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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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Title: **Division and Unity in the Struggle: African Politics on the Witwatersrand in the 1920s.**

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DIVISION AND UNITY IN THE STRUGGLE:
AFRICAN POLITICS ON THE WITWATERSRAND IN THE 1920s

Accounts of African political organisation in South Africa between the 1920s and 1950s have tended to veer between two extremes - institutional studies of national political organisations and micro studies of local struggles in which the national political organisations played an intermittent and often inconspicuous part. The politics of specific regions of the country have as a result been poorly served. We have Bradford's study of the rural organisation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, and Lodge's accounts of two ANC campaigns in two key urban areas - the Defiance Campaign in the Eastern Cape and the Bantu Education boycott on the East Rand - but aside from these there is a notable dearth of such middle level exercises which might help bring national political organisation and local level struggles into a closer and more meaningful relationship to one another.[1] Among the most conspicuous gaps in the literature are studies of the politics of the Witwatersrand and Eastern Cape. These two urban areas are usually depicted as the forcing houses of black politics, but neither has attracted the attention that it might have been expected to have received. On the Witwatersrand a number of fine local studies have been produced but none gives a broader sense of the pattern and movement of political activities on the Rand.[2] A large part of the reason has been the sheer scale of the enterprise, but enough of the pieces have now been assembled for us to begin to compose the broader picture. This paper represents the first stage of such an attempt.

In this generally cloudy field, the politics of the 1920s and 1930s are perhaps the most murky and opaque. The 1920s are commonly perceived as the decade of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU) and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), as each enjoyed a brief celebrity and vogue. Of the two the ICU has stolen most of the limelight, much as it would have wished, but more by a process of association with its struggles in other urban centres of the Union, and in the countryside of the Highveld and Natal

than by any successes it scored on the Rand. On the Witwatersrand itself, the ICU displayed a much lower profile and no doubt partly for that reason has attracted virtually no serious attention from scholars. As a result its activities in the area remain largely a blank. This apparent lack of impact is perplexing, particularly as the area was, to use General Secretary C Kadalie's own words, "the backbone of the economy".[3] So too is the lack of interest of scholars since the reasons for its failures must shed some light on the rhythms of resistance in the towns. This paper attempts to address some of those issues.

The ICU made its first appearance on the Witwatersrand in the middle of 1924. Roux claims that the Young Communist League, of which he was a leading member, took the initiative in setting up a branch, seeing it as a means of reaching an African constituency.[4] The ICU's General Secretary Kadalie paid an extended visit to Johannesburg to stimulate the organisation in September and October of the same year. Meetings were held in various Reef locations but these soon proved "too slow for my [Kadalie's] taste" and were replaced by assemblies in the middle of the city in Market Square to which hundreds of Johannesburg's workers seem to have flocked.[5] By the time Kadalie left the city early in November 1924 the Johannesburg branch numbered over 1 000 strong, and a branch had been set up in Benoni.[6] Other branches in Germiston and Roodepoort were soon to follow.[7]

Kadalie returned permanently to Johannesburg in January 1925, and transferred the national headquarters to there from Cape Town in April 1926, but despite the presence of the national office and the acquisition of an expensive but priceless organisational asset in the form of a lease on the Workers' Hall the ICU never really took off on the Rand. After an initially enthusiastic response membership stagnated at about 5 000 for Johannesburg and perhaps 6 000 for the Reef as a whole, most of which did not regularly pay dues.[8] By the middle of 1927 monthly branch income, which was made up of 2/6 joining fees, and 6d. a week subscription dipped to between £70 and £85, a

significant proportion of which was probably drawn from newly enrolled members.[9]

While the organisation was nowhere particularly robust, the outlying areas of the Reef seem to have been positively enfeebled by their proximity to Johannesburg. From the start Kadalie had found local meetings in the locations tedious and slow, and once the Workers' Hall was acquired in September 1925 much of the organisation's energy and vitality seems to have concentrated there. Few meetings addressed by national or provincial office bearers seem to have taken place on the East or the West Rand, the only break with this pattern having occurred in late July and August 1926, when attempts were made to rekindle interest in the organisation through meetings addressed by Kadalie and the new Provincial Secretary, Thomas Mbeki, in Germiston, Benoni, Randfontein and Springs.[10] Where branches existed, as in Germiston and Benoni, they seem to have been largely inactive. Even individual complaints were taken up by, if not funnelled through to the complaints office in Johannesburg and it is not even certain that the branches were able to generate the income out of which full time branch secretaries could be paid. In Benoni, initial enthusiasm was quickly dampened as became apparent when only 50 local residents turned up to the meeting addressed by Kadalie and Mbeki in August 1926.[11] Kadalie was at a loss to explain this disinterest in terms of the machinations and "hypocrisy of ministers" and the countervailing attractions of the church, but an equally plausible answer is provided by the apparent failure of the branch executives to mount a serious challenge still less to secure redress on any work-place or community issue.[12] The achievements of the neighbouring Germiston branch are scarcely more impressive. Its sole recorded action to hold a meeting in protest at the administration of lodgers' and stand permits, which secured an audience with the town clerk of the municipality but very little else.[13] Less than 6 months later its branch secretary Reginald ka Jonga had taken up a position as clerk in the ICU offices in Johannesburg, leaving the branch to languish untended by any permanent official.[14] Thereafter the many and pressing

grievances of the location residents were taken up by a variety of residents and vigilance associations. Perhaps the most telling commentary on the level of the ICU's active support on the East and West Rand is the delegate roster at the ICU's Durban Conference in April 1927, at which, aside from 5 delegates from Johannesburg, only the branch secretaries of Benoni and Germiston were present.[15] In the following years other centres of the Witwatersrand would witness brief flurries of activity as in Boksburg early in 1927, and in Randfontein at the end of the same year, when for one heart-stopping moment it seemed that several thousand Mpondo miners were intent on joining the ICU, but these did not thereafter depart from the usual pattern and disillusion quickly set in.[16]

Johannesburg itself followed a slightly different course. Although the branch failed to fulfil its early promise, and membership first flattened out and then declined in 1925 and in 1926, it displayed a buoyancy unmatched by any other African political organisation working on the Reef. Whereas the Transvaal Province of the ANC barely functioned for much of this period managing only occasional meetings which were ill-attended and uninspired, and the CPSA encountered seemingly unsurmountable hurdles in recruiting an African membership of any size, the ICU held meetings every week-end for 5 or more years, which were always attended by 200 plus members and sometimes by crowds of 3 to 4 times that size.[17] In so far as there was any focus of African political activities in Johannesburg it was at the Workers' Hall in Jeppe that it was to be found.

