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ORGANISING FOR CONTROL: THE GARMENT WORKERS' UNION, THE INDIAN TAILORING SECTION AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN CLOTHING WORKERS' UNION, 1928 to 1936

by LESLIE WITZ

INTRODUCTION

The year 1922 is seen as a turning point in the history of the trade union movement in South Africa. In that year 25 000 white miners on the Rand came out on strike demanding job protection and increased wages. The strike was crushed by the Smuts government with 153 people killed and over 500 injured. But, in the words of Rob Davies,

> although the strike itself was defeated it was nonetheless one of the crucial watersheds in the evolution of social class relations in the South African formation.(1)

While the state protected the interests of mining capital by crushing the strike it also moved towards incorporating white wage earners as a supportive class and ending industrial conflict.

Amongst other things the Rand strike prompted the South African Party government to enact the Industrial Conciliation Act in the hope that it would "defuse workers' militancy and create further divisions in the South African workforce so as to weaken it".(2) In order to accomplish this the act laid down complex bargaining procedures, extensive requirements before a legal strike could take place and refused recognition to trade unions which had in their ranks pass - bearing blacks.(3)

In the following years the hopes of the state were largely realised as most white workers became enmeshed in bureaucratic, non - militant, racially exclusive trade unions. Yet white workers were not simply trapped by the act. Incorporation was a

process which took over ten years or more to accomplish and was determined by the specific conditions facing trade unions. Indeed some trade unions (especially the craft based ones) had been cooperating with the state and capital since World War One to protect the position of skilled white workers.

There is one trade union which it is maintained went against all these trends: the Garment Workers' Union (GWU) under the leadership of its general secretary Solly Sachs, between 1928 and 1952. The GWU, it has been asserted, revived industrial militancy, committed itself to worker control and managed to retain its commitment to non - racialism. All these assertions require some form of qualification but this paper will only focus on the last one as this has been promoted as the hope for South Africa. Here was a trade union which had almost exclusively Afrikaner women as members and showed signs, of what Lewis has called, of "genuine inter - racial solidarity".(4) If this could be extended to the whole of South Africa then, according to Basil Davidson, writing in the New Statesman in 1950, there could be hope for white and black in South Africa.(5)

This paper will take a closer examination of the GWU's racial policies in the late 1920s and early thirties in order to examine the validity of these assertions. Although the GWU's racial policy became a much more central issue to the union after 1936 when blacks started entering the clothing industry in the Transvaal in greater numbers, its roots were implanted well before then.(6) Indeed the trends which were established in the earlier period between 1928 and 1936 played a key role in shaping the relationships between the GWU and black workers in the

industry in later years. This paper will examine these trends and how they were established in the first ten years of Solly Sachs' tenureship as general secretary of the GWU. In order to do this it is first of all neccessary to understand the nature of the clothing industry, the Garment Workers' Union and the workforce in the industry in those early years

THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY AND THE GWU

The trade union which Solly Sachs became secretary of in 1928 was undergoing the first phase of a transition.(7) Originally established in 1913 under the name the Witwatersrand Tailors Association (WTA),the union initially only catered for those workers engaged in the tailoring section of the clothing industry on the Witwatersrand. The making of clothes had initially been a skilled craft performed by tailors who had immigrated to South Africa from Eastern Europe. Factory production had taken off during World War One when imports almost ground to a halt. In factories workers were placed in a set and each worker completed one process in the making up of the garment. The set rather than the individual would therefore complete the garment.

Most of these factory workers were Afrikaans speaking white women and the WTA excluded them from its ranks. At the end of the First World War the WTA had engaged in a series of struggles over cuts in wages. These struggles culminated in a strike in 1922 which ended in defeat for the union with a general reduction in wages being accepted. In 1923 the WTA decided, following its ignomonious defeat, to strengthen its organisation by accepting factory workers. The Association was internally divided into two sections: the factory section and the bespoke tailoring section.

From this stage onwards numerically it was women (who were mostly factory workers) who were to dominate the union. The number of male members declined from 415 in 1925 to 300 in 1928, while over the same period female membership rose from 787 to 1550.(8) Yet, despite their numerical predominance, women "had little or no say in the policy and the management of the union".(9) The union offialdom was merely interested in issues affecting bespoke tailors, such as immigrant tailors and bespoke tailoring in factories,(10) and tended to neglect gross violations of the agreements in factories.

