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TITLE: Race and class in the National Union of Distributive Workers: the breakable thread of non-racialism: 1937-53

BY: **R. DESAI**

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Race and Class in the National Union of Distributive Workers: the breakable thread of non-racialism: 1937-53

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'as long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you'
James Baldwin *The Price of the Ticket*

As David Roediger perceptively argues, a highly poetic politics-as captured in the above quote- is what is required in a situation where workers who identify themselves as white are bound to retreat from genuine class unity and anti-racism. The development of non-racial trade unionism has had a long, complex and indeed contradictory history, to which scant attention has been paid. This is no better illustrated than in the history of trade unionism in the retail sector where the National Union of Distributive Workers under CPSA control and the Trotskyist influenced African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union were in operation. In this light the organisational and political relationships between the NUDW and organised black[1] workers in and outside its own ranks are investigated. Organisational and later legal considerations demand separate treatment of African and non-African black workers, as with the exception of Cape Town (where it had a largely African B branch), the union co-operated with independent African unions (namely in Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria). The unions' other B branches were either composed of South African Indians or 'coloureds'. The chapter begins with an examination of the factors that conditioned the NUDW's attitude to race, which demands some attention to the theory that implicitly guided the union. It is followed by an outline of the policy, evolution and history of the 'B' branches, which illustrate the subsidiary character of these branches to the union, the most important of which was the largely African branch in Cape Town. Some tentative conclusions are advanced as to what motivated the parental style relationship between the 'A' and 'B' branches, which are arrived at on the basis of suggestive rather than completely substantive evidence. The notion that African workers in this sector were not as open to class orientated organisation is challenged.[2] The chapter then moves on to discuss the nature of the African workforce on the basis of Hellmen's study of African commercial labour force in a large store, which in the case of the major cities I have assumed to be relatively representative of the country.[3]

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[1] I have been forced to use a host of terms, for black workers (black being a socio-political term that covers all workers oppressed on the basis of their skin colour). The usage of various term are used purely for taxanomical purposes in this chapter.

[2] University of the Witwatersrand (UWL) Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ag1-Ag3 Circular No. 51 1943 Report of the Wage Board Hearing September 1943. These figures are what the respective unions reported to the board p. 3 By 1943, 16,000 African workers in the sector had been organised into four separate unions, the ACDWU claimed a membership of 12,000. The Durban ACDWU, which had been linked to the former for a short period numbered 1900, Pretoria Non European Distributive Workers Union claimed 1800 members and was formerly a branch of the Johannesburg union had broken its ties with ACDWU by this stage but was still registered under this name at this time, so it continued to use its old name at this official hearing. The African Cycle Workers Union boasted 300. A brief history of the ACDWU and the union based in Pretoria can be culled from the records of the NUDW as both of the former had a relationship with the latter. However, there remain many important gaps in the history presented here, partly due to the limited time available to conduct this research, but more importantly as the records of both organisations have not been traced. It should be possible to trace the history of the Johannesburg based ACDWU, through the records of other organisations and interviews, which will form part of a further research agenda

[3] Reggie September Interview Dec. 1996 . The picture painted by him of the African workforce generally confirms that these workers were permanent residents in the urban areas.
UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.14-16 Minutes of NEC Feb. 1946 p.8 This is confirmed by the report that Katie Kagan gave on the re-affiliation of the branch to the NUDW. In addition the ability of the branch to sustain itself from 1944-1946 also speaks to a certain degree to the stability of this section of the workforce. Mokgatle, N. M. , *Autobiography of an Unknown South African* Univ. of California Press Los Angeles 1971 . In passing comment of the ACDWU as 'the mother of all unions in Pretoria' seems to underline the

The study thereafter focuses on the ACDWU and provides an analysis as to why this union was one of the most militant and effective unions in the sector. In this context its relationship with NUDW is explored. I have focused the history of ACDWU and two other unions in order to ascertain whether any discernible patterns emerged in their relationship with NUDW. Despite there being an objective community of interest between low paid white women and African men working in similar jobs for similar pay, the union leadership refused to challenge the racial hierarchies embedded in society and in the process union structures came to reflect those racial divisions in society. It remained highly unlikely that prevailing notions of race and racism could be challenged in an organisation that was built on those very same divisions. The question of leadership, with this consideration in mind, is of undoubted importance and some parallels are drawn with interracial trade unionism in America. In attempting to understand the tenacious hold of racism on white shop workers some attention is paid to the self perceptions of the white working class, its striving for respectability and its possible intersection with racism.

Race, Gender and Class - some theoretical considerations

This chapter's prime focus is on inter-racial relationships, which would be incomplete if reference was absent to the stated understanding and claims marxism makes in this regard in view of the political complexion of the unions involved. Additionally, an exploration of some recent gender theory is required if one is to make sense of the intersection of race and gender. The notion of class consciousness is therefore examined and problematised in relation to both these categories in this section and in the conclusion.

The NUDW was a communist controlled union, and therefore held to a number of postulates in relation to the role of racism under capitalism. In this section an assessment of the organisation's practice is measured against its (largely implicit) socialist understanding of racism, from which school of thought I derive my own understanding of the subject. Recent studies seem to confirm the marxist viewpoint that racism undermines both black and white wage levels.

The fundamental reason why marxists argue that racism is not in the interest of white workers is that, by dividing the working class, racism weakens white as well as black worker organisation. The proposition that white workers gain from racism has been tested in the United States by the marxist sociologist Al Szymanski. Szymanski sought to compare the situation of black and white workers in 50 states of the union. He found, first, that 'the higher black earnings relative to white, the higher white earnings relative to other whites' elsewhere in the United States. This relationship - that white workers were better off the narrower the gap between their wages and those of blacks was stronger in the states where at least 12 percent of the population was 'Third World' (i.e. blacks, Hispanics, Asian and Native American), 'i.e. those states where economic discrimination against Third World people is said to have a significant economic effect on white earnings'.[4]

Szymanski found, secondly, that 'the higher the population of Third World people in a state's population, the more inequality there is among whites'. He concluded that 'the relatively poor white workers lose disproportionately from economic discrimination against Third World people compared with better paid whites.' Thus 'white workers appear to lose economically from racial discrimination . These results appear to support the marxist theory of the relationship between economic discrimination and white gain.' Szymanski found, thirdly, some evidence to support the hypothesis that 'the more intense racial discrimination is, the lower are the white earnings because of the intermediate variable of working-class solidarity-- in other words, racism economically disadvantages white workers because it weakens trade union organisation by undermining the solidarity of black and white workers.'[5]

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importance of the African commercial labour force , in all probability stemming from their permanence once again, as a catalyst for other groups. Numerous references to the ACDWU as the best organised African union cannot solely be laid at the doorstep of Daniel Koza, it also reflected the nature of the workforce.

[4]A Szymanski, 'Racial Discrimination and White Gain'. *American Sociological Review*, 41, 1976, pp. 409-12

[5]ibid.

Szymanski's study suggests that racism is contrary to the interests of white workers, even when these interests are understood in the narrowest material terms. This is one facet of a much broader claim, namely that racism helps perpetuate the exploitation of black and white workers alike. White workers accept racist ideas not because it is in their interest to do so, but because of the way in which labour market competition among different groups of workers is stoked up, by the conscious and unconscious efforts of the capitalists, into full scale racial divisions. At most what white workers receive is the imaginary solace of being members of the superior race, which helps to blind them to where their real or objective interests lie. How this process occurs is difficult to plot. Nonetheless some suggestive data will be presented as to how this took form among white shop workers. This analysis also offers a clue as to how the hold of racism on white workers can be broken- through the class struggles which pit them against the employers and unite them with their black brothers and sisters. While I hold to this view, this is not to assert that there is some pristine form of class consciousness; rather the opposite, consciousness is often contradictory, as competing abstract ideas are often accommodated within a single persons minds. Upsurges in both the South African and American working class is probably the best studied processes in twentieth century history, such studies generally content themselves with observing that white workers sometimes overcame racism. This type of approach often reinforces tendencies to minimise the role of racism and of black workers and can, therefore leave their practitioners unable to penetrate some of the deepest problems that their work raises. Herbert Hill maybe partly correct in attributing the new labour history's failure to fully engage the questions of racial identity and racism to an excessively zealous search for a usable and inspiring past.[6] Additionally, it would be bad practice to assume that the development of consciousness was a unilinear process. Recent studies on gender are illustrative of both these points and are to a large extent seemingly transposable to race, which also call forth a tighter and inter-related understanding of race, class, gender and in certain contexts, nation, as consciousness is not bifurcated. For example, the 'White workers of the World Unite.....' slogan of the 1922 Rand Strike highlights that racism was popular and even a force that encouraged white working class unity and consciousness. A point reinforced by Alexander Saxton's work on racism and the American working class.[7]

A number of studies have reasonably and extensively documented the development of distinction and segregation within the labour process. Willis has argued that these cannot be seen independently of class, as men from the working class may learn to value 'hard' work, as middle class men may readily become attached to the competitive demands of career and business success. Women's preparation for paid employment tends to be conditioned by the expectation that they will also be primarily responsible for domestic labour. Their caring responsibilities inform a variable commitment to prolonged paid work. Both men and women are prepared for certain distinct types of work which condition a gendered-based solidarity with their peers.[8] It is noted by Yarrow that these generalised conditions are not without both internal and external contradictions. However, the preoccupation with feminine and masculine identities informs the choice and allocation of jobs and shapes the nature of skill and consent for men and women.

Thompson highlighted how management exploit women's 'traditional' attributes of 'natural skills', passivity, sentimentality and 'niceness', which connect to an experience beyond the workplace.[9] It has also been argued that the concern with gender and class identities can, like other consenting practises, be seen as a defensive way of coping with insubordination that provides a sense of self worth. For example,. blocked hierarchical mobility for women may encourage their preoccupation with the prospect of marriage or aspects of a workplace culture which centre around romance and 'external' activities. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that gender identities necessarily reproduce practices of consent and submission based on the division between men and women in the

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[6]Hill, Mythmaking as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America', International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society 2 (Winter 1988): pp. 132- 198

[7]Saxton, A. , The Rise of the Great White Republic

[8]Sturdy, D. Knights, J. , Willmot, H. , *Skill and Consent: contemporary studies of the labour process* London 1992 p. 8

[9] Thompson P. *The Nature of Work* 2nd edition London 1989 p. 8

workplace.[10] In fact, gender role subordination in the household can clash with womens' career choice, as defined by the need to provide a supplementary income to the family. This can determine a higher dependency of women on wage employment, and specific forms of militance and resistance.[11] On the other hand, the construction of masculinity in relation to employment does not unproblematically reproduce dynamics of gender solidarity between male employees and employers.[12] Masculinity, as involving the role of man as breadwinner, can indeed clash with declining living standards and family income, thus determining a higher level of militance.[13] In general. we can say that the role of gender in reproducing consent, division, or militance, should be analysed mainly in relation to phases of working class offensive and retreat.[14]

Michael Yarrow's essay *Class and Gender In the developing consciousness of Appalachian coal miners* raises a number of interesting issues. In looking at class consciousness, he states there are two prominent theories concerning consciousness. The first is that of stages of class consciousness which develop incrementally and that such theories assume that development is irreversible, which he describes as additive and unidimensional. He looks at how Mann describes four stages from the first to the fourth stage where the worker links his own experience to an analysis of wider structures and then to alternative structures.