The leading ICU officials nevertheless repeatedly lamented the size and enthusiasm of Johannesburg's ICU membership, when compared to that of Durban, Bloemfontein, East London and many smaller rural towns in the Transvaal, attributing it in the main to the shortcomings of the people themselves.[18] The complex and contradictory character of the Witwatersrand's African constituency may well have blunted the ICU's progress in the area, and is a subject which will be addressed later in this paper, but much of the ICU's lack-lustre performance must be attributed to weaknesses within the ICU's

organisation and leadership as well. It is to this subject that this paper initially turns.

To the extent that the ICU serviced its membership, it did so through its Complaints and Research Office, which catered to the whole Reef, and which took up matters ranging from the withholding of notice pay to the defence of those raided or prosecuted for the illicit brewing and selling of liquor. On narrowly work-place issues there is meagre evidence to judge of the measure of their success. If the cases reported in the Workers Herald are documented in the files of the Pass and Complaints Officer of the Johannesburg office of the Government Native Labour Bureau, provide any guide, there were lengthy periods which were barren of significant gain or redress.[19] The two most notable victories of the period 1925-1926 were the re-instatement of 50 striking workers at a Johannesburg tin factory called Mayfields, and the inclusion of Africans in new regulations governing notice and dismissal.[20] The Mayfields case was exceptional. The ICU never encouraged strikes at this stage in its development, and with the additional exception of the African compound at the Kazerne goods yard of the South African Railways, it never recruited members from work-places 'en bloc'.[21] Its standard means of bringing workers together were general meetings in the centre of Johannesburg, and even if a group of workers from the same place of employment attended together and joined at the same time, there was little in the ICU's *modus operandi* to sustain a group presence at these meetings or to maintain group solidarity. Why the Kazerne goods yard should have been singled out for special treatment is not entirely clear, but the most likely explanation, as the Complaints Secretary, H.D. Tyamzashe claimed, was that it was a special project of the communist wing of the ICU, for as Tyamzashe was, to his discomfort, to discover, at the time of the communist expulsion from the ICU in November 1926, this was a bastion of communist party support.[22]

The subsequent fate of the Kazerne workers is instructive, because it is symptomatic of more fundamental problems which were at the core of the ICU's ultimate failure on the Rand. On 7 July 1927 the Kazerne railway

workers struck in support of higher wages and the right to be allowed to sleep outside of the railway compound. H.D. Tyamzashe, the Complaints and Research Officer was called in by the labour contractor of the yard to help settle the dispute and could only proffer the unwelcome advice to return to work. Such counsels of caution the workers were in no mood to accept and they promptly chased Tyamzashe from the premises amid threats of assault. No ICU officials returned and the striking workers, now deprived of all external assistance, were fired and replaced.[23] Wickens interprets the Kazerne debacle as a testament to the organisational incompetence of Tyamzashe, and a portent of the collapse that would shortly overtake the ICU.[24] This is in many senses correct, but the problem went deeper than that. By the time the strike broke out the Kazerne workforce had come to exhibit the typical characteristics of the ICU recruitment strategy - scattered members and no organisation. Since the communists had been expelled from the ICU in November 1926 such elements of organisation that had previously existed seem to have collapsed. As a result, when the strike broke out only a few of the workers were still members of the ICU, and the officials claimed to be in complete ignorance of the issues and of the strike. In the public meeting at the Workers' Hall which followed the strike a post-mortem was held, in the course of which a familiar lesson was drawn - namely, that the whole episode represented yet another confirmation of the fatal weakness of the 'sectional strike'.[25] This was not simply a whitewash as evasion but rather illustrated a central flaw in the ICU's strategic thinking. The ICU was and is sometimes accused of 'reformism' and lacking the stomach for the hard and bruising confrontation, but this is to misapprehend its conception of struggle.[26] A recurrent motif in ICU propaganda was the idea of the general strike and there is every indication that this was a goal which they were genuinely committed to attaining. In speech after speech Kadalie, Mbeki (the Transvaal Provincial Secretary) and other officials offered the same prescription: "If the natives merely stopped work all the industries would be at a standstill in one minute (Kadalie). " "The Railways, Mines and Industries could not go on without their labour but

wuold be at a standstill if they stopped work" (Mbeki).[27] Indeed, if police informer reports are to be believed, the inner conclave of the ANC Conference held in January 1926 deputed Kadalie to tour the Union to prepare for a general strike, in the event of the Herzog Bills not being withdrawn - an exercise which the ICU executive endorsed.[28] Unfortunately these heady prospects were always doused by the same cold and sobering realisation. "A stoppage of work would bring the country to a standstill", but as Mbeki acknowledged in the next breath "until they were united this was impossible to hope for" - and the ICU were bereft of ideas as to how to accomplish this feat.[29] Between the individual grievance, which was the province of the complaints and research office, and the general strike there existed a yawning conceptual chasm, which they had no organisational girders to bridge. In the place of an organisational framework the ICU leaders could only offer impassioned exhortations to units and rhetorical flourish. When this failed to achieve its desired effect they heaped insults on their long-suffering countrymen, blaming them for inertia, stupidity or cowardice. Not only did African workers on the Reef display "a great lack of interest in their own welfare" asserted Kadalie in the course of a series of addresses to Rand meetings in the middle of 1926, but they were also "too slow and foolish".[30] And this was not an opinion which they gave him reason to change. From the vantage point of milleuarian syndicatism it was the workers' own apathy and ignorance which was at fault, not any defect in the mode of organisation itself.