Even so the union was undergoing a transition even before Solly Sachs took over in 1928. The WTA encouraged its members to participate actively in the affairs of the union. It rallied them to pay their subscriptions regularly, to report any complaints to shop - stewards, to encourage other workers to join the union, to attend meetings and not to work overtime.(11) Although women did start attending meetings and began participating in the affairs of the union, they were still treated on a paternalist basis.(12)

The coming of Solly Sachs speeded up this transition process immensly. Over the next four years the union emerged from its cocoon and began using the strike weapon to challenge the employers. Wage registers were continually checked and strikes became frequent occurrences in the clothing industry on the Witwatersrand. A new constitution was adopted by the GWU in July 1929.(13) A great deal of emphasis in the constitution was placed on the general meeting as the structure through which members were able to express their views and elect and revoke officials.(14) Although management of the union was vested in the hands of

the Central Executive Committee (CEC), this was subject to the direction and control of general meetings.(15) On the executive the bespoke tailoring and factory section had equal representation, giving the former grouping a measure of power far in excess of their numbers.(16) In 1930 the name of the union was formally altered from the WTA, with its craft emphasis, to the GWU, with its industry wide ramifications.

The next two years saw strikes in the industry reach their zenith culminating in two general strikes in 1931 and 1932 as the Transvaal Clothing Manufacturers Association (TCMA), the organisation representing employers in the clothing industry in the Transvaal, tried to reduce wages. Although the union managed to resist the wage cut successfully in 1931, the following year it succumbed under heavy pressure from the manufacturers and the government. The GWU was heavily defeated and its ranks were depleted. Solly Sachs was banned from being in the Transvaal for twelve months, a restriction which was lifted with the election of the fusion government in 1933.

Yet out of the depths of defeat the GWU regathered its resouces and began to rebuild. The remainder of the old guard was finally ejected and new leaders such as Anna Scheepers, Katie Viljoen, Johanna and Hester Cornelius replaced them. Eventually, in 1934, the bespoke tailoring section seceded from the GWU to form the Tailoring Workers Industrial Union. The employers also began to realise the value of having one strong single union with which to negotiate and in 1937 the closed shop clause, which had been in abeyance since 1932, was inserted into the agreement between the GWU and the TCMA. By the late 1930s the GWU was well on its course to becoming one of the strongest trade unions in South

Africa.

THE WORKFORCE IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

Up to 1928 there were very few blacks in the clothing industry in the Transvaal. Although it is very difficult to obtain accurate statistics of the racial composition of the workforce in the 1920s it is clear that most of the workers were white women machinists.If one uses the industrial census reports one can come to a rough estimate of the racial composition of the workforce in the clothing and textile industry on the Witwatersrand. From these figures it appears that the number of Indians rose from 90 in 1925 - 26 to 106 in 1926 - 27 and 109 in 1928 - 29.(17) Their proportion of the workforce thus hardly ever rose above 2%.(18) Whites on the other hand constituted a steady 66% of the workforce.(19) It was rather Africans who contributed the second largest slice to the labouring population in the industry. The industrial census figures record an increase in African workers from 964 in 1925 - 26 to 1 101 in 1926 - 27 and 1 533 in 1928 - 29, thus constituting a fairly stable 28 to 30% of the workforce for the period under review.(20) This "encroachment of native labour" at least in absolute terms was soon to become a source of concern for the WTA.(21)

As was noted earlier the white women would work together in teams to sew the garment together using sewing machines. There was a distict division between them and the African workforce in the factories. Africans in the clothing industry were involved in three major occupations: cleaning, laying out and pressing.(22) The first entailed sweeping the factory floor and the second the laying of the cloth on the table for the cutters. Pressing of

garments also involved little skill. In one factory in order to press the clothing, the manufacturer, "simply had these garments folded and allowed a native to sit on the pile, the resulting pressure being sufficient for all practical purposes".(23) The operation was not usually as crude as this and tended to be carried out using a large steam press which merely had to be opened and closed in a vertical motion. This contrasted markedly with skilled pressing which was predominant in bespoke tailoring establishments. Here each garment had to be carefully pressed with a hand iron to ensure a neat crease.(24) This latter type of pressing was becoming increasingly uncommon as as factory production burgeoned and tailoring diminished. As the TCMA was to comment to the Wage Board, "the clothing industry is such...that it does not warrant the employment of skilled pressers as they are not necessary in the trade in question". (25)

Unlike African workers Indians were mainly employed in tailoring workshops. Tailoring involved the making up of a suit of clothes to fit a clients personal rquirements. Although tailoring started out as being the preserve of a single tailor the tasks were also increasingly becoming sub - divided. Nonetheless it was still conducted on a small scale in filthy rooms which required little overheads. Very low wages and sweating, the speeding up of work to meet sudden demands for clothing, were a standard feature of these establishments.