The inability of such notions to explain explosions of consciousness led Perry Anderson and Mann to develop what has been termed a dual consciousness oscillation theory. According to this theory class consciousness will oscillate with changing structural conditions. Shifts in consciousness are expected to change the structure of consciousness by leading to the development of further developments of the contradictory elements and perhaps a change in relative importance. 'The worker who returns to the status quo ante after a strike or rebellion is expected to have an altered consciousness, but to be still under the sway of dominant ideology. For this model the development of class consciousness involves explosions and reversals, not incremental slow progress.'[15]

Yarrow argues that notion of class consciousness has been viewed from the problematic of working class revolution, rather than 'providing the landscape to view'. Moreover, from this engaged perspective, it seems clear that the rationalist bias of the epistemological approach to class consciousness is misplaced. To act collectively against the powerful requires not only good analysis but appropriate emotions. 'The gender consciousness of the male miners can be shown to have affected their class consciousness in important emotional as well as cognitive ways. He concludes for the coal miners he studied that the effects of a gender consciousness are mixed. 'Miners seem to have adapted the received definition of manliness to meet their class needs. As a result miners' gender consciousness in some ways enhances their class consciousness while also inhibiting it.' [16] Such a conclusion runs counter to the assumptions of theorists of class consciousness who have argued that consciousness of any other structure of inequality distracts from class consciousness, in a belief that other factors cause perpetual confusion. Yarrow states that such assumptions have be tested empirically if they are to hold any validity.

Theory and the reality: poles apart

The NUDW constitution as amended by the union in 1938,[17] gave as one of its objects: 'to remove barriers between workers and to promote unity of action, co-operation and closer relationships between all workers, whether nationally or internationally in the belief that the interests of all

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[10]Pollert, A. *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* in Sturdy, J. et al '*Skill and Consent*' p.28

[11] Fernandez-Kelly, P and Nash, J. (eds.), *Women, Men, and the International Division of Labor*, Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1986.

[12] Cockburn, C. *Brothers* London: Pluto Press, 1985

[13]Yarrow , M. , 'Class and Gender: In developing consciousness of Appalachian coal miners' in Sturdy *Skill and Consent*

[14]Yarrow 'Class and Gender

[15]Yarrow 'Class and Gender: p. 27

[16]*ibid* p.28

[17]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box AC1.6.2 Minutes of the NEC Aug. 1939 p. 8 These amendments took fifteen months to reach the registrar due to Edwards tardiness or reluctance to do so.

workers are identical.'[18] At the National Conference of 1944 a resolution was tabled in response to the sudden appearance of explicitly racist white unions, which read 'Only a strong and united working class movement can achieve higher wages and better working conditions for us.'[19]

The degree of correspondence, (if only perceived) that existed between the theory and the practice of the union can only be tested by examining the evolution of 'B' branch policy, and explaining both its rationale and its actual functioning in practice. The brief history of the 'B' branches presented here begins in 1937, focuses most of its attention on the 1940s and concludes in 1950, as it is in this period that a proliferation of such branches occurs.

Bill Edwards at the founding conference of the union in 1936, led the argument against the adoption of a non racial constitution. He claimed that it would lead to a number of smaller unions refusing to join the proposed merger, and therefore proposed an all white union which commanded majority support.[20] The Cape Town delegation refused to take part in the merger due to this racially exclusive policy. It was later agreed after negotiations between Edwards and the Cape Town union that the organisation of non-Europeans could continue and that branches could be built within branches, although no such provisions were contained in the constitution.[21] In 1937 Cape Town proceeded to form a Warehouseman's, Packers and Labourer's union as a branch of the NUDW. This led to the policy being formally adopted at the annual conference in 1938 of establishing 'B' Branches[22] to cater for African, coloured and Indian workers, an arrangement that Solly Sachs apparently had helped to broker.[23]

The B branch policy was developed by Solly Sachs in the Garment Workers Union (GWU), which in the case of GWU initially excluded Africans completely from B Branch membership of largely 'coloured' branches. 'Parallel unions' provided the possibility of a compromise between a policy of complete exclusion and a policy of inclusion on the basis of equality. They normally involved a paternal relationship, from which the black union or black section derived certain benefits such as support in negotiations, provision of office space, the collection of stop orders, loans, etc., but in return had to accept white domination. Parallel unions were sanctioned by the industrial registrar in 1928.[24] It was Sachs who perfected the practice, through attempting to establish a number of parallel unions. He established the South African Clothing Workers Union (SACWU) a nominally independent union which like the Packers, Warehouseman and Labourers branch of the NUDW [25] (in Cape Town) was financially dependent on the mother body. Unofficially, in the (GWU's case), both unions were branches of their mother union.[26] The NUDW, unlike the GWU, allowed for representation of its B Branch's at the NEC and the national conference. To circumvent the law they were officially recorded as visitors after 1945,[27] but due to their inability to attend NEC meetings these branches often mandated a national office bearer to represent them. While Sachs admitted that the policy 'was against all trade union principles' he justified it by stating 'in practice

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[18]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1. 37 Special Conference 23 Aug. 1959 p.4

[19]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Minutes of 1944 Annual Conference p. 22

[20] Interview with Ray Alexander August 1996. These branches included Pretoria, Harrismith and Bloemfontein.

[21]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.2 contained in a letter from the Gen. Sec Bill Edwards to the Western Cape Brach Sec. March 1937. Herd, *Counter Attack* p. 51 states that these negotiations involved persuading Ray Alexander to accept a this compromise that added up to a 'B' Branch policy. Ray Alexander states that she was not involved in any such negotiations. Telephone conversation Jan. 1996

[22]UWL Historical Papers Association NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3 Minutes of Executive meeting of Cape Peninsula branch .April 1937

[23]Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict'...p.105 states that Sachs was involved in helping to found the NUDW. Interview with Dulcie Hartwell August Cape Town 1996. She states that he was involved in advisory capacity at meetings that preceded the NUDW founding Conference in 1937.

[24] Simons and Simons *Class and Colour...* p.379

[25]While SACWU was an African union, the NUDW B Branch was largely African, as it also composed coloured members.

[26] Witz 'Servant of the Workers' p. 159, 171, 179. Interview with Kay Altman Dec. Cape Town 1996. Reggie September, Dec. Cape Town 1996

[27]Interview with Kay Altman Dec. Cape Town 1996. The Department of Labour during 1945 informed unions that they should expel Africans on pain of derecognition

it worked well.'[28] This was not the same verdict coloured activists reached in the GWU[29] or the NUDW.[30]

Was there an alternative to the B branch policy?. In terms of labour organisation and law, the key issues related to the distinction between 'pass bearing natives' and 'employees', contained in the Industrial Conciliation Act. Quite simply this disallowed the former from protection under the legislation as they were not considered employees. The Department of Labour did not at first impose a blanket ban on non-racial unions recruiting Africans. In 1944 the Supreme Court upheld the GWU's contention that pass bearing Africans could be considered 'employees'. Following a cabinet decision in 1945, the Department of Labour switched to outright rejection of Africans belonging to registered unions, threatening deregistration for non-compliance. The Sweet Workers Union, Supreme Court challenge to this was successful, as the court found that non-pass bearing voters, were eligible for membership, while all pass bearing Africans should be excluded.[31] This was reversed when the 1947 amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act disbarred all Africans from membership of racially mixed unions.

Due to the impossible task of distinguishing between these two categories, the Department of Labour refused to register unions with a majority of African members.[32] In Natal and to a lesser degree in Transvaal, unions such as the Textile Workers Union, Textile Workers Industrial Unions, Food Canning and Allied Workers Union (FCWU), National Union of Laundry, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers Union (NULCDW) and the Tailoring Industrial Workers Union[33] kept two membership lists - one for 'employees', the other for 'non employees'- but all members belonged to a unitary organisation that recruited Africans on the basis of equality. This practice became increasing difficult to sustain under pressure from the Department of Labour. However, unions like the FCWU, the NULCDW made a mockery of the compulsion to operate as legally separate unions and functioned as one entity right up until 1952.[34] Despite legal constraints it was possible to operate on the basis of equality. The question however, was whether the NUDW could sustain unity on an organisational level as well.

Reggie September , a CPSA activist at the time who was to become the Cape Town B Branch organiser thought not. He asserted that non racial trade unions required a high degree of organisation and militancy, which was not present in the NUDW. In his view 'it was a conservative union.'[35] Whether this was a correct estimation of the degree of organisation and militancy of the NUDW is questionable, taking into account the union's history from 1942-1946. As the evidence suggests the union membership was militant, class conscious but also racist. This was partly due to the failure of the leadership to openly challenge the prevalence of overt racism in their ranks. It is plausible that the failure to challenge the 'B' branch policy was also partly due to the CPSA's ambivalent understanding of the national question,[36] which I have traced elswhere.[37]

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[28]Sachs, S. *Rebel Daughter* p. 120

[29]Witz 'Servant of the Workers' p. 181

[30]Interviews with Reggie September and Solly Ariefdien 1996. Reggie September implied that the branch was cynically used to enrol the requisite percentage of the workforce for recognition, and both he and Ariefdien stated that 'B' branch had no input into the direction of the union locally. The branch would be informed of decisions that impacted on them, an be expected to follow them.

[31]Alexander 'Industrial Conflict' pp. 115 -116

[32]*ibid.* pp. 115 -116

[33]*ibid.*

[34]*ibid.* One clear example of this was where the NULCDW continued to send a African delegate to Industrial Council meetings with the agreement of the employers up until 1952.

[35]Interview with Reggie September Dec. 1996

[36] Interview with E Burford August 1996. The party members in the NUDW never received any policy direction in relation to their own union from the CPSA. It is deduced from this that the party never requested them to do so. No Sizwe, (pseud. Alexander, N.) *One Azania, One Nation* Zed Press London 1979. Alexander cogently argues that a general confusion reigned within the Marxist tradition in regards to an understanding of the Black Native Republic Thesis, which he states was primarily distorted by petit bourgeois prejudices.

[37] Chapter 2 of my Masters by coursework dissertation, 'Race, Gender. and Class in the NUDW 1937-53' University of the Witwatersrand 1997

Industrial Action and the 'B' branches

The first 'B' branch to be established was in Cape Town in 1938. During the 1939 Wage Board enquiry into the retail sector the branch gave Morris Kagan the written mandate 'to do whatever he think best in our interest.' regarding the negotiation of pay scales. The letter continued in a deferential tone, 'whatever is done or said on our behalf will receive our heartfelt appreciation.'(sic)[38] In 1940 the branch had two hundred mainly African members who were mainly employed in the OK Bazaar's as warehouseman and packers. That year the NUDW entered its first major dispute with store management when the 'B' branch members at OK Bazaars protested about being ordered to sign a document agreeing to submit to being searched at any time on the premises. Some of the members signed under protest and those that refused to sign were dismissed along with those instigating the protest. The union managed to persuade the company to re-hire the workers and drop the idea of searching, by written consent. However, two weeks later the same men were dismissed once again. The union made a veiled threat about the 'B' branch striking and managed to obtain the intervention of the African Representatives in Parliament but with no result. The men were only offered their jobs back six months later after the intervention of Ivan Walker, on instruction from Madeley, but by then all of them had found work elsewhere.[39]

Minutes of the Cape Town 'A' branch executive showed no consideration of the possibility of building solidarity amongst the white membership at OK, or elsewhere with those who had been dismissed.[40] A possible explanation of the failure to build support for such action lies in the condescending attitude adopted towards the coloured and Indian branches at the highpoint of the unions' militancy several years later in 1943. Considerable enthusiasm existed to join the strike action in the B branches in November of that year. However, the union was reluctant to mobilise in support of any action. Fearing that repression would be used against this section of workers, the union held them back from joining the strike.[41] To quote Herd 'In an industrial skirmish these members could not enrol as musket- bearers.'[42] It is also clear from interviews[43](see pages' 12-13) that there was a reluctance to upset racist opinion in the organisation by involving black workers in the strike action, an issue we now turn to.