Workplace issues were not the only ones around which a general strike or even a membership drive could be centred, and the ICU spent as much, if not more, of its time, on "community" and political issues as it did on narrowly employment related concerns. Of the community matters taken up by Tyamzashe and his complaints office staff, the most common were cases related to the illicit brewing of liquor and disputes over the application and policing of municipal permits for visitors and lodgers.[31] Again the degree of success which attended these endeavours is unclear. Letters to the

Department of Native Affairs or the local magistrate might occasionally secure redress or a change of tack, but any issue which could not be settled by the power of persuasion or by staking out the high moral ground required recourse to the law, to which the ICU could not repeatedly resort since the funds to pay lawyers were invariably scarce. As in the case of employment related issues, the overwhelming impression that one derives is of a very limited range of matters that could be successfully addressed.

Pursuing complaints in such an environment must have been a thankless and dispiriting task, and the clerks in the complaints office, of which there were several, seem to have given vent to a growing sense of disaffection, by shirking their duties or displacing their frustration onto the complainants themselves. This became progressively more apparent in late 1926 and 1927. At an ICU meeting held at the Workers' Hall in November 1926 an ICU stalwart named Fesha, who had been at the centre of the successful Mayfields strike, complained that members attending union offices "were treated with scant respect by officials". Complaints were handled sloppily and slowly, he charged, with workers scarcely ever receiving satisfaction.[32] Sensing the undercurrent of dissatisfaction Kadalie attempted to orchestrate a morale-boosting exercise to show that the union was capable of producing results, which instead only served to expose even greater depths of head office incompetence and disarray. At a meeting 2 weeks later he called upon the complaints secretary Tyamzashe "to outline recent successes regarding the dismissal of workers without notice, and other reprehensible acts by employers", but Tyamzashe badly fluffed the occasion. After reading several letters between the Native Affairs Department and himself, Tyamzashe sought to enlist the sympathy of the audience by explaining just what a problem the workers themselves sometimes were. The but of his criticism was an unnamed coal miner from somewhere on the Rand who had arrived at his office full of righteous indignation at wrongful dismissal, but who had turned out (on whose evidence it is unclear) to have been guilty of theft. Blaming the victim proved too much for Tyamzashe's audience, who began shouting him down. There

was no doubting now which way the tide of sentiment was running and Kadalie prudently distanced himself from his floundering lieutenant, and weighed into the attack himself. Tyamzashe, he announced, had disgraced himself that afternoon and the same could be said of the whole head office staff. Since the head office had moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg the work of the organisation had ground to a halt. ICU officials were often absent from their offices and were guilty of serious neglect of their work.[33] Such accusations were echoed and amplified over the subsequent years. Both Sam Dunn, the Acting Provincial Secretary for the Transvaal, and A W G Champion the Acting National Secretary, denounced "the drunken and other habits of the headquarters staff" after assuming their position at the beginning and end of 1927, while in March 1928 Keable Mote, the ICU Provincial Secretary for the Orange Free State observed how he had noticed during several visits to Johannesburg that "the officials had no time for anyone who was not known to them and never enquired into any grievances".[34] None of which, it is scarcely necessary to say, provided the basis for a loyal and disciplined membership, or the springboard for a general strike.

In workplace matters the ICU on the Rand either neglected or proved unable to latch on to collective issues which might have served as the bridge between the individual grievance and the general strike. In the community or political arena they displayed more interest in staking out this middle ground, perhaps because their favoured tactic of the legal challenge stood a much greater chance of success. The two issues of this kind with which the ICU was most closely associated were the campaigns against the government's attempt to impose night passes on African women in 1925, and against the efforts of the Johannesburg municipality to clear the inner city slums. The night passes issue ideally suited the ICU's campaigning style. A series of fiery meetings were held at various centres on the Rand, one of the most inflammatory of which took place in Benoni, at which passive resistance and a general strike were successively threatened, and which culminated in characteristically tame and anti-climactic fashion with a test case in

Court.[35] The appellants won, and the ICU's stature was correspondingly enhanced (along with that of the campaign's rather more timid co-sponsor, the Transvaal African Congress) but out of this accrued no solid or enduring organisational gain.[36]

The Johannesburg municipality's attempt to clear the inner-city slums was an equally, if not more, burning issue to Johannesburg's African population. Here the ICU was much slower off the mark. In July 1926 the City Council issued a new and technically watertight proclamation requiring all the African residents of its target slum of Ferreirastown to depart within a month.[37] The action cannot have come entirely as a surprise since the municipality had just had two attempts to proclaim the whole and part of the city upset by challenges in the courts, but by the middle of August when the evictions were about to come into effect, neither the ICU not any other African political organisation had stirred. It was left to the Indian landlords of Vrededorp led by Mohamed Jagbhay to find the means by which the municipality's programme could be derailed. At a meeting in Vrededorp, attended by a crowd of some 500 strong, Jagbhay's Attorney, A.P. Benson, outlined a scheme whereby all those faced with eviction would make application to the Council for accommodation, which the Council was manifestly unable to provide. Large numbers signed, which gave the basis for a new (and successful) legal action in December of the same year.[38] A few suburbs away, at the very same time, the ICU was holding its own meeting to protest the ban on Kadalie's movement out of the Transvaal to Natal, and to collect money to challenge the order.[39] Only later did the ICU actively associate itself with Jagbhay's initiative, for which it claimed the credit when the Council's proclamation was ultimately overturned.[40] A further attempt at proclamation in February 1927 was dealt with in exactly the same fashion, with the Transvaal African Congress and the ICU this time taking the lead.[41] Both the weaknesses and the strengths of the ICU stand exposed in these exchanges. The suffocating grip of personality-centred politics, in which a key collective issue was lost sight of when the leader's personal mobility was curtailed,

could not be more plain. In that particular instance it did not matter, because it was as useful to Jagbhay to have the ICU attaching their name to the campaign, as it was to the ICU to appropriate the campaign and claim the resulting victory as their own. Herein lay the ICU's strength. Yet the episode did highlight one disturbing point: if the interests of the two parties had not coincided the ICU might have remained wholly peripheral, and such coincidences were unlikely to recur the moment the ICU reputation was tarnished or its support began to ebb.

