforts from the Chair to have the notion over-ruled.[67] Two weeks later 500 members of the Johannesburg branch voted solidly to elect Johannes Nkosi, a C.P. member, to the branch executive.[68]

The South African Federation of Non-European Trade Unions was formed on March 25th 1928, at a meeting of over 150 delegates representing 10,000 workers from the African Laundry Workers, Motor Drivers and Garage Workers, Bakers, Clothing Workers, and Engineering Unions.[69] The Federation appointed Weinbren, Kotane and La Guma as president, vice-president and general secretary. The choice of La Guma was particularly significant. A leading theorist in the C.P. at this time, he championed the 'Black Republic' slogan and rejected Bunting's policy of continued reliance on the white working class.[70] In fact, the formation of an independent black trade union movement marks a break with the C.P.'s earlier stress on non-racial working class organisation. The number of African unions continued to increase during 1928 and 1929, with the formation of the African Dairy Workers' Unions, the Native Motor Drivers' Union[71], the Amalgamated Food and Drink Workers' Union[72], the Steel Workers' Union, the Cold Storage Union, the Cotton and Rope Workers' Union, the Soap and Chemical Workers' Union.[73] By mid- 1928 it is estimated that membership had reached 15,000.[74]

The late '20's was a period of considerable industrial militancy amongst African workers. In 1927, 4,418 'non-whites' went on strike (as compared with 740 whites), whilst for 1928 the figures were 5,074 and 710 respectively.[75] The pattern seems to have been one of strikes in response

to the victimisation of trade unionists; and strikes designed to enforce payment of the legal wage rates laid down by the Wage Board. In May 1928 African Workers brought Leonardo's Laundry to a standstill, after the victimisation of one of the employees. Although forced back to work by the police, the strikers secured his reinstatement.(76) During the same month the Native Clothing Workers' Union successfully co-ordinated a one-day strike in 3 Johannesburg factories to demand full payment for Good Friday.(77) On September 25th, 1928, 170 African, Indian and Coloured workers at the Transvaal Mattress Company struck to enforce the implementation of a Wage Board determination. "Before nightfall the employers had capitulated and advised the Mattress and Furniture Workers' Union (non-European) that the demands of the workers would be fulfilled."(78) In October African Furniture workers in the Louis and Metz factory struck successfully for payment for overtime.(79)

One of the failings of the ICU had been its inability to distinguish between trade union activity and political protest. Although the FNETU was certainly not non-political - in fact, in 1929 it affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions(80) - it remained strictly a trade union body. The strikes which were undertaken by the African unions arose over wages or out of grievances in the work place. Also, the stated aims of the FNETU were limited to dealing with working conditions: the demand for a 48 hour week, and equal pay for equal work.(81)

The use of lightening strikes over immediate issues indicates effective shop-floor initiative, and the considerable success of this tactic demonstrates the bargaining power of the workers and the fact that they could not easily be dismissed by the employer. The militancy of African workers is demonstrated by the strike at Donner's Laundry in October 1929. The strike, which was 100% solid, was called over the issue of intolerable working conditions and the failure to implement Wage Board determinations. "The boss offered to reinstate all but two on conditions demanded by the union, but these terms were rejected and the strikers took their passes and subsequently obtained employment in other laundries".(82

This latter statement indicates that African Unions were working in a favourable employment situation. Conversely it is argued that the Depression led to the collapse of the FNETU and African trade unionism in 1931.(83) It is probably also true that this decline was hastened by the internal conflicts in the C.P., and the ultra-left policies pursued under Wolton and Bach. In the same way that the ICU had tied its fortunes to the careers of a few individuals, so the Federation was too closely linked to the C.P. to survive the internal conflicts of the latter.

(c) The 'old' and the 'new' : the origins of the Garment Workers' Union

A history of the early GWU (the strongest union to emerge from this period) and its predecessor,, the WTA, demonstrates many of the arguments which this essay has tried to put forward. The WTA had been dominated by master craftsmen deeply rooted in the British craft tradition.(84) During the early '20's most still worked in small tailoring shops, and in fact at that time the WTA still included 'middlemen' in its membership (tailors who took work from the merchant tailors to sub-contract to others).(85) The membership of the union changed dramatically with the expansion of factory production. In December 1925, a meeting of factory workers was held to elect a committee for the Factory Section of the union.(86) During 1926, Dan Colraine became union organiser. Within 4 months the membership of the Factory Section was increased by 300, with 90% organisation of factory workers on the Rand.(87) By 1928, when Sachs became Secretary of the GWU, the membership was 1,750, of whom 2/3 were in the Factory Section, and 3/4 were women workers.(88)

It is interesting to observe the changing response of the WTA to perceived threats from other sections of workers. In 1924 the union called for the replacement of 'Kaffir pressers' by Whites.(89) The same point was made, together with an alleged threat of Asiatics to White standards, in evidence to the Cape Town Conference on unemployment called by the Secretary for Labour.(90) In August 1926, attention was drawn to the fact that firms were increasingly employing girl machinists to do the work of Trousermakers, and it was agreed that attempts be made by the Industrial Council to stop this trend.(91) However, later that month the union's constitution was altered to admit non-Europeans(92),(this meant Indians and Coloured, since Africans were not eligible to join a registered trade union) - presumably on the basis 'that if you can't beat them, join them'. Also, from 1928 Sachs gave moral and often tangible support to the Clothing Workers' Union under Gana Makabeni.(93) The threat of undercutting and job-fragmentation, which accompanied large-scale machine production, forced the WTA to open its ranks to an increasingly semi-skilled workforce. However, friction between the two sections remained. At a general meeting held in 1932, the old membership complained of the heavy expenditure occassioned by strike action and legal expenses. One speaker commented, in connection with the 1931 general strike that, "the old leaders would have prevented it".(94) The tailors section finally seceded in 1934 to form a separate union.