Inter-racial solidarity forged?

The union leadership's implicit policy of dampening down the militancy of African and non-African black workers was subsequently born from the attempt not to alienate the white NUDW membership, which was confounded to some degree by the experience of both the 1942 and 1943 OK Bazaar strikes. While both strikes demand further research in this respect, some preliminary comments can be proffered. The experience of the 1943 strike illustrates the impact of the regional diversity between Cape Town, where a subordinate B branch existed, and Johannesburg, where a strident independent union was in operation.

In 1942, the first strike occurred in OK Bazaars when over 400 Africans and 600 white workers in OK Johannesburg's branches participated in a half day strike that won the closed shop. Apparently the white, largely women workers were convinced that the decision of the ACDWU to join the strike, assured a speedy victory.[44] Koza, perhaps a touch over optimistic, was moved to write that:

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[38]UWL Department of Historical Papers Kagan Papers A2452 Box B General Correspondence Letter from Warehouseman's and, Packers and Labourers branch of the NUDW to Morris Kagan June 1939

[39]Herd *Counter Attack* ..p.72-73

[40]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Boxes Ab1.5 - Ab1.6 Minutes of the 1940 Executive Committee meetings

[41]Herd *Counter Attack*... p 113. UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1. 10- 13 Minutes of NEC meetings 1943 Nov.- December. The 'B' Branch in Cape Town despite union advice to the contrary came out on strike in the OK dispute of 1943. The Johannesburg Indian 'B' Branch and the Durban Indian 'B' Branch both expressed a desire to strike.

[42]*ibid.*

[43]Interviews with Dulcie Hartwell 11th December Cape Town 1996 Pauline Podberry 12th December Cape Town 1996.

[44]Interview conducted by Pete Alexander with Burford London 1992

real history was made when black and white workers of the OK stood side by side for a common cause and succeeded. It should be a lesson to other workers, proving that joint action between black and white workers is possible.[45]

In 1943 a dispute broke out between Sives Bros. and the NUDW, a large retail druggist chain store in Johannesburg, around wages and the closed shop. Among those who joined the one day strike were unorganised Africans. At a mass strikers meeting, the union pledged full support for Africans to organise into the ACDWU, a number of who had joined during the strike.[46] Similarly, the ACDWU involvement in the 1943 OK strike resulted in a mass meeting in Johannesburg where strikers only agreed to return to work on the condition that the ACDWU accepted the agreement.[47] This represented an important break through in workplace race relations, but none of these disputes presented a challenge to the racial hierarchies dominant in the respective stores. Betty White, a shop worker in OK Bazaars (Johannesburg) in the 1940s stated that after the strike, Africans were 'also feeling far more confident...' and 'the relationship (with whites) was much closer'.[48]

In Cape Town where a B branch composed largely of, but not exclusively of African workers had been established, the situation differed to that in Johannesburg. On the first day of the OK strike of November 1943 seven hundred workers were out on strike, not including the African workers who numbered about hundred strong.[49] A strike meeting decision on the first day of the strike to allow Africans to enter strike bound stores was passed on the grounds that their strike action would be illegal under the Masters and Servants Act. It was seemingly ignored that the host of strikes in this period were conducted by African workers, which although technically illegal were rarely prosecuted.

The CPSA aligned NUDW leadership's reluctance to challenge this decision reflects the tendency of the union to accommodate white chauvinism as discussed in the previous chapter. Pauline Podberry[50] claims that 'it did not occur to any of us that black workers should be on strike.' She later qualified her statement by saying that they represented such a small fraction of the workforce the question of 'calling them out would not have affected the outcome of the strike' and '...that the leadership did not want to antagonise the other white workers as 'white women would have been embarrassed to be on picket lines with black men'.[51] Similarities with inter-racial strike action are striking in this regard and have generally been explored far wider in America than in the South African case.[52] NUDW rank and file member, and strike committee member at the time, Kay Altman seems to have thought they were involved but was rather hazy on the subject when interviewed.[53] The lack of involvement of the Cape Town 'B' Branch - meant that a golden opportunity to forge links between black and white membership was lost. Roediger argues that in the context of the American South it is important to realise that white workers were not just manipulated into racism. Rather 'their consciousness was a double one that constantly pulled them towards urgent insistence on their whiteness and towards questioning of whether their class grievances did not outweigh their racial privileges.'[54]

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[45]Hirson *Yours for the Union* p. 97 Praeger, New York, 1974. Source: Guardian 1942

[46]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1601 Witwatersrand Branch Archives. Box Eb, Minutes Johannesburg Sive Bros. mass meeting 1 Nov. 1943. p. 1

[47]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1601 Box Eb Minutes Johannesburg OK Strikers mass strike meeting 19 Nov. 1943

[48]Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' p. 172

[49]ibid.

[50] Pauline Podberry, *White Girl In Search of the Party*, Hadeda, Pietermaritzburg, 1993. The book covers amongst other things her decision to become a CPSA member, her extensive trade union activities with the ACDWU Durban not linked to Koza's union, and then in Cape Town with the Textile Workers Union and finally her resignation form the Party after Hungary in 1956.

[51] Interview with P. Podberry Dec. Cape Town 1996

[52]See Rodeiger, D. *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* Race and Class in the 1877 St Louis General Strike,

[53] Interview with Kay Altman Dec. Cape Town 1996

[54]Roediger, D. , *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* pp. 135-136

It is perhaps not coincidental that some months later the Cape Town B branch disaffiliated from the union. The 1943 OK Bazaars strikers vote to allow African workers to continuing working, became redundant when Africans refused to cross the picket line. They did, however, keep a respectful distance from the picket line.[55] It also confirms the second class status of 'B' branches, and moreover, the bankruptcy of such a policy when it came to developing black and white working class unity, that the union held as a principle.

For Alexander, whose thesis explores the role of class struggle in forging a common class identity, the strike raised Africans level of confidence and led to a much closer relationship generally between these two groups.[56] Such unity, according to Alexander, was based on the common position of white women and black workers (mainly African men) who were employed at similar jobs and on comparable rates of pay. Black men in this context and elsewhere in industry were not seen as an economic threat to white women. A unity of interests then emerged that gave expression to solidarity amongst women and men, black and white.[57] Alexander fails to explore the limits and or the shortcomings of the development of such unity. Subsequently, his study leaves one with the impression that all that was demanded was a campaign by the leadership to forge inter-racial solidarity, without any reference to both hidden and visible white chauvinism. If one accepts the oscillating theory of class consciousness, then 1943 provided only a limited historical window of opportunity that was lost as the war and attendant radicalisation came to an end. An attempt to explore and engage the psychological underpinnings and its historical specificity that went into the making of race and its impact on the trade union leadership and the rank and file is therefore required if we are to consider racism a serious obstacle to class unity. This study, while partial and suggestive in its evidence in regard to the latter, illustrates that such solidarity was invariably bonded to the dominant gender and racial hierarchies then present in South Africa. This is not to deny that multi-racial solidarity in strikes had a positive impact on race relations, acting to undermine racism, however, the character of the NUDW leadership did not lend itself to this specific and historically conditioned development to challenge the hierarchical racial division of labour.

B Branches - Anatomy of a Failure

Black workers were not to be found behind store or shop counters during the 1940s or 1950s. Their employment in such stores, was however widespread. Much of the work that they did in this period took place beyond the view of the consumer,[58] in the basement, pricing goods, in the warehouse weighing and storing, in rooms in the dressmaking and milliner's section etc., as well as in packing and delivering that was somewhat more visible. The stores in the urban areas employed approximately 70,000 employees, of whom approximately 53 percent were 'European', 35 percent were Africans and the remaining 12 percent were of Coloured and Asiatic decent.[59] The racial composition of the commercial and distributive workforce in the smaller towns showed a higher percentage of black employment, with whites only accounting for 42.9 percent of employees, Africans 39.7 percent, Coloureds 10.9 percent and Asiatics 6.5 percent.[60]

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[55]Interview with Kay Altman Dec. Cape Town 1996. In an interview with Pauline Podberry, she stated that t the fact that African workers were in such a small minority meant that the whole question of formal African support for the strike was in all probability not even considered. But this is also qualified somewhat by her earlier remark see footnote 1. Dec. 1996

[56]Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict'. p.172

[57]*ibid* p. 96

[58] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3.6 Minutes of Cape A Branch Executive Comm. meeting March 1946. p. 4 In response to a letter from the CPSA presumably asking the union to take a stance with the employers concerning the employment of coloured shop assistants. The union responded that this matter was one for consideration of employers and that what was probably more important was that employers did not discriminate in terms of wages

[59]CAD, Department of Labour Annual Report 1940 p.41

[60] CAD, ARB 1069/182/2/6. Letter accompanying Wage Board Report 1943 for determination 87 (smaller towns Commercial distributive trade) from the Sec. of Labour to the Minister of Labour. 19 November 1943

B Branches existed in Cape Town, Durban, Witwatersrand, Vereeninging and Worcester.[61] The largest B branch was Cape Town, whose membership normally stood at between 300-400. Enrolment of black membership was low in relation to the size of the African and coloured workforce that totalled over 6000.[62] The remaining B branches had memberships of under 200. With the exception of Cape Town all of these branches began their rather unstable existence during 1942 and early 1943. The failure and general instability of the branches was due to a number of specific and related factors in addition to a general context characterised by employer hostility and low wages. In brief this was a lack of meaningful support from the NUDW; company unionism in Cape Town; office based unionism; Indian employers' evasion of the wage determination; a change of strategy from national wage determinations to Conciliation Boards that covered individual firms, and lastly and perhaps most importantly new legal constraints which the progressive trade union movement faced in 1947.

Opposition was mounted to the NUDW in Cape Town by a company union. This union, Commercial Staffs was formed in 1943, and allowed hostile employers the opportunity to delay the NUDW's attempts to establish national CB agreements.[63] It was only in 1947, four years after their last wage hike, that coloured workers (spread over 60 firms) in Cape Town received a pay increase of 2/9d per week. The inability to secure regular wage increases adversely affected the union's ability to recruit workers.[64] It was also expressed that there was a 'hesitation to joining the union...' because '...there is not one branch for all Distributive workers in the area' many coloured workers could see no point in joining the union.[65] The existence of two racially defined branches in a situation where the union was battling for survival must have been seen as baffling to the more class conscious elements among coloured shop workers. The Secretary of the struggling B branch and the largely still born newly formed national African union for commercial and distributive workers, Reggie September resigned during 1948. Revealingly, the Secretariat rather than the B branch itself, was instructed to find a replacement, and failing his replacement with a suitable candidate the 'A' branch was instructed to take over its running.[66]

The mainstay of the B branches' activity was the policing of the Workmen's compensation Act, the Shops and Offices Act 1940, Determination No. 70 and 87, the latter covering 36 smaller towns.[67] Like the African trade unions the branches lacked shop floor structures and therefore practised an office based style of unionism, where members came into the office with complaints. The secretary or organiser would then take the complaint up with the employer. In cases where the union received no co-operation the matter was referred to the Department of Labour, whose intervention often carried the threat of prosecution. The B branches, as with other black unions, could only grow on the basis of their ability to deliver wage increases. This proved itself a difficult enterprise due to the segregated nature of the NUDW, which deprived B branches of some of the unions most talented and experienced organisers. Perhaps the most biggest obstacle in this respect was the atomised character of much of the retail sector.