By the occasional high-profile campaign, which invariably ended in the courts, the ICU was able to enlist and to some extent hold a substantial following on the Rand. Yet neither these collective community based actions, nor the individual grievance centred activities of the ICU adequately explain the grip it was able to maintain over the loyalties of several thousand members and sympathisers spread across the Rand. Indeed, when one examines its record of achievement it is easier to explain its ultimate demise, than the quite remarkable resilience and buoyancy it exhibited over the preceding 5 years. Here the strengths as well as liabilities of personality centred politics need to be taken into account. What made the ICU so attractive to many of its followers was precisely the same bravura and bombast as were at least partly responsible for its many short-comings and flaws. To hear ICU leaders ridicule and threaten government ministers, municipal officials and police or brashly to pronounce that the end of the pass laws was at hand, was obviously an exhilarating experience, which seems to have provided a genuine if relatively short-lived sense of psychological emancipation in which tens of thousands of black South Africans shared. The personal bravery and boldness of ICU leaders in saying and sometimes doing the unthinkable was thus one of its main selling points to an often cowed and demoralised African constituency, but this too was a currency which could be easily devalued if the legal spaces within the structure of oppression which the ICU leaders so acutely exploited, were shut off or closed down. It was for this reason that the Native Administration Act (initially the Sedition Bill) loomed so large

in the minds of ICU officials. If it was words above all, and the impunity with which they seemed to be uttered that electrified the ICU's constituents then the "hostility" clause of the Native Administration Act which proscribed "inciting hostility between the races" threatened to do incalculable harm. Suddenly the ICU's executive began advising their officials not only to curb their own tongues but to prevent ordinary members from speaking at meetings, less the organisation suffer multiple prosecutions and be buried under a mountain of legal debt.[42] No doubt there were other possible solutions. "If they could not open their mouths" Kutu announced at a meeting in the Worker's Hall shortly after the law had come into effect, then "they would make signs with their eyes".[43] But then, for many, the whole point of the ICU would have been lost. It was precisely the fiery language and provocative gestures that gave the organisation its appeal. A muzzled ICU could be no other than limp, uninspiring and forlorn.

If the power of personalities buoyed up the ICU in its latter years on the Rand, they also impelled it to its ultimate ruin. As early as November 1926, James La Guma, the ICU's Communist General-Secretary complained of the "servile attitude" of most ICU members on the Rand, warning that they were making "a tremendous blunder in worshipping some of their leaders".[44] Everywhere he had visited in his tour of ICU branches, he told an ICU audience two weeks later, he found the same unhappy situation: "the majority were controlled by a few ... no effective work was accomplished [and], officials constituted themselves as dictators".[45] Nowhere was this more true than of the head office in Johannesburg, which was run more or less as Kadalie's personal Fief. Head Office, activities and expenditures were subject to virtually no membership scrutiny, so that a host of abuses went unchecked. The officials of the Johannesburg branch who were in closest proximity to head office saw these abuses at closest hand. And since it was among the ICU in Johannesburg that the Communist Party of South Africa had recruited most of its African membership, friction slowly grew between head office functionaries and communist members of the ICU's Johannesburg branch over accountability and

general behaviour. Only one month before La Guma's outburst an "acrimonious argument" took place at an ICU meeting in Johannesburg, at which communist party sympathisers and others had challenged the head office about the disbursement of money collected for the defence of Kadalie against a ban which had been imposed on his movements.[46] The executive committee responded to this demand by accusing the communists of having instigated the attack. The status of the Johannesburg branch, they declared, was in no way superior to that of any other branch in the ICU, and it had no right to demand a financial statement from the head office. It graciously allowed that in this case they could have one placed at their disposal, but as "a matter of privilege", not of right, after which Kadalie and a number of his close lieutenants set about preparing a purge of the only branch of the organisation that could seriously monitor or hold to account the national officials.[47] In December 1926 these plans came to fruition at the National Conference in Port Elizabeth, when all active Communist Party members were expelled.[48]

The lack of control over head office staff, and their deteriorating standards of probity and performance gave rise to mounting discord in the ICU both nationally and on the Rand. In February 1927 the new General Secretary Sam Dunn, who had been imported from Natal denounced certain leaders' "addiction to brandy and loose women", a charge echoed by the Acting National Secretary, A W G Champion, at the National Council in Johannesburg in November of the same year.[49] In February 1928 a section of the Johannesburg branch led by Green (Gauer?) Radebe were once again raising questions about the way members' subscriptions were being used. They were not satisfied with a general statement of income and expenditure, they declared, but wanted a detailed breakdown of what money had been spent on.[50] A week later Radebe took matters a stage further, specifying individual acts of misappropriation and theft by the branch secretary Enoch Jonga, the Provincial Secretary, Abel Phofoolo, and the Complaints and Research Officer, Henri Tyamzashe. The only effective remedy to these abuses, Radebe concluded, was to elect one of the ordinary Johannesburg branch members to a attend executive committee meetings,

since the executive kept secret from the membership whatever it discussed.[51] As was usual with these periodic efforts to discipline the national officials, the agitation seems to have spent itself with nothing accomplished and the same practices continued, though perhaps in a less flagrant and publicly scandalous fashion.