VI. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'NEW UNIONISM'

Firstly, it is important to place in perspective the movement I have described above. The majority of White unions did not affiliate to SATUC, and were not associated with the developments of this period.[95] Furthermore, most of the activities I have described took place mainly on the Rand (but then this was the area of most intense industrialisation). However, there is evidence of a more broadly-based trade union response to secondary industrialisation. Similar unions - for example, a Garment Workers Union - were formed in the Cape. In Natal, by 1928, Indian Workers had organised unions in the printing, furniture, garment, leather, tobacco, liquor and catering trades."[96] Also in the Cape, the remnants of the ICU formed into the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Federation, comprising African and Coloured unions.[97]

In dealing with the 'new unionism' as an 'inter-racial' phenomena, this essay has tried to suggest that within one section of the working class - namely those employed in secondary industry - there was considerable overlap of functions within the labour process between different racial groups. It is further suggested that, at the economic level, the class determination of this section of the working class was not affected by racial categories, and that, therefore, basis for inter-racial class alliance existed. (In secondary industry at least, White workers remained productive, and had not yet come to perform the 'global role of capital'). Contemporary communists certainly believed this to be the case[99], and the incidence of joint strike action by black and white workers seemed to substantiate this view.

In May 1928, 400 white workers (75% women) from Germiston's 3 clothing factories struck over the victimisation of 3 workers. The Native Clothing Workers' Union, which was 100% strong in Germiston, offered to bring its members out in support. Some 120 African workers struck in solidarity. As a result of the strike the 3 dismissed workers were reinstated.[100] However, only a week or two later, the white workers failed to assist black workers in a similar dispute, involving the dismissal of a black. In this case the Chairman and Secretary of the Clothing Workers' Union, Gana Makabeni and Thebidi, and four others were charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act, whilst 75 of the strikers were charged under the Masters' and Servants' Law, and each sentenced to 10 days imprisonment, or a fine of £1.[101] There were other examples of inter-racial solidarity. In 1928, the African workers at the Ideal Laundry struck in support of a white woman employee who had been victimised.[102] In 1929, a mutual defence pact was agreed between the African Furniture Workers' Union and the white union. The pact was observed by African workers in October, but in November during a strike of 200 African and Coloured mattress makers, the white workers scabbed. The left-wing leadership of the white union

contemplated resigning in disgust over the incident.[103]

Despite the backwardness of white workers, there is evidence of genuine inter-racial solidarity. This showed itself in terms of trade union organisation when the garment, leather, furniture and canvas unions dropped their colour-bar against Coloureds and Indians.[104] It might be argued that this was in order to absorb the threat which they represented to the position of white workers in these industries. Even so, those who were admitted certainly benefited from membership of the trade union. Furthermore, the GWU and the Furniture Workers' Union[105] held joint meetings with their African parallels, whilst the European and African laundry workers unions actually both affiliated to a joint executive committee.[106] Although mixed trade unions (i.e. admitting Coloureds) had existed for many years in the Cape, these activities marked a major breakthrough on the Rand, and it might be argued that this contributed towards the beginnings of a more 'enlightened' racial policy on the part of the TUC. In 1929 SATUC recommended to its affiliated unions "the enrolement of all employees in their respective unions, irrespective of race or colour ..... or, alternatively, that a policy of parallel branches in the unions be adopted."[107]

The 'new unions' revived the techniques of industrial militancy, which had lain dormant since 1922. Evidence of the militancy of the new unions has already been given. The GWU, for instance, led over 100 strikes, 2 of which brought the entire industry to a standstill, between 1928 and 1932. Although the union was later to make full use of conciliation machinery, Sachs maintained that the strike weapon should never be given up.[108]

Enough has been said already to demonstrate the significance of the 'new unionism'. But it might be argued that in the last analysis, the movement was a failure. The women's unions were short-lived. The African unions virtually all collapsed within a few years. The continued growth of the GWU, the Furniture Workers' and Leatherworkers' unions provides much clearer evidence of continuity and success. These unions were to provide the backbone of the Left within the trade union movement. However, even the African unions did not completely disappear - Makabeni's Clothing union survived, the Laundry Workers' Union was later revived by Max Gordon - whilst attempts to recruit women workers, in such industries as sweetmaking and tobacco were revived. In fact the Waitresses' Union continued to exist as a subsection of the Witwatersrand Liquor and Catering Trade Union.[109] Furthermore, the NEC of SATUC continued to represent the interests of sweetworkers to the Wage Board after the demise of their union.[110] The latter union was later revived by Mr E V Spark with the help of SATUC.[111]

Most important, during these years, there emerged a group of trade union organisers whose influence was to continue to be felt for two decades. This group included names such as: Sachs, Weinbren, Merkel and Kalk, from the white trade union movement; La Guma, who helped organise unions in the Cape during the 1930's;[112] Moses Kotane and Gana Makabeni, both workers, who were destined to play a leading role in the revival of African trade unionism during the late 1930's and the war years. The impact of the 'new unionism' is best demonstrated at the Cape Conference held jointly by the Cape Federation of Labour Unions and SATUC in 1930, which resulted in the formation of the Trades and Labour Council, specifically on a non-racial basis. The new unions were beginning to change the balance of forces within the labour movement.

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