A majority of 'B' branch members in Johannesburg and Durban worked in small Indian owned businesses where family employment was predominant. This inhibited the union from gaining majority membership in these stores, so that a majority of the South African Indian NUDW membership were not covered in the Conciliation Board agreements instituted in 1947 that affected

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[61] Herd, *Counter Attack* p. 97. The Worcester branch had openly recruited Africans, which in a short space of time led Africans to become a majority, the NEC promptly declared it a B Branch. The white members were then enrolled into the Hottentots Holland Branch.

[62] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Minutes of 1943 Annual Conference

[63] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ac1.6.4 Minutes of 1948 Conference. This agreement covered both sections of the NUDW and was concluded on the 27 Dec. 1947 and the basis of the agreement was very similar to the national agreement. Report of the Cape Peninsula A branch. p.14

[64] *ibid.* Report of the Cape Peninsula 'B' Branch by Mrs Crump , branch organiser

[65] *ibid.*

[66] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ac1.6.4 NEC April 1948 minutes p.7

[67] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Boxes Ab1.7- Ab1.20. This conclusion is drawn from a survey of branch reports to the NEC 1940-1950

most of the white membership.[68] Where upward adjustments to wage scales for black workers were made, the increases instituted were often pitiful.

The affiliation of the mainly Indian Durban Non- European Distributive Workers Union to the NUDW in early 1943 was also a short lived affair. The inability of the branch to pay their subscriptions to head office, which refused to subsidise them after 1944, led to their subsequent closure in 1946.[69] The mainly Indian Witwatersrand, Vereeniging and Durban 'B' branches faced 'the systematic exploitation of Indian workers by Indian employers'. It was common practice for these employers to circumvent wage determination legislation by forcing their employees to sign for receipt of the legally prescribed minimum wage, when in fact they were paid far lower wages than they had signed for.[70] The Witwatersrand branch found this situation particularly difficult to counter. In Durban, it was reported that they were prepared to make a showdown with one major Indian employer.[71] This firm was Choonilal Bros. of Durban who paid out the legally specified amount with the understanding that the workers then had to pay a certain amount back. The workers were apparently ready to strike but nothing transpired to this end,[72] despite Indians probably representing the most militant section of the working class in the war period.[73] While Indian workers were the most adept at combating their exploitation, Indian employers' exploitative custom, elevated the practice to something akin to an art form. The inability of the Indian B branches to recruit new members who in turn became active members posed serious organisational difficulties, as the task of collecting subscriptions from hundreds of members usually fell on the shoulders one or two office bearers, that were able to get time off work to perform such duties.[74]

What led Indian employers to exploit workers from their own community? The American experience sheds some light in this respect. It was common practice amongst most immigrant entrepreneurs in the United States to build their businesses on the labour of fellow countrymen, whose job prospects were often severely limited and whose labour came cheap. Such entrepreneurs faced with numerous restrictive practices and lacking capital tended to pool their resources and carve out business opportunities for themselves in previously uncharted terrain. Petty commodity trading and labour contracting within and from their own ethnic communities were common springboards into larger economic concerns. The predominance of ethnic economic niches was in large part sustained through access to the competitive advantage that cheap labour provided, drawn from their own ethnic group. In the South African context the Indian trader class replicated this pattern, were highly organised, and articulated their interests assertively.

In 1939 the South African Indian Congress was dominated by the Indian merchant class, who made representations to the Wage Board that lower wage rates should apply within the urban areas for all traders, irrespective of race, for 'inferior areas'. They justified their request on the grounds that equal pay for equal work was meaningless unless equal opportunities existed for work.[75] This request on the surface of things smacked of opportunism, given the brisk trade in which many

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[68] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ac1.6.4 Minutes of 1948 Conference. Presidents 's Address states that 383 firms covered by the national agreement

[69]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Boxes Ab1.10-16 Minutes of National Conferences and NEC meetings 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946 Conference.
UWL Department of Historical Papers Box B Kagan Papers A2452 General Correspondence letters from Errol Shanley NUDW Chairman to Morris Kagan.

[70]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Nat Sec. Report to the 7th Annual Conference 1944. p. 47 Branch Reports to the NEC 24 November 1943 p. 7-18

[71]*ibid.*

[72]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Minutes of the NEC 1943 Branch reports. p.12

[73]Alexander 'Industrial Conflict' p. 126 This conclusion is drawn from the Ballinger Papers 'Half Yearly Report' Jan. - June 1944 . Indian workers in percentage terms according to Alexander received the biggest pay increases in percentage terms. His study also show a clear correlation between militancy and wage rises.

[74]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3-6 Cape Peninsula 'A' Branch minutes 1945. The 'B' branch had a thousand members on the books but only three hundred paid up members due to the logistical problems.

[75]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ah 3.3.1 File 1 *The Star* 17/5/43

Indian traders were reportedly involved.[76] However, it would also seem that the competitive edge (in terms of mark-up) that many Indian traders held over their white counterparts was in large part due to the 'internalised exploitation' involved in wide spread use of family labour. To sustain this advantage it is plausible that Indian traders who expanded their business to employ non family members reverted to methods of underpayment of the legally specified wage, with the grudging consent of their employees, many of whom had extremely limited employment opportunities. In this context, the implied consent involved in such practices rendered monitoring of wage determinations redundant.

Wage increases for black workers in the sector were usually dependent on wage determinations and revisions thereto. Union strategy shifted from pressing for wage determinations and revisions in 1946, to securing national agreements, negotiated through Conciliation Boards that only covered those firms where the union had a 55 percent majority.

The shift in stratagem from wage determinations which covered all workers regardless of union recognition, to one where wage increases were dependent on CB agreements, meant gains were only secured for a bare majority of the union membership.[77] So for many black workers' in particular, wage increases were only secured through wage determinations, and these quickly became fewer and further apart, due to a less sympathetic government and the unions' own policy of reaching national agreements with a limited coverage. The union justified it's change in strategy by arguing that:

> *... apparently there are many selfish people in this world who will if given a chance take all and contribute nothing. Human nature being what it is, we must therefor, and of necessity, change our tactics and protect our members only, encouraging non members all the time to come into the Union...*[78]

However, it seems more likely that the NUDW now believed that the policy of reaching separate agreements in some 383 firms, which granted organisational facilities and where wages levels-over and above the prescribed minimum- could differ from company to company,[79] accommodated the general economic unevenness of the retail sector, specifically the differential ability to meet wage demands. It therefore provided a means to avoid a generalised resistance from the employers to the NUDW's national demands.

Motivation waned in these branches after 1945. This was a result of employer unwillingness particularly in Cape Town, to subscribe to a national agreement that would cover both employees and 'non-employees'. Employers' party to national Conciliation Boards agreements in 1947 refused to cover Africans in the industry on the grounds that they were not considered employees by the Industrial Conciliation Act. The NUDW quickly conceded and dropped its demands for Africans to be included in the national CB agreements.[80] Africans after 1947 legally could not belong to mixed unions such as the NUDW. The Amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1947 forced Africans out of mixed unions. While some unions took a number of years to bring their practices into accordance with the law, the NUDW immediately stepped into line, by forcing its Africans to set up their own union. It led the way to the establishment of a separate and nominally independent African union. A lack of political will on the part of the NUDW meant that African's were first left out of crucial national agreements, and second promptly removed from the ranks of the union into

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[76] Dugmore, H. , 'Becoming Coloured: Class and Culture in Johannesburg Malay Location' PhD Thesis Univ. of Witwatersrand, 1994. p. 102. The demands by the White League in the first decades of the 20th century both on the West and East Rand for segregation of Indians from both blacks and white was motivated largely by the ability of Indians to out compete their white counterparts.

[77] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab-13-16 Minutes of National Conference 1948 Report of the National Executive to National Conference p. 2 The report states that agreements covered three hundred and eight three stores. On average each store employed 15 people. This calculates to a figure of just under six thousand.

[78] *ibid.*

[79] *ibid.*

[80] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Cd File Cd.2 Letter from Katie Kagan to Reggie September, 2 October 1947 p.1

an 'independent' union that was unable to sustain itself[81]. The once lively, stable and solidly organised group of African workers in Cape Town, were now left to fend for themselves as individuals.

'The ungenerous treatment extended to them in the wage legislation sapped their optimism. In Cape Town the union's B Branch began to wilt in a climate of discouragement.' [82] Organisational continuity was also hampered by a lack of funds, subsequently B branches frequently forfeited representation at the national conference, as they were usually not in 'financial standing'.[83] By the end of 1949, only two B branches remained in operation, both in the Western Cape.[84]

Research into the activity of the B branches is hampered by the lack of any record of their executive or branch meetings, and a lack of coverage of their activities in the Union journal *New Day*. A lasting impression, however, is left from the politically orientated nature of the National Conference resolutions tabled by the B branches, which leads to the conclusion that many of the leading NUDW 'B' branch members in both Johannesburg and Cape Town, were also CPSA activists.[85] The establishment of Witwatersrand 'B' seems to owe its existence to the new politicised atmosphere of the war period. It was able to draw a handful of 'Indian' political activists into the structure, but its membership never exceeded an 100. By 1948 it could only claim a membership of 35, and by 1949 the Branch was dissolved because of its failure to repay its loans to the head office.[86]

Distant cousins

The relationship of the B branches to the NUDW structures was typically estranged and can be characterised as being that of distant cousins. An example of the distance was well illustrated in 1944 when the predominantly African Cape Peninsula 'B' branch disaffiliated from the NUDW probably due to derogatory remarks made about the leadership of the branch by the national secretary and the decision to exclude them from involvement in the 1943 OK strike.[87] It was found on application for re-affiliation in 1946 that some of the members never realised that they had disaffiliated.[88] An organiser employed in 1947 for the Cape 'B' Branch bemoaned, 'the only time we had recourse to go to the 'A' branch was to collect subscriptions.[89] Another leading coloured member of the B branch in the 1950s reported that fraternisation never took place.[90] One finds

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[81] This union was established in 1947 and named the African Commercial Distributive Workers Union of South Africa, whose history in this paper follows in a highly truncated form due to space consideration in later pages.

[82] Herd, *Counter Attack*... p92

[83] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Boxes Ab1.10-Ab1.19 Minutes of National Conferences and NEC meetings 1943,1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949. Typically only one 'b' branch in financial standing. Never in attendance when not 'in financial standing' and views represented typically by national office bearers.