Such conditions presented a fertile environment for police agents seeking to promote divisions, demoralisation and dissent. In June 1927, the ICU, to its consternation, uncovered two police informers in key positions in its Johannesburg branch, Alfred Solwazi, its current branch chairman, and Mazingi, his predecessor in that post.[52] Both Solwazi and Mazingi had figured prominently in the communist party's attack on the financial probity of the national office in November 1926, which preceded their expulsion from the organisation the following month, while Mazingi had, according to Kadalie, been responsible for the break-up of the Alexandra branch.[53] To stop the rot, and restore public confidence, the Johannesburg branch was immediately dissolved, and new elections were held. These captured, in microcosm, much of the ICU's more general malaise. Three candidates, Motsoaki, Stoffel Mabe and J Sifadu, were nominated for the position of chair, and although the railway worker Sifadu gained a clear majority of votes, the Provincial Secretary, Thomas Mbeki, arbitrarily declared Motsoaki to have won, defending his decision, when challenged, by the argument that Sifadu did not have enough English at his command while (the not always sober) Motsoaki did. Pandemonium ensued, but then slowly abated once Mbeki would not budge from his decision. "Servile" to the last, the meeting caved in.[54]

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ORGANISATION

ICU leaders, when surveying the state of their organisation were wont to lament the weakness of the Johannesburg branch and the level of support enjoyed by the union on the Reef as a whole. Not uncommonly they placed part, if not most of the blame on some unfathomable apathy of the people themselves. Kadalie repeatedly admonished ICU members for lacking "energy" and "zeal" or

for simply seeking to gain office and not being content to remain ordinary and of course dues-paying members of the Union.[55] A W G Champion expressed similar sentiments when he arrived in Johannesburg in June 1927 to assume the position of Acting National Secretary and complained of "the lack of interest in the organisation shown by the natives themselves".[56]

Outsiders often allied these observations to criticisms of the branch and national leaders whom they impugned as unapproachable, lazy, incompetent or corrupt, but they were nevertheless able to discern a dual dynamic at work. Sam Dunn, after assuming the head office position of General Secretary in February 1927 described the Johannesburg branch as alternately "fast asleep" and "a disgrace and a sore", ascribing this infirmity to its leaders "addiction to brandy and loose women". This sorry state of affairs, however, was not solely due to these leadership shortcomings. "To make matters worse" the newly installed General Secretary added "a very large number of people in Johannesburg were addicted to the very same causes" producing a sordid symbiosis out of which very little that was productive, still less inspiring could emerge.[57]

Crude and unsympathetic though Dunn's observations may have been, they do raise the issue of the social character and the economic context of the community that the ICU served. What were its main components and pursuits? Under what pressures and disabilities did it labour? And how well could any formal organisational activity be modulated to the popular pulse? Our first point of entry into this discussion will be the questions of wages, subsistence and employment.

The 1920s as Bradford shows, were a time of great hardship for African labour tenants working on white farms, and of blighted expectations for younger blacks seeking to gain entry to the ranks of the black elite.[58] In the cities, however, the bulk, though by no means all, of the African population found itself less sorely pressed by economic privation in the mid to late 1920s than at any stage in the preceding and succeeding decade. In the immediate aftermath of World War I the Rand had been rocked by a series

of political explosions triggered by the deteriorating material conditions of its African population. Three key issued inflamed African opinion and served as a focus of opposition - wages/prices, passes, and housing.[59] In two out of three of these issues, an appreciable improvement had been registered by the mid 1920s. From mid 1921 deflationary pressures for the first time began to reverse the seemingly irresistible upward surge in prices which had been underway since late 1917. Between 1920 and 1925 the index of retail prices for food, fuel, light, rent and sundries for 9 Witwatersrand towns registered a drop from a high of 2041 to 1508.[60] Information on wage levels is more sparse. Wages of African workers were marginally increased in 1920 and do not seem to have suffered a significant reduction thereafter with the result that by the mid 1920s African wage-earners were appreciably better off than in the storm years of 1917-21, and were at close to a parity with the years immediately preceding World War I.[61] Partly offsetting this trend was a narrowing in the scope of employment open to African workers, and particularly to the African elite, as a result of the civilised labour policies adopted by the Pact administration. More will be said about this later, but suffice it to note for the moment that a combination of rising real incomes and shrinking job opportunities was scarcely conducive to large-scale trade union mobilisation.

The supply of housing, which was one of the other burning grievances of 1918-1920, was also expanded in the early years of the new decade, and in some instances improved. Following the passage of the Housing Act in 1920 local authorities were entitled to apply for loans from the Central Housing Board to provide low-income housing for those living in slum conditions. Such funds were only intermittently available, particularly for black housing, but in the early 1920s a number of Reef municipalities were able to take advantage of its provisions and expand the housing stock available to blacks. In 1922 the Johannesburg City Council began constructing Eastern Native Township, and in the same year the building of houses in Western Native Township was resumed.[62] In Benoni, Boksburg, Germiston and Springs similar projects were

set in motion, so that the appalling overcrowding and squalor which had disfigured African residential areas was partially and momentarily relieved.[63]

With the exception of Eastern and Western Native Townships, only modest numbers of municipally built houses were constructed.[64] The typical pattern was for municipalities to trim costs by providing serviced plots or stands, upon which stand-holders could erect their own wood and tin structures, sometimes aided by loans or low cost building materials furnished by the municipal authorities. The ratio of owner to municipally built houses on the East Rand by the early 1930s as a result stood at anything from 2 and 12 to 1 - 626:326 in Springs location; 226 to 963 in Germiston location and 73 to 1027 in Benoni location.[65] The penny-pinching attitude of the municipal authorities opened up a number of spaces and opportunities within the structures of urban control, and served to soften the harsh regimen of black urban life. In theory, stand-holders were permitted to reside in the location so long as they paid their rent and observed the location regulations, in default or breach of which they could be expelled. In practice the ambiguous status of stand-holders who were at once lessors of the property and owners of the house meant that they might be fined or otherwise penalised for misdemeanours but rarely expelled. Stand-holders exploited this space to effect a number of tacit understandings and assert *de facto* rights. Widows, along with other women who had been abandoned or divorced were allowed to hold on to stands, which flew in the face of most central and local government thinking on the matter. By 1930, for example, women occupied 250 out of 818 stands in Benoni location, and a similar situation was developing on a slightly lesser scale elsewhere on the Reef.[66] Men who possessed stand-owners' permits seem to have been able to secure daily labourer's passes with relative ease, with the much greater measure of personal latitude and economic independence which this conferred. A surprisingly high percentage of economically active men fell into this category in the 1920s, where daily

labourers numbered a fifth of the wage earning population in the early 1920s.[67]

From a relatively early stage the accommodation made available to stand-holders and the tenants of municipal houses was insufficient to meet the demand of *bona fide* employees in the various Reef towns. The location authorities coped with the pressure by allowing workers and their families to lodge on stand-holders' plots, sometimes in rooms in their houses, more often in separate shacks. Stand-holders now acquired an economic edge to match their comparatively more secure residential status. Growing numbers rented out rooms for anything from 10 shillings to 30 shillings a month.[68] By 1927 400 stand holders in Benoni were renting out an average of 3 rooms each and a similar situation prevailed in most locations along the Reef.[69] Ultimately the growing pressure on accommodation, and the exploitative behaviour of site-holders would create deep rifts within the urban population from which new kinds of civic struggle and organisation would arise, but in the 1920s and early 1930s a considerable measure of harmony still prevailed and site-holders could continue to enjoy their relatively privileged position without challenge or occasion for self-doubt.

Stand-holders were thus able to open up sizeable pockets of autonomy within the framework of seemingly all-embracing location regulations, and to acquire far more economic latitude than a bare recital of wage levels and job opportunities would suggest. The space this afforded predisposed them less to radical political action than to a dogged defence of what limited benefits they had already won. Other sections of the black urban population, while more marginal, and more vulnerable to official interference and control were able to create their own areas of social and economic space which they defended with the same stubborn tenacity and determination. The best documented example of this area of black working-class life in this period is the liquor-brewing cultures of Johannesburg's slumyards. Here a confused overlapping of contradictory jurisdictions and interests, between central, provincial and local government, and the manufacturing section and the mines

allowed a string of multi-racial inner city slums to arise and ultimately to house an African population of 40 000 strong. Within its perimeters a "robust, resilient and defensive working class culture evolved which organised its daily struggle for survival around the collective but politically passive institutions of the shebeen, the stokvel and marabi dance". The central material components of this culture were wages and liquor. Slumyard rents were generally higher than those prevailing in the municipal locations, and the average wages paid by commercial and industrial employers fell far short of even the most rudimentary family subsistence requirements of those living in the yards. The balance was made up by a variety of informal money generating activities but most commonly by the illicit brewing of liquor which could earn £2-3 a week-end. The clientele was composed partly of residents of the yards, but more importantly of single men working in the mines or in domestic service in the adjacent white suburbs.[70]

A different, but not entirely dissimilar, situation evolved in the municipal locations of Johannesburg and of the East and West Rand. Here, despite much closer municipal surveillance and a battery of municipal controls, the illicit brewing of liquor was conducted on an equally massive scale, miners form adjacent compounds providing the external infusions of income upon which the traffic relied. In later years the illicit brewing of liquor would be increasingly dominated by a semi-professional group of Basotho women, commonly known to white officialdom and other sections of the public as 'shebeen queens'.[71] At this point, however, the illicit brewing of liquor was an activity spread much more evenly across the entire African community. In Springs, for example, just before the large-scale influx of the more full time Basotho women brewers, "a large percentage" of the location population was described as being involved in the illicit brewing of liquor, but only one individual was believed to trade in liquor as a business.[72] Representations made by residents' associations and location advisory boards confirm this impression. At the beginning of the 1920s a deputation from Springs location exhorted the Council not to view beer brewing as an illegal activity. "The

native women have some reason why they adhere to such a dangerous traffic", they explained. "The demand of the cost of living is higher than the wages that her labour and that of her husband produces".[73] A member of the Benoni Advisory Board made a similar appeal some years later. "There are many decent underpaid natives" he declared "who are forced to sell liquor to live".[74] Even in the slumyards of Johannesburg where the illicit brewing of liquor was generally thought to be rampant and uncontrolled, beer brewing was conducted on a relatively small scale, individual brewers only catered for a limited clientele, and beer brewing earnings were used in the main to supplement family incomes.[75] The fragments of evidence that exist from other urban centres in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging triangle seem to confirm the same pattern.[76]

The proceeds of beer-brewing trickled down to a wide section of the urban African population, who were able to use them to insulate themselves from the harsher extremes of their economic environment. Husbands benefitted either by directly sharing in the profits or by being able to entertain their friends.[77] Stand-holders profited through the payment of substantial rents, while street vendors and craftsmen prospered from the trade of the hundreds and sometimes thousands of miners that thronged the location streets each week-end.[78] In Germiston and Benoni a number of otherwise straitlaced and highly respectable shopkeepers rang up even more substantial profits by the illicit sale of yeast which would be purchased in huge quantities by beer-brewers each week.[79] As a result despite the unruliness and violence which accompanied the arrival of black miners in the location, and sometimes occasioned misgivings, the vast majority of the urban community rallied to the beer-brewers' defence. The domestic brewing of sorghum beer should be legalised, countless deputations of clergy, teachers and other location luminaries urged. And the municipal sale of sorghum beer they insisted would be an insult and an outrage to which no section of the African community would submit.[80]