[84] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.16-19 meetings of the Annual Conference 1949 p. 6

[85] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3-6 Minutes of Cape Peninsula Branch Executive 16 July 1945. The 'B' branch organiser for Cape Town in 1945 was a Mr Monaghan, who was discovered to be doing party work in union time. One would assume Miss Speer the 'B' branch organiser in Johannesburg from 1945 onwards from her input at national conference was also a CPSA member. Resolutions from B branches were predominantly broadly political resolutions, that reflected the CPSA's influence. Reggie September Interview Dec. 1996 That the leadership of the 'B' branch was mostly African and that represented the most sophisticated section of the African population and consequently were also to be found in the leadership of the ANC. September was also a member of the CPSA.

[86] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Boxes Ab1.10-19 Minutes of National Conferences and NEC meetings 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947,1948, 1949

[87] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Nat Secretary Report to NEC Feb. 1944 p. 1 Burford states 'there are undoubtedly fine potentialities, but it seems to me that the leadership is unenterprising, weak, vacillating and lacking originality. Burford comments about Daniel Koza being 'arrogant' and the fact that he was reported to demand that he be addressed formally by black workers, 'Mr Burford' in this case, leads me to conclude Burford was a bit of a closet racist. It was shortly after his visit to Cape Town that the B branch made an application for disaffiliation.

[88] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.14-16 Minutes of NEC Feb. 1946

[89] Reggie September Interview Dec. Cape Town 1996

[90] Solly Ariefdien Interview Aug. Cape Town 1996

mention in some of the reports that assistance was given by the local 'A' branch. More specifically favourable mention is made of those white organisers who shared their experience, time and energy in helping the branch overcome problems.

Where developmental support was not forthcoming branches often flagged and or dissolved. Negative proof of this point is clearly illustrated in the case of Port Elizabeth. In Port Elizabeth in 1938, there was 'some acrimony over African workers in town', this centred over what union they should belong to, the NUDW or the newly established African General Workers Union (AGWU) established that year by Max Gordon.[91] Katie Kagan (nee Silpert) was in attendance at the local NUDW branch meeting and argued that African workers should not be divided into two camps and the AGWU should form a separate section for the Non European distributive workers within their own organisation 'with which the NUDW would work in closest co-operation with that section, until such time as that section came over to the NUDW as a branch thereof.'[92] The workers in question joined the AGWU. However, the AGWU was unable to retain these workers in the union, probably due to the sectional nature of trade unions, which is premised on the differential conditions in each trade. After a year or so the African commercial workers left the union. An opportunity was lost to strengthen the organisation of distributive workers in the crucial 1940-1942 period[93] due to an acceptance of the racial boundaries endemic to South Africa. Max Gordon shortly after his release from internment in 1943 organised the Port Elizabeth African shop workers into the ACDWU.

African workers were generally not catered for by the NUDW. Port Elizabeth provides an example of a clear opportunity to organise this group which was not taken up. This pattern was to repeat itself in the early 1940's in Durban amongst two separate unions which respectively catered for African and Indian workers,[94] and two regional African unions in East London and Pretoria. In the case of the latter, the African workers were organised into a branch of the ACDWU. On the NUDW being approached for assistance, the union advised them to set up a local independent union rather than absorbing them into their own union. In the case of Durban, East London and Port Elizabeth the organisation of this section of the working class had to wait for Gordon and Koza's organising skills. It is clear that the ACDWU was among the most militant and effective African unions, why this was so is now explored.

A profile of the African commercial labour force

The attitude displayed by the NUDW towards its B branches and African workers generally must be counted as a lost opportunity. A study conducted by E. Hellman's in 1953 of a Johannesburg store to which she gives the name 'Sellgoods', provides ample indication that its African workforce and in all likelihood the African workforces of other large stores both in Johannesburg and elsewhere was eminently unionisable and potentially militant as well.

The African labour force at Sellgoods numbered 336 workers. The median age of the workforce was 35.4 years and 44 % of the shop workers and 22% of the warehouse staff were unionised.[95] The older workers tended to be more unionised, which illustrated a clear correlation existing between the length of service and trade union membership.[96] The workforce was ethnically heterogeneous, half was exempted from passes, which generally reflected higher levels of education,

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[91]Alexander 'Industrial Conflict' Appendix four p. 403

[92]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.2 Executive Committee Meeting Port Elizabeth 15 Aug. 1938

[93] Stein, M. , 'Max Gordon and African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand 1938-40' *Essays in South African Labour History* (ed.) E. Webster. Max Gordon in 1942 went to Port Elizabeth under the auspices of the South African Committee of Trade Unions to organise African workers. It was considered highly successful with several unions being organised, one such union was the ACDWU. Whether it was affiliated to the Johannesburg union is unclear.

[94]The Durban B branch was composed of largely Indian workers, which collapsed some time in 1946. Appeals to the NUDW to help revive it were turned down in 1947.

[95]Hellman, *Sellgoods A Sociological Survey of an African Labour Force,* Johannesburg, SAIRR. 1953 p. 23

[96]Hellman, *Sellgoods* Staff with the firm less than 17 months show only 2%-4% membership, the number of members rises to 41 % in the 2-5 years category, 56% in the 6- 10 years, and 84% in the 11 plus categories

and 63% were married with their wives in Johannesburg denoting a relatively high degree of permanence.[97]

According to Hellman's criteria of urbanisation, 39% of the workforce was urbanised, a large proportion of which were among the longer term employees.[98] Reggie September, one time organiser of the Cape Town 'B' branch, likewise indicated that the African workers were the 'most stable component of the branch and sophisticated elements of the (African) workforce, many of them comprising the leadership of the local ANC.'[99] This can be accounted for by the relatively high level of education among this group of workers, 75% of whom attended school for a period of time, which according to Hellman 'appears to be higher than the average among the African population.'[100] The approximate 30% annual labour turnover rate of the African labour force in this department store speaks directly to the social stability of this sector of the commercial distributive work force.[101] The relative stability of these workers is brought into focus when one compares this labour turnover rate to that of African workers in other sectors between 1936 and 1944, in transport the rate stood at 191%, building 160% and metal and engineering 109%.[102] The low labour turnover in the retail sector amongst African workers can possibly be accounted for by the relative status of the job, which occupied a top place in the occupational hierarchy for Africans at the time. [103]According to one source: 'They were the best jobs Africans could find.'[104]

The impact of war time inflation and other factors placed severe pressure on the wages of Africans. The vast majority of urbanised workers were also reported to be remitting money to the rural areas mainly to support parents, [105] which during the war period was intensified as a severe drought was ravaging the countryside. This burden was increased by location regulations which required sons and daughters over the age of 18 to pay lodgers fees to the municipality or to move out of their parents house.[106] The high number of dependants in the towns and reserves in a period of high inflation, and rural decline simultaneously deepened proletarianisation and militancy.

This study suggests that commercial and distributive workers experienced an exceptionally high degree of proletarianisation and therefore represented a potentially powerful and indeed explosive force (particularly during the war period) that could be galvanised by the union's in the cities to further the interests of the working class as a whole.

The ACDWU: *the best organised African union*

The ACDWU during a large part of its brief existence was engaged in racially mixed, relatively large scale strike action in the commercial and distributive trade. It engaged in strikes three times between 1942 and 1946, each strike positively extending the relationship between rank and file black and white workers. The union also conducted three small store strikes independently of the NUDW between 1942 and 1946 whose outcome has gone unrecorded.[107]

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[97]Hellman *Sellgoods* pp. 24 -32

[98] Hellman *Sellgoods* pp. 65-66

[99] Interview with Reggie September December Cape Town 1996

[100] Hellman *Sellgoods* p. 49. The study provides the following figures sub standards 6%, Std 1 to Std. 2 pass 19%, Std. 3-to Std. 4 25% pass, Std. 5 pass 9%, Std. 6 pass 10%, Stds. 7-8 5%, J.C pass or Std. 9 1%

[101] Hellman, *Sellgoods* p. 61

[102]Bonner, P.L 'The South African Working Class on the Rand 1935-55: Parameters, Patterns and Possibilities' unpublished Draft Paper 1993 University of the Witwatersrand p.5

[103]Hellman, *Sellgoods* p. 61 Employment histories show a marked trend in job sequence from farm labour, mining and domestic to industrial and commercial employment.
See also Bonner 'The South African Working Class on the Rand 1935-55' p. 6. Here Bonner is drawing on information on Pass Records which show a 70% labour turnover in commerce and industry as a whole where as the figure of 30% is based on one department store that I believe is safe to assume can be generalised to other stores.

[104]Interview with Reggie September December Cape Town 1996

[105]Hellman, *Sellgoods* p. 62

[106]CAD, ARB , Memorandum submitted by the ACDWU to the Johannesburg and Pretoria Conciliation Board 1943 Conciliation Board

[107]Alexander *Industrial Conflict* Appendix Four p. 400- 12

According to Hirson the ACDWU was established because the NUDW refused to recruit African workers. This is only partially true as we have seen that the union did recruit Africans in Cape Town and made a vague commitment to do so in Port Elizabeth, which was not realised. Max Gordon set up the ACDWU in 1938 alongside several other African unions. Daniel Koza joined with Gordon and together they recruited dairy workers, coal workers, shop workers and others. In 1939 Gordon claimed to the Wage Board that the ACDWU had 1200 members.[108] The central plank of Gordon's organisational strategy was campaigning for and then policing wage determinations, the history of which has been well covered elsewhere.[109] It seems he was prompted to establish the union as a result of the acquiescence by the Minister of Labour to the NUDW's request for a Wage Investigation in 1937. Shortly after publication of the Wage Board report in 1939 the union instituted an amicable split due to the need for the ACDWU to operate in one defined trade, so as to aid their organisational effectiveness. Workers not covered by the Wage Board's definition of commercial and distributive workers were instructed to join a general union belonging to the same federation. Most importantly Gordon provided a vehicle where black retail workers could undertake their own self organisation, which when compared to the tutelage of black workers in the NUDW's B branches and their subsequent track record, highlights some of the beneficiary aspects of the former style of organisation. However, the development of class unity arguably required a racially unified organisation willing to challenge racism, which in this instance was far from forthcoming.

Once the Wage Board for the commercial and distributive trade had completed its final report containing its recommendations, Gordon set out to police the determination, as if it had already been gazetted. The report contained proposals to raise the wages of semi-skilled and unskilled categories where Africans were predominant. This included such jobs as warehouseman, packers, labourers, delivery men and lift attendants. In the process he recovered a total of £3, 200 for the members of his union in 1939. [110]

The commercial and distributive trade agreement covered both employees and non-employees, and came into operation on 22 December 1939. The Joint Committee of African Trade Unions (JCATU) was the trade union federation that Max Gordon built from the late 1930s onwards, of which the ACDWU was its largest affiliate. In large part, the success of JACTU, by far the largest federation of African trade unions at the time,[111] was the product of policing determinations and organising simultaneously.[112] The 1940 wage determination was seen as 'The Joint Committees major triumph' as their strategy of leading evidence at Wage Boards regarding African wages, which in this trade employed tens of thousands of African workers, proved particularly successful. According to a leading trade unionist at the time, Edwin Mofutsanya, although Gordon went to the Labour Department he 'succeeded' because he 'kept on organising'.[113]

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[108] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3- 6 Gordon bringing fraternal greetings from ACDWU to NUDW Annual conference 1939 p. 5

[109] David Harries (pseud. Baruch Hirson) 'Daniel Koza' *Africa Perspective* 1981, Mark Stein ,Max Gordon 'African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand 1935-1940' *Essays in South African Labour History* V.L. Allen *The History of Black Mine Workers in South Africa* p. 328 Allen argues mistakenly that Gordon kept the lid on black militancy in 1938-40 period. Hirson *Yours for the Union* London 1989 p. 44 & p. 48. An important corrective to this point is provided by Hirson when suggests that Gordon adjusted his tactics but not his principles to suit the challenges of that period, and that by building successful unions he paved the way for further advances in the 1940s. He qualifies this statement by suggesting further that Gordon unwittingly led the unions into a pattern of white paternalism and liberal stewardship which the ACDWU under Koza's leadership broke with.