The trade in liquor was viewed in a very different light by the local and central authorities and by the Chamber of Mines. Not only did it support the presence of otherwise economically redundant African women, who reared "detribalised" children, took up much needed accommodation, and who were already by now in a significant excess over men, but it also had a debilitating impact on the mines.[81] In June 1921, for example, the Springs branch of the Transvaal Compound Managers' Association complained to the Springs Municipality that the illicit brewing of liquor was being carried out on a far greater scale than ever before. Black miners were flooding into the location on week-ends and returning to the mines in "a hopeless state of intoxication, some of them incapable for their work, others insolent and aggressive in their manner, the latter class being the cause of many assault(s) and disturbance in the compounds". As a consequence the mines suffered "to no small extent on Monday morning through lack of efficiency in native labour and 'loafer tickets'".[82] Similar objections to location administrations were registered all along the Reef, with those of Benoni and Brakpan being singled out for particular attack.[83]

Such disorderly behaviour raised the spectre of a general loss of control over the black urban population across the length of the Reef, and prompted both central and local authorities to redouble their efforts to stamp out the trade. In 1923 new regulations were introduced permitting compound managers to issue Sunday passes to miners which expressly denied them entry to locations, and throughout the period the police raided remorselessly for liquor.[84] While vast quantities of illicit concoctions were uncovered and destroyed, and tens of thousands of convictions were secured in the courts (far more than for any other category of offence), these attempts at proscription made little dent on the trade. Women beer brewers employed a wide range of ingenious techniques to avoid detection or prosecution, and even when convicted usually had little difficulty in paying their fine from the lucrative proceeds of the trade.[85] The conclusion drawn by the Vereeniging

Riots Commission of 1937 could thus have applied equally well to any time in the previous twenty years. Police efforts

> "were unremitting ... but in the Vereeniging location, as in many if not most urban native townships and locations in the country, the result has rather been to make the liquor trade hazardous than to prevent it or even sensibly to diminish it.[86]

The resulting stalemate induced a defensive mentality among all those who benefitted from the trade. Location leaders and residents might protest about some of the more arbitrary and invasive methods used by the police to improve their chances of detection, such as breaking into houses in the dead of the night, but provided these were not taken to extremes, they would accept the principle of raiding with stoic resignation.[87] Thus while Walter Ngqoyi, the Benoni branch chairman of the ICU, might feel that he had a chance of success at re-awakening the interest of Benoni's African residents in his union by claiming that one of the things the ICU could do was to "stop the police from running into and searching their houses", the failure of the police to interdict the traffic in liquor, or seriously to encroach on this economic space, meant that it was correspondingly more difficult to rouse the population on this, or indeed most other issues.[88] It was perhaps for this reason that the ICU attracted negligible women's support on the Rand, in marked contrast to Durban, where, as a number of Natal branch officials observed, there was an infinitely larger and more enthusiastic female participation.[89]

A similar elasticity can be discerned in the Reef municipalities' administration of physical and social space. Here Benoni presents us with the most extravagant example. For most of the 1920s only minimal restraints seem to have been exercised over the residence and movement of Benoni's African population. In December 1920, for example, a detective head constable reported that "natives boast that no pass is necessary when visiting Benoni location" while in January 1923 the new location superintendent exclaimed that the location registers were badly kept, that it was impossible to know who was

legitimately resident in the location.[90] The situation did not materially improve during the rest of the decade. By early 1928 700 Africans lived effectively outside the council's control, in a beer-brewing paradise in the Indian section, while for the African location proper the Superintendent could make the astonishing admission that his estimate of 2 000 lodgers could be 3 000 out. Among the other lapses of control recorded in the same report was the presence of only 24 hostel dwellers sleeping in the hostel at night out of the 100 that were supposed to be there and had paid for accommodation.[91] Only Brakpan and Johannesburg's slumyards rivalled Benoni's spectacular laxness of control, but almost everywhere else a considerable measure of latitude obtained.[92] Only with the enforcement of a new generation of location regulations which installed a far more restrictive regime of residential and visitors' permits, and which came into effect in most places in the early 1930s, were some of these gaps and loopholes closed down.[93] Until then most of the black urban population could evade or circumvent irksome restrictions, which correspondingly depressed their urge for collective contestations and head on collisions with either the local authorities or the central state.

Negative support for these conclusions can be drawn from the experience of Germiston's Dukathole location. Up until 1926 Dukathole shared in many of the features of Benoni and Brakpan locations. As many as 500 women liquor brewers were alleged to have taken up residence in the location, hundreds of African miners flooded in each week-end, and the issue of proper permits had lapsed. Early in 1926, after a special committee of enquiry had revealed countless administrative irregularities, the location superintendent was dismissed and a new one appointed with a mandate to re-establish control.[94] This he did with great harshness and brutality excluding first miners, and then, as far as he was able, beer brewers and other African women.[95] Several years in advance of the other Reef locations, a more restrictive and rigid grid of residential permits were set in place with the result that a far greater measure of administrative control was effected and growth of the

African population in the location was held in check.[96] No clearer evidence of the effectiveness of the new location Superintendent, W Turton's, ruthless regime need be advanced than the population census of 1927, which recorded the presence of 1 200 men and only 973 women, a fraction of the African population of Germiston's less industrialised neighbour Benoni.[97] Constraints of space preclude an adequate examination of the response of Germiston's African population. Suffice it to say that an agitation developed, spear-headed by the Women's League of Justice, and assisted somewhat later by the CPSA, which was unparalleled for its intensity and tenacity, in any other location along the Reef. Only later when the same physical and economic spaces began to close down in other Reef locations did they begin to follow suit.[98] By then the ICU was a spent force.