[110] Hirson, *Yours for the Union* p. 44 . It is stated that Gordon began with this task in 1938, but this would have been impossible as the Board only completed its report in 1939. It usually took 18- 24 months for Gazetting to occur which gave legal effect to the recommendations.

[111] Stein, M. , 'African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand 1935 -40' pp. 96-97. The JCATU had 20, 000 members by 1940 compared to the Council of Non European Trade Unions 3,000. Stein implies that the latter was established to counter the latter.

[112] Hirson, *Yours for the Union* p. 45

[113] Fine, R. and Davies, D. *Beyond Apartheid Labour and Liberation in South Africa* Pluto, London, 1989 pp. 35 and 44

The Wage Board Report's recommendations once gazetted, granted substantial pay increases for Africans. In Johannesburg a wage rate of 27 s 8d per week for unskilled workers was set, in the Reef Towns and Pretoria 25 s per week, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth 30s, with provisions for annual paid leave, overtime pay, and special rates of pay for public holidays. Wages elsewhere in the country were slightly lower but still proportionately higher than the rate for unskilled workers.[114]

In February of 1940 Gordon held a celebration rally at Wemmer sports ground upon the gazetting of the wage determination No. 70 in order to promote further trade union organisation. For the first time in the history of the commercial and distributive sector, workers' wages and conditions of work of tens of thousands of African's were now regulated, 'It was a big landmark for the African workers in the country...' claimed N. Mokgatle.[115] So was the Coal workers' strike that took place the following year.

The Coal workers strike was given a militant lead by Koza in 1941 and for the sake of brevity I will only deal with its conclusion, which was successful on two accounts. Firstly, it managed to secure the inclusion of coal workers in Wage Determination No. 70 thereby raising their wages substantially. Secondly, it precipitated major changes in state policy towards African workers. Ivan Walker, the Secretary of Labour undertook to raise the issue of African union recognition with the Minister. Thirdly, it was agreed that the Department of Labour would take primary responsibility for most future disputes regarding Africans in the larger urban areas. Since the Department of Labour tended to be more sympathetic towards African unions than the Department of Native Affairs, this was understandably regarded as something of a victory.[116]

Other important state directives followed the wave of militancy amongst black workers. The introduction of cost of living allowances (c.o.l.a.) from 1941 improved black workers' wages considerably and represented a considerable advance for black workers, particularly as it has been argued that this wage legislation was introduced by Smuts 'to keep our workers in good temper'.[117] The state, however, combined collaborative steps with coercive measures. Gordon was interned for so called subversive anti war activities in 1940, that were directly related to the organisation of Africans into unions.[118]

Gordon's relationship with the NUDW seemed to be genuinely fraternal, and he was present at the 1939 NUDW annual conference, which he briefly addressed.[119] The CPSA in their publications supported the unions Gordon had established, which probably accounted for his invitation to the conference.[120]Daniel Koza, who had worked with and had been trained by Gordon took over the leadership in 1940. Lynn Saffrey from the South African Institute for Race Relations who was actively involved in African trade union affairs, visited Gordon at the interment camp and returned with suggestions for the unions that had been under Gordon's secretaryship in the Joint Committee. Saffrey and Rheinallt Jones met members of the Joint Committee of Africa Trade Unions and raised the need for a petition to secure Gordon's release. At Gordon's suggestion they also proposed that Saffrey take over his role. According to Saffrey, Jones 'made (the) mistake of suggesting that the reason be that the unions could not manage without Gordon.'(sic) Koza was furious and his opposition to Saffrey's appointment split the Joint Committee. Hirson suggests that 'The meeting was a watershed for the unions, and for SAIRR involvement in their affairs. The trade unionists who had supported Koza had broken with a tradition into which Gordon unwittingly, had led the movement.' [121] Koza was a sympathiser of the Workers International League (WIL), as were a number of African trade union leaders who left the JCATU and established the Progressive Trade Union Group. According to Hirson 'although the Africans were not interested in the politics of

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[114] Hellman, *Sellgoods* p. 12

[115] N. Mokgatle, *Autobiography of an Unknown South African* p. 228

[116] Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' pp. 120-121

[117] Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' p. 123

[118] Numerous other white African trade union leaders were interned in this period including Burford.

[119] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.3-Ab1.6 Minutes of the 1939 Annual Conference

[120] Duncan, D, *Mills of God State Bureaucracy and African Labour in South Africa 1918-1960* Wits University Press, Johannesburg 1993 p.196

[121] Hirson *Yours for the Union* London 1989 p. 48

WIL, they responded to the militant trade unionism it encouraged.'[122]It seems much like the Afro American Communist Party members of Alabama, who embraced the party and used as a vehicle for organising themselves.[123] Koza's political alignment and the subsequent battles in the Council of Non European Trade Unions (CNETU) caused serious tensions to develop with the NUDW which is explored below.

Burford, one time national secretary of the NUDW described Koza as 'arrogant', suggesting at the same time this was probably a way of demonstrating independence from the NUDW.[124] According to Burford's account of the 1942 OK Bazaars dispute, the ACDWU was party to the settlement and the secretary signed the eventual agreement, 'but the membership was not consulted and played a minor part in the proceedings.'[125] If factually correct, this gives some weight to the unsubstantiated claim that Hirson makes regarding Koza's '... bureaucratic approach to administration which set him apart from the workers he represented...'[126]

The ACDWU and the 1943 OK Bazaars strike

During the 1943 OK strike approximately six hundred African workers belonging to the ACDWU joined forces with the NUDW by withdrawing their labour. These were largely warehouseman and 'unskilled' workers who had been occupationally segregated into such categories of work. In the run up to the strike a number of Conciliation Boards had been called in an attempt to resolve the dispute that centred around the closed shop and wage demands for both African's and 'employees'. During the first sitting of the CB in Johannesburg the employers made a generous wage offer to African workers, but refused to meet the NUDW's demands. In response the ACDWU's decided to pull out of negotiations 'as a gesture of identity' with the NUDW. This decision to pull out of the negotiation process rested on the notion that a joint fight with white shopworkers would strengthen both organisations and yield wage increases that would at a minimum be no less than what had already been offered and quite possibly, more. However, the ACDWU was encouraged by the NUDW to settle separately. The NUDW did so as they failed to see the merit in a strategy based on a united front of African and mixed trade unions. Burford, the NUDW national secretary continued to negotiate on behalf of the Pretoria Non European Distributive Workers Union that represented African workers in that city, with whom the NUDW had a close relationship.[127] The ACDWU's options were now narrowed by the NUDW's stance in this regard and so the ACDWU also decided to proceed with the negotiations. In coming to this decision they pledged that they would show solidarity with white workers if they struck. The ACDWU and the Pretoria based African union reached what they thought was a voluntary agreement with the employers, which was widely publicised, but some days later it was cancelled by the Minister on the basis that the African unions lacked representivity. [128] This agreement was reached in May 1943. A month later in June the closed shop in OK Bazaars was repudiated. The resolve of the African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union to embark on strike action in Johannesburg during November 1943

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[122] Hirson the 'Trotskyists of South Africa' *Searchlight South Africa* 10 1993 p.94

[123] Roediger, D. *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* 'Where Communism was Black' p.55 A review essay of Robin D.G. Kelley *Hammer and the Hoe, Alabama Communists during the Great Depression.*

[124] Alexander, Industrial Conflict p.120 cited from an interview with Burford in 1993

[125]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Nat Secretary Report November 1942 p. 6

[126]Hirson Yours for the Union p. 95

[127] CAD, ARB 1052/226 Minutes of Conciliation Board meeting and memorandum handed into the meeting from the ACDWU. Mokgatle, N. , *Autobiography of an Unknown South African.* The NUDW helped establish this union after they decided to build a union independent of the ACDWU, which it formerly was a branch thereof. Sectarian concerns seemed to have been the primary reason behind this move. See chapter 4 for further discussion.

[128] CAD Archives ARB 1069/135/3/5 Letter regarding the involvement of Africans in the 1941 dispute with OKs . A scribbled note(most probably Madeley's) on the letter to the Minister from the Chief Clerk in the department Chairman states that he thought a ruling by a C B would set a dangerous precedent in relation to registration of African trade unions. Hirson *Yours for the Union* and others cite government attempt to curb inflation as the major reason for the Minister refusing to Gazette this agreement. See Chapter 4 for further discussion.

was then related both to the closed shop[129] facility which it had won together with the NUDW in OK Bazaars in 1942 and the voluntary wage agreement that had not been effected.

The NUDW justified the decision to propose a separate settlement between the employers and the ACDWU. by reference to its concern for the plight of low paid Africans.[130] The union noted that its decision to persuade the ACDWU to accept the wage offer independently of an agreement being reached with themselves should not set a precedent, and in future the joint agreements as well as joint actions should be planned to the mutual advantage of both'.[131] Its failure to mobilise its own black membership in the 1943 and its willingness to conclude agreements independently of the ACDWU (despite a failure to gain any increase for black workers on the lowest grades from 1944 onwards) brings into question the declared motivation of the NUDW in his instance. The refusal of the Minister of Labour to gazette the agreement between the ACDWU and the Johannesburg and Pretoria employers, ensured that the their membership joined the strike later that year called by the NUDW in OK , CTC and elsewhere.

The 1943 OK Bazaars dispute proves a useful episode through which to examine the relationship between the state and African labour. Norman Herds' published account of the history of the NUDW claims the following about the dispute.

> *' the subsequent arbitration award gave the Africans wage increases of 105 to 115%, a 48 hour week and several additional benefits. It also committed the employers to recognise the African union and the timing of the agreement gave it an historical aspect for it was the first time in a particular industry that employers had reached a settlement with their African employers before coming to terms with their White workers.* [132]

For the sake of a true historical record this needs to be corrected. The Johannesburg and Pretoria employers at the first sitting of the CB, which covered both Africans and 'employees' agreed to wage increases for the former which worked out at about 35%, at the maximum. This was entered into as a voluntary agreement between the ACDWU and the regional employers who belonged to their respective organisations in May of 1943. The refusal of the Minister to gazette this agreement following this agreement, led to the Wage Board hearing in September 1943 being tasked to make a recommendation in this regard. The Wage Board proposed that wage increases for Africans be revised downwards from what had been agreed to in the voluntary agreement in May. The board's proposals were brought into effect only once they had been gazetted. This was delayed due to the strike breaking out in November of that year. Wage increases therefore became part of the Arbitration proceedings, which was only finalised once the Award was made in February 1944. The arbitration applied to both employees and non employees, that had been negotiated as part of the settlement of the strike at the end of 1943, took three months to complete. The original voluntary agreement between the employers associations and the African unions covered 6,000 workers. If it had been gazetted, it would have became binding upon all employers, regardless of whether they were members employers association or not. It thereby would have extended substantive wage increases to an additional 6,000 Africans in the Witwatersrand and Pretoria area alone.[133] The national coverage of the determination extended the wage increase to approximately another 12-13,000 African workers in the urban areas. The rise this represented in the wage bill was therefore not negligible and perhaps partially explains Madeley's reluctance to gazette the increase, independently of the white workers and further negotiation between employers, employees and the state.

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[129] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Dc.2.4 Memoranda and Minutes 1943-49 Shop Assistants Case (Part 1) p..5 In the case of retrenchments the management were bound to inform the ACDWU of their intentions so that union shop stewards or officials could be in attendance as part of the committee when the issue was being discussed.

[130] Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' p. 170

[131] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.10-13 Minutes of 1943 NEC 18 April pp .7-8. Agreement between Morris Kagan, Burford and the ACDWU executive endorsed by the meeting.

[132] Herd, *Counter Attack....* p102

[133] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ah 3.3.1 File 1 *The Star* 9/3/43

The Department of Labour's initial refusal to ratify the agreement was justified by reference to the Industrial Conciliation Act. Since this excluded Africans from the definition of employees the Minister argued it could not be gazetted. An array of different reasons often in contradiction to one another were forwarded as reasons, as the Minister's initial decision not to gazette was also based on the grounds that the ACDWU was not fully representative.[134] According to Hirson this 'was double talk. The truth was the government had decided that wage increases were inflationary and pegged wages at the 1943 level throughout the country.'[135]

Possibly there was more to Madeley's reluctance in this regard than just economics. Concern was expressed by the state as far back as 1941 concerning the attempt of African workers in the NUDW to use the machinery of the Industrial Conciliation Act. A letter from a Chief Clerk of the Department of Labour concerning the 1941 Cape Town dispute between the NUDW 'B' branch and OK Bazaars stated that the granting of a CB, 'may be used as a precedent for extending recognition to Native Workers ...Furthermore active organisations would be justified in asking for registration as trade unions.'[136] The Minister may thus have been refused to gazette the agreement with ACDWU reached at the Johannesburg CB in March 1943 due to this critical consideration, i.e. it may have accorded them the right to register.[137] Additional suggestive evidence which relates to the political (narrowly defined in this instance) nature of the initial reluctance to gazette the agreement can be found in Madeley's own political make-up.

In January 1943 the SALP annual conference condoned Madeley's support for delaying an amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act, which would accord employee status to Africans. The SALP insisted that they still favoured such a change, but in order to prevent white workers' interests from being threatened, this should only occur after the Masters and Servants Act, the Tax Act, and other related legislation had been revised.[138]

A Wage Board hearing for a revision to the wage determination No. 70 that covered areas where some basic agreement existed between the warring parties, including the ACDWU on the one side, was instituted in September of 1943. Madeley's decision to include the wages of Africans in the proposed wage revision displayed the concern to avert a strike, which overrode his previous objections to the lack of representivity of the union and his commitment to tackle inflation through wage policy. An agreement that covered Africans and non- Africans workers together through the wage board would not represent a departure from existing practice. Additionally and perhaps more importantly an agreement reached through the Wage Board with Africans over wages may have proved enough to provide a breach in the support that organised African workers had promised their white counterparts in the event of strike action of the latter. However, no agreement with the ACDWU was forthcoming.

During this hearing, Koza argued that the wage scales agreed to by the employers at the first sitting Witwatersrand Conciliation Board in March of 1943 should be put into operation, i.e. 37/6 d a week for labourers: packers and £2.2.6. for others. The National Conference of Employers, held a month prior to the September 1943 Wage Board hearing refused to agree to the scales agreed by the Johannesburg -Pretoria employers. It was therefore finally proposed by the employer's representative that labourers be awarded an increase of 25 % on existing wages and labourers and packers and others should receive an increase of 12%. No agreement could be reached at the hearing and the ultimate decision would rest with the Wage Board who would take some to complete their report. [139] Before the board had reached this stage, the massive 1943 'OK' strike broke out which the ACDWU joined and demanded that the original agreement with the Conciliation Board

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[134]Hirson, *Yours for the Union* p. 97

[135]*ibid.*

[136]CAD ARB Vol. 612 1052/248 Letter regarding the involvement of Africans in the 1941 dispute with OK from the Chief Clerk of 'C' Division. The Minister approved holding back from making a decision as the 'dispute seems to have faded out...'

[137]ibid A note scribbled on this letter that was addressed to the Minister, and I therefore assume it was his scribble supported the observation of the dangers involved and added that the matter was still under consideration.

[138] Hepple, A. ' The South African Labour Party: A memoir' p.331

[139] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ag1-Ag3 Circular No. 33 of 1943 p.1

be implemented. The Wage Board Arbitration in February of 1944 that followed the conclusion of the strike, agreed to the employers' proposal of 25 percent for labourers in most urban centres, but raised the wages for packers and other staff from the employers' proposal for 12 and half percent to 15 percent. This recommendation would raise wages to £2.3.1 in Cape Town, £2.0.3 in Johannesburg per week and slightly less elsewhere for packers. The labourers increase would amount to under just under £2.00 in Cape Town and Johannesburg. [140]

Other important aspects of the 1943 strike have been covered earlier on this chapter and in the chapter on the strike itself. To underscore one point at the risk of repetition, the ability to pull out 500 workers in Johannesburg which represented just under half the amount of white strikers on the Rand was an impressive feat.[141] It seems clear that this lent a measure of respect to be given to African workforce, which for most white organised shop workers was presumably absent before the strike. However, the solidarity that the ACDWU provided was not to be reciprocated when requested by Koza in 1945.

Negotiations conducted by Koza with the Johannesburg Retailer Association in 1945 for a wage increase proved fruitless, and the ACDWU therefore contemplated strike action. [142] Koza was obviously aware that the success of a proposed strike would depend on solidarity from unionised white workers and requested from the NUDW an assurance that, in the event of scab labour being used, the NUDW would refuse to handle these goods. The deliberations of the local executive of Johannesburg NUDW branch minutes concluded, 'It was felt that the organisation of such a boycott was beyond our strength. It was agreed ... that we undertake to give financial and moral and other support.'[143] Consequently the ACDWU decided against strike action.

ACDWU decline

The conventional wisdom regarding the decline of African trade unionism is that after 1942 the government decision to curb African militancy and 'wage inflation', combined with the rapid turnover of the workforce led these unions into decline. This process began a little later for African unions in the retail sector largely due to the proletarianised nature of the membership, the relative maturity of the leadership, and the inter-racial solidarity which allowed improvements to be secured through strike action up until 1944. The successes of the ACDWU in Johannesburg managed to catalyse branches in East London, Bloemfontein, Kroonstad, Port Elizabeth and Witbank throughout most of the war period.[144] Much of this success can be attributed to Gordon's efforts after his release. However, their exact relationship to the ACDWU is unclear, as is their history.

In 1947 Daniel Koza observed that:

> *Since 1943 there had been a great recession owing to decreased trade union activity and the government policy of wage ceilings. The Iron and Steel Workers Union potentially the largest had an income of £500 per month in 1943, but was now practically non existent. A similar decline had taken place in the Municipal Workers and Brick and Tile Workers Unions. In the Commercial Distributive Union the membership had been 10,000 and was now 1,500 and 2,000.* [145]

Hellman's study captured the relative decline of the union. She made the point that in 1944 the minimum labourers wage of 35s was considered to be the highest labourers' wage in Johannesburg, and the very fact of securing 'this comparatively high wage was regarded as a triumph for the union.' However, 'in 1951 the wage was only one shilling more than eight years ago - while in other

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[140] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ag1. Circular No. 53 of 1943 Report of the September Wage Board hearing 12 Nov. 1943 p. 7

[141] Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' Appendix One p. 407

[142] UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW Ah1601 Box Ca. 2 Witwatersrand Branch Executive meeting 5 December 1945 p.3

[143] *ibid.*

[144] Alexander, 'Industrial Conflict' Appendix Four.

[145] Hirson, *Yours for the Union* p. 192 Quote extracted from his address to the Joint Council of Action 1947

industries the wages have risen to, and in a number of instances above, the wage level in the Commercial and Distributive trade.'[146]

Hellman also reports that at Sellgoods the ACDWU members complained that 'Organisation became lax; membership has fallen off; there is little contact between trade union officials and the members of the union.'[147] This is best explained by the shifting conditions that made the possibility of securing further gains particularly difficult. While the ACDWU had led a number of strikes during the war years, the CPSA policy of supporting the war effort from 1941 onwards meant that numerous grievances that erupted in 1944 between the NUDW and the employers never broke out into strikes. The prospects for further gains by the ACDWU through joint action disappeared. The union returned to its strategy of reliance on its officials to secure what they could out of the Department of Labour, which amounted to precious little from 1944 onwards. The inability to develop store rank and file organisation ensured that it would maintain a style of unionism where the union office operated as a centripetal. The militancy of the union and its co-operation with the NUDW led to voluntary agreements that included stop orders, [148] but while such a facility helped to establish stable organisations, they also encouraged a high level of passivity. Consequently there remained no need for rank and file members to be active for the union to sustain itself.

Powerful links had been forged between 1940 and 1944 through battling the employers in wage determinations, policing the determinations, and more importantly amongst the rank and file membership through joint strike action on two occasions. This proved insufficient to check the sectarian manoeuvres on the part of the CPSA and the NUDW that threatened to weaken organised African workers in the retail sector as their actions in Pretoria and Council of Non European Trade Unions seem to demonstrate.[149]

In regard to the NUDW commitment to the organisation of black workers, the minutes of a 1950 NEC meeting prove revealing as do later statements in 1959.

In a 1950 NEC meeting when a question was raised about organising coloured workers, Kay le Grange, by then the acting national secretary, said that while it was noted that 36,000 thousand Africans compared to 59,000 non-African workers were now working in the trade, 'it was felt that where these (black) workers could be organised this should be done but at the moment, there were thousands of European workers in every centre still to be organised.' She then went on to explain the difficulty in organising Indians in Natal and the Transvaal where 'attempts to organise them in the past had not been successful.'[150]The qualification that is made in relation to organising black workers and the ending of her input on past failures illustrated how far the NUDW in practise had moved from its previous understanding of the 'identical interests of black and white workers' and that only the organisation of both groups could ensure a strong trade union movement.

In 1959 Bobby Robarts, the National President, in attempting to win the argument to provide some assistance to the Shop and Office Workers Union, an African organisation, stated:

> *...that the NUDW was not putting its principles into practice. While in principle we supported the establishment and growth of African trade unions, we ourselves had done nothing to assist or encourage their growth of even the workers in our trade to organise.*[151]

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[146]Hellman, *Sellgoods* p. 23

[147]Hellman, Sellgoods p. 24. Workers are quoted in 1951 in saying that 'we never see the union any more', It no use asking the union to do anything -they can't do anything anymore' , 'The union doesn't get you pay'

[148]Herd, *Counter Attack* p.102

[149] In Pretoria the NUDW chairman Morris Kagan was instrumental in encouraging the Pretoria Branch of the ACDWU to split off from the union and establish itself as independent union, when the union was in disarray following Max Gordon's internment. In the CNETU the leadership of the Progressive Trade Union group (PTU) (under the influence of WIL) that was composed of a number of healthy African trade unions, was expelled for purportedly bringing Gana Makabeni's name into disrepute. The charge was flatly denied by the amongst others by Koza, who together with others from the PTU exercised considerable intellectual influence over the CNETU.