One last feature of black urban life on the Witwatersrand in this period which may have contributed to the apparent docility of the African population was the hold exercised by organised religion. This is an issue which has not yet attracted sufficient attention and is only tentatively addressed here. Much of the existing writing on this period discounts the influence of mission Christianity on the African urban population on the Rand. Hellman speaks of a profound disenchantment with the mission denominations among the slumyard population and this is echoed by Kagan and Koch who suggest that they were eclipsed in popularity by the rapidly growing Ethiopian churches.[99] Koch and Coplan's portrayal of slumyard culture also suggests a free-wheeling style of life in which women repeatedly changed partners through impermanent liaisons known as "vat-en-sit" which could not have easily been reconciled with orthodox Christianity. Koch, for example claims that "'vat-en-sit' was ... the crucial means whereby the informal production of the yards and income from formal employment were harnessed together to provide for the working-class family's subsistence needs": - a relationship which "symbolised the merging of lumpen proletarian and working-class values that characterised slumyard culture".[100] The implied incompatibility of Christianity with the pervasive drinking culture of the African urban locations is both over-stated and

misleading. Even in the slumyards of Johannesburg, Hellman shows a large proportion of marriages were contracted by Christian rites and were much more enduring than the vat-en-sit variety.[101] This squares with what we know about the social character and religious persuasions of the early African population on the Reef, which was disproportionately Christian and literate in composition, hailing from the heavily proselytised areas of the Eastern Cape, the Natal midlands and the Eastern Free State.[102] Among these, a respectable working class and lower middle class set of values continued to flourish, which included, among other things, a firm commitment to a stable family life. While this may have been partly diluted by new waves of immigration in the late 1910s and 1920s, it was still the respectable working class which predominated in the location populations along much of the Rand.[103] This also continued to adhere to mission Christianity, as is testified to by the size of mission congregations along the length of the Reef.[104] Precisely how this influenced the political inclinations of this church-going constituency is unclear, but Kadalie and that whole generation of ICU leaders judged its impact to be immense. Kadalie repeatedly inveighed against the siren call of the church which sapped the strength of the union both in terms of the congregations it attracted on Sundays, and the fees which it claimed.[105] Indeed for most of the local leaders of the ICU the church seems to have been regarded as the biggest single obstacle to their union's success, a view which even if exaggerated cannot be wholly dismissed.

Caught between the churches, the shebeens and lax location administration, the ICU struggled to strike a chord among the Reef's black urban population. Among the few promising lines of attach that remained were the widely detested pass regulations which governed all aspects of adult, black, male urban life. One or two of the most reviled aspects of passes notably the character column which was filled out by employers, had been discarded at the time of the anti=pass agitation in 1919, but despite an often permissive attitude on the part of the local and central government authorities along the Rand, they still constituted a heavy burden on the

region's black male adult population.[106] A multiplicity of passes still had to be carried, which generally involved a considerable cost, and bearers and non-bearers alike were always exposed to the rude attentions of police.[107] The post-war depression, and the civilised labour policies introduced by the Pact administration may have made these disabilities press harder on a section of the Reef's population. Early in 1926 the Superintendent of Benoni's location observed that

> "Lately, owing to the policy of replacing natives by white youths, a large number of natives have been thrown out of employment.
>
> These natives, being unable to obtain work then try to start a business of their own, such as coal merchants, shoemakers, carpenters, hawkers, etc. Consequently we are beginning to find a very large percentage of the inhabitants of the location trying to make a living, and very often through lack of business methods, or competition, failing miserably."[108]

In the absence of other opportunities, the Superintendent continued, such individuals were forced into various kinds of illegal activities, which one must assume, can only have jeopardised their position under the pass regulations. It may well be that it was from this category of the population that the ICU drew a disproportionate part of its support, which might account for the constant harping on passes by ICU leaders. No other issue figured remotely as prominently in ICU speeches, or occupies so much attention at ICU meetings.[109] And, unfortunately, on no other issue was there less chance of success.

From 1926 some of the economic pressures on those that had recently been thrown out of employment were eased by a mini boom in the economy which got under way following the passage of the Tariffs Act of 1925. Martin dates the real beginning of South Africa's manufacturing expansion to the period 1926-1929 and suggests that this represented a more important leap forward than that which occurred after 1934.[110] Important changes in the volume and structure of employment accompanied this sudden burst of economic growth.

Employment in manufacturing in the Transvaal increased by a massive 25% most of which was centred on the Rand, while a significant increase in semi-skilled categories of work also occurred, in such industries as Baking, Laundry and Dry Cleaning, Clothing and Furniture and Mattress Making.[111] By the time these developments made themselves felt the ICU was already in steep decline, the victim of incompetence, corruption, conflict among leaders and the massive disillusion of its members.[112] The CPSA was as a result the main beneficiary of this period of renewed prosperity and growth. For most of the 1920s the communist party had proved a dismal failure at recruiting a substantial African membership, and had sought to reach an African constituency by co-operating closely with the ICU. Members of the Central Committee of the Party even agreed to make clandestine payments to Kadalie of £5 a month in April 1926 in order to increase the leverage that they might bring to bear on the union, but this badly back-fired when they overplayed their hand.[113] Once expelled from the ICU, the Party persisted in its former somewhat aimless endeavours, until early in 1928 they decided on a change of direction. According to secret agent reports "having failed to organise natives as members of the Party they have started a trade union for the natives".[114] These unions, which in most cases worked in tandem with the white members of registered unions and proved an instant if limited success. Between 1928-29 37 strikes in which African workers were involved broke out in Johannesburg alone, a number of which ended in success.[115] By invoking Wage Board determinations, and then policing them by means of strikes, African unions were able to register significant improvements in wages as well as to score a number of other gains.[116] By 1928 B Weinbren claimed that the South African Federation of Native Trade Unions boasted a membership of 10,000 strong. This was almost certainly a gross exaggeration, and the available evidence suggests that the unions' memberships never crept up beyond the 4,000.[117] This nevertheless was a considerable achievement upon which a good deal more could be based. In addition, many of the locations along the Reef would shortly erupt in opposition to new location regulations which were about

to be imposed, upon which the communists could have reasonably expected to capitalise as happened in Germiston in 1931-2. In the event these hopes were dashed by the onset of depression a sequence of schisms and purges which wrecked the Party, and the adventurist policies pursued by the Party in its ultra-left phase. This, however, is the subject of a further section of this paper which I will expose to discussion in due course.

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