[150]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.17-20 Minutes of NEC 15 October 1950. p.8

[151]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.33-35 Special Conference Aug. 1959 called to discuss affiliation to SACTU, Assistance to African unions and deregistration p. 4

The secretariat narrowly won the motion to assist the union. The request to assist them financially to the tune of £3.00 per month for six months was referred back to the branches and the NEC for a postal vote. This was illustrative of how far the union by this stage had been transformed from a militant fighting union, which however cautious, paternal and patronising they had been towards organising coloured, Indians and Africans, still had made some effort in that direction. By 1950 the union was being invited by large employers to deliver lectures on the union as a means of inducting new trainee personnel managers. In this context the largest and previously most militant branch of the Witwatersrand reported, 'We are no longer such dangerous people in the eyes of the majority of the employers.' We have become respectable.'[152]

The failure of non-racialism

Non-racialism failed in retail sector unionism for primarily two inter-related reasons, the generally conservative nature of the membership, which was conditioned by their place in the racially divided occupational hierarchy, the normally restrictive gender practices, and the political character of the leadership who did not attempt to seek mechanisms to address these inequities former. This approach rather than leaning on vacuous theories of labour aristocracy seeks to locate more tangible aspects of the development of the white working class to explain the propensity of race to divide workers

An important influence on white working class consciousness was undoubtedly notions of respectability, linked to codes of female sexual respectability intersected with racism. Strong identities clearly existed among shop workers which led a reluctance among the CPSA aligned union to unequivocally embrace non racialism. The composition of the NUDW membership and the character of the leadership resulted in little or no attempt to challenge underlying assumptions regarding this phenomenon, and were arguably caught up unconsciously in this same complex and deeply imbedded social matrix.

A more specifically defined notion of working class respectability may provide a useful tool to prise open cultural differentiation within the working class and the capacity to shed some light on the subjects at hand. A clear picture arises from a number of sources that show white women workers preferred shop work to employment in a factory. Both gender conditioning and the relative ease of entry into what is often generally described as white collar work attracted women and men with a reasonable level of education, many of whom considered themselves to be middle class to engage in store work. A majority of shop assistants therefore came from what could be termed respectable working class or lower middle class families. An environment which stressed the importance of sexual propriety, which was at risk in the close contact with largely white men that selling involved, and black men that store employment entailed.

The issue of defining working class respectability is a debate within itself. It has often been viewed as applicable only to sections of the working class vacuously termed the 'Labour Aristocracy'. Robert Weggs study of the inhabitants of Viennese working class districts, however shows that people there ranked themselves more in terms of those who were respectable and orderly rather than in terms of who were more skilled. Respectability is defined by Weggs to mean the ability to manage ones' affairs, no matter the income, and a level of cultivation that provides the knowledge base to avoid behaviour that leads to becoming dependent on outside aid.[153] To avoid such a situation it was crucial for a family to steer away from excessive indebtedness that could result in a family losing its economic self sufficiency which, for Weggs lay at the core of respectability.

Weggs persuasively argues that such subjective features of the working class are not attempts to ape the middle class as Engels and Max Adler have implied, but was rather a mechanism to provide

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[152]UWL Department of Historical Papers NUDW 1494 Box Ab1.17-20 Minutes of NEC 15 October 1950 Witwatersrand Branch report p. 3

[153] Weggs, R. Working Class Respectability : The Viennese Experience *Journal of Social History* 1982 Vol. 7 No. 2 1982 p. 622

the social distance between themselves and the indigent, or what Marx termed the lumpen proletariat. It seems plausible to assume similar attitudes existed here amongst the white working class in view of the high prevalence of the 'poor white problem' which was only seriously tackled towards the end of the 1930s. The striving for respectability was therefore not limited to the so called 'labour aristocracy' but rather applied to all but the unskilled poor at the bottom. Respectability then had racial and gendered overtones in the South African context. White workers' individual consciousness was bound up with notions of respectability that expressed fears about themselves slipping out of the orderly relatively prosperous industrial orders back into the poverty and darkness of pre-industrial societies.[154] Rawick connects racism with the various losses of humanity in the transition to capitalism. The separation of work from the rest of life, the bridling of sexuality, the loss of contact with nature, the tyrannies of the clock were all part of this process. While racism served to justify slavery it did more than that, as all the old lifestyle's that whites had to discard were in the process battened onto blacks. 'In order for the reformed white to ensure that he does not slip back into his 'dark ways' or act out repressed fantasies he must factor in huge differences between his reformed self and those he formerly resembled. Blackness and whiteness are thus created together.' [155] The crumbling reserves and marginal existence of South African blacks were a constant reminder to whites of what not being black meant. Whites in large part then arguably defined themselves by negation, while shopworkers considered themselves, respectable, civilised, English or Afrikaans, mature and middle class, because like white Americans they were not allegedly degraded and dissolute people of colour.

Race, union leadership, non racial unionism and democracy

Strategic options existed for the leadership of 'non-racial unions', but were not taken up. Why this was so demands exploration, a process which is aided by providing a limited comparative historical treatment with interracial trade unionism in the USA. There is a good deal of evidence that workers with special privileges, especially in the more skilled and higher paying jobs, tend to defend these privileges and exclude access to other workers. Where the privileges are in part or wholly racially based, racial exclusion plays an important role.

This calls into question the self perception of shop workers and their leaders. I have argued in a previous chapter that the tendency towards craft identity and forms of organisation had racial implications, and were partly rooted in the labour process. However, structural factors, as Michael Goldfield has contended in a controversial article play an important role in laying the basis for interracial unionism, but on their own are never sufficient in explaining the success of such projects. Such forms of unionism also demand strong commitments to racial equality due to the pervasiveness of racism. Structural factors in this type of analysis represent only the potential for racially egalitarian unions. Evidence from American unionism suggests that it is wrong to view the race and ethnic composition of a workforce, the skill level of jobs, the nature of job hierarchies, the character of the labour process in an industry in determining the level of racial egalitarianism of a union.[156] Instead he stresses the importance of leadership in the building of non-racial trade unionism: [157]

> *Thus by bureaucratic inclination, by lesser commitment to egalitarian principles, by their anti communist stances, by their consequent lack of support among Black workers; and by building their strongest base of support among the whiter, more conservative, more privileged elements in their unions and industries, nonleft unions and leaderships were almost preordained to*

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[154] Roediger, D. , *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* London Verso 1991 p.107

[155] Roediger, D Towards the Abolition of Whiteness p. 64. George Rawick *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*

[156] Price, R. 'The Labour Process and Labour History' *Social History* Vol. 8 No. 1 1983. Argues that the character of labour action depends upon the context and surrounding environment in which in which it occurs, and ore particularly upon the state of the balance of between resistance and subordination. Should that balance be disturbed, for example, negative 'old style' craft control is perfectly capable of altering its form to assume more positive implications.

[157] Goldfeild, M. , 'Race and the CIO: The possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s' *International Labour History of the Working Class 44 Fall 1993*

abandon the struggle for racial equality and to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In contrast, the left unions tended, ... to be more inclusive and egalitarian providing the seeds for interracial solidarity and civil rights struggles.[158]

The import of such arguments is that they trace the variables that were demanded for the development of broad non-racial working class support for egalitarian demands that may have had the potential to transform the politics of South Africa in that period, and indeed made the achievement of the demands of the democratic movement more likely. More specifically, the likelihood of building strong trade union organisation was negated by the structural constraints these workers faced as a result of societal segregation. Rather than challenging these divisions by building organisations that crossed such barriers, a policy of segregating black workers, non-Africans in particular, only compounded the difficulties that this section of the working class faced in attempting to organise themselves.

Conclusion

I have attempted to illustrate the limited scope of 'non-racialism' of the mixed unionism of the NUDW through an examination of its relationship to the B branches and in the later period to its troubled history with the 'African sections'. This chapter points to the conclusion that non-racialism was not something easily translated into practice. Rather it was something that had to be fought for tooth and nail, it did not come naturally even to the most class conscious elements within society. If the findings presented here are representative of what was going on in other non racial as opposed to mixed trade unions, a serious reconsideration of the role of trade unions in shaping non-racialism is called for.

Some answers have been suggested as to why active CPSA members, who despite opposition from the CPSA leadership to B branch policy sustained such practice. This necessarily entail's a recourse to a particular theoretical discourse that Neville Alexander has argued distorted the classical marxist understanding of the national question. Moreover, it has been argued in previous chapters that a combination of craft exclusivity, the strength of the political traditions of the SALP amongst retail workers, the CPSA's failure openly to challenge such traditions, combined with a general absence of theory honed to understand their work in the trade unions were all important factors in this instance. This, however, fails to account for the lengthy accommodation to white chauvinism. It would seem that the NUDW leadership while committed to a multi-racialism, was at the same time immersed in a highly racist society which they adapted themselves to as opposed to confronting this reality. In the process of leading an objectively reformist trade union institution, the institution transformed them rather than vice versa. In the process their socialist vision was postponed to a distant horizon, which in a mechanical manner would only draw closer as systemic class contradictions matured. Meanwhile, a succumbing to a reformist agenda in the South African context was destined to lead them to capitulate to a tremendously pervasive current of white chauvinism, which as this chapter has hopefully illustrated had disastrous consequences for the struggle for non -racialism in practice. The choices were stark in this period, but to engage in reformist struggles that encompassed the white working class and at the same time not to bend to white chauvinism required far more theoretical clarity then generally has been understood.

So despite the value of a marxist understanding of race the NUDW remained a product of South African conditions. This is not to deny that some noteworthy attempts to build solidarity on the basis of the inter-racial nature of the workforce. The union, however, continued to think and speak in terms of gender and racial hierarchies. In this sense some clear parallels exist here with Rodeiger's work on the American IWW affiliated Brotherhood of Timber Workers in the 1910s and race generally.[159] It is quite likely that more could have been achieved in a unitary organisation where the extensive experience of white trade union organisers could have been used systematically to build a black leadership. A truly integrated environment where blacks were recruited on the basis

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[158] *ibid.* p.27

[159] Rodeiger, D. , *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* 'Gaining a Hearing for Black-White Unity: Covington Hall and the Complexities of Race , Gender and Class' Verso London 1994 p.145

of equality may have held out the ability to alter the deep rooted psychological hold of racism. However, whether such unions held out this potential remains inconclusive in the South African context and therefore an important consideration for a further research agenda. Again the experience of the inter-racial unions in America's working class during the 1930s and 1940s would suggest that this was the case.[160] However, while some factors have favoured the growth of egalitarian unions in both South Africa and the US, industrial unions being better than craft unions etc. , it should not divert our attention from the broad pattern of non-racial unionism being insufficiently successful to undergird a workers struggle against racism or class rule.

[160] H. Gutman *Work Culture and Society on Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History* 1984. Gutman's highly acclaimed thesis on the 19th Century labour movement stated amongst other things that were success story of inter-racial unionism in this period which gave birth to a whole number of studies that sought to rediscover these stories in that later and the 20th Century. E.B. Halpern 'Black and White Unite and Fight: Race and Labour in Meatpacking 1904-1948' PhD thesis University of Pennsylvania 1989 is one such attempt. J. Barrett's The Jungle: Chicago's Meatpacking House