Both the employment of Africans as pressers and Indians as workers in tailoring workshops presented the WTA with serious problems. In both cases it threatened the positions of a

constituency of its membership.

In the case of the pressers the WTA, with its craft union base, was deeply concerned that this process of deskilling would lead to unemployment of a large proportion of its male membership. In the face of factory production it attempted to create a job monopoly on certain categories of labour. One of the ways in which it sought to accomplish this was through the erection of colour bars. In 1924 it called for African pressers in the industry to be replaced by whites.(26) The manufacturers paid no attention to this plea for the obvious reason that they had no need to employ skilled white pressers at high wages when unskilled Africans could perform the job as adequately at a cheaper cost. With the government at the time trying to find employment for the thousands of poor whites the setting of high wages was not an attractive proposition. The only alternative left for the WTA was to try and organise Arican workers in the industry and thus ensure that the wages of whites were not undercut. As early as 1927, Glass, the general secretary of the WTA, asserted that the asssociation would

> very shortly be faced with the problem of either organising them (the natives) or submitting to a reduction of wages because of the competition of their low standards of life.(27)

Trade union organisation was therefore seen as one way in which African labour would not undercut white wages and jobs.

The low wages being paid to Indian workers presented possibly an even greater threat to the WTA. They could undercut white wages and even perhaps lead to them losing their jobs. It therefore became imperative for the WTA to organise Indian workers.

ORGANISING THE INDIAN WORKERS

Between 1929 and 1932 there were 72 tailoring workshops run by Indians in the centre of Johannesburg, Jeppe, Hillbrow, Braamfontein and Fordsburg and 21 on the Reef.(28) These tailors were organised into the Transvaal Indian Tailors' Association(TITA). They employed in total 165 Indian workers, 98% of whom were men.(29) The workers in these small workshops were unorganised and subject to forms of extreme exploitation. Many of the workers were members of the tailors family and obliged to carry out the labour free of charge or for very little.(30) Child labour was particularly prevalent in these workshops. A blacklist was also circulated and when a worker was sacked by an Indian employer no other Indian employer would hire him.(31) The terms of the bespoke tailoring agreeement, to which the TITA was a party, were hardly ever taken notice of, never mind adhered to.(32)

In October 1928 the WTA began taking steps towards organising Indian workers.(33) The WTA had decided that in order to preserve the position of its members it was necessary to organise Indian workers. "So long as a large number of workers, whatever their race or colour may be, remain unorganised the conditions of the organised workers are always in great danger."(34) Conversely if the Indian workers were organised "an improvement in their conditions is bound to come about and the conditions of the organised workers would also be secured more effectively". (35)

While there was general consensus among the WTA executive that Indians should be organised there were debates over how this organisation should be constituted. The chairman, H.Lee,

suggested that the Indians should form their own section which which would be a part of the union. Solly Sachs concurred with this view.(36) Both Sachs and Lee implied that their views on this matter were based upon the deep racial prejudice which they felt the white workers were imbued with. The Rev.Sigomony, an Indian minister of the Anglican church, a man who "had taken a very great interest in the labour movement", was a guest at the executive meeting which discussed this question.(37) His speech at the meeting ran contrary to what both Sachs and Lee had said. He favoured Indians forming independent unions. He was definitely against parallels.(38) Nonetheless, the WTA decided to go ahead and form a parallel union for Indian workers. In this way it ensured that it could offer these members organisational support and leadership while at the same time ensuring that the parallel would be firmly under the WTA's control.

As a result of this executive meeting the WTA decided to call a meeting of Indian workers.(39) At this meeting the workers appointed an executive and decided to organise into a trade union section.(40) They also requested that the WTA convene a meeting with the Indian tailors over infringements of the agreement and to organise a dance to raise funds. This the WTA Central Executive agreed to do. (41)

At this stage the Indian tailors began putting pressure on their workers to ignore these organisational efforts. They intimidated the workers with threats of losing their jobs if they attended union meetings and the TITA refused to meet the WTA to discuss the enforcement of terms of the agreement.(42) This pressure on the part of the Indian tailors seems to have paid off for there

is no mention of any attempt to organise the Indian workers again until July 1930.

The spur for the second attempt to organise Indian workers arose out of the initiative of the white Master tailors and the bespoke tailoring industrial council. The white tailors were vitally interested in the gross exploitation of Indian workers as this was enabling the Indian taiolrs to undercut prices. According to one tailor Indian competition was a great menace to the tailoring industry because "they work all hours of the day and night at low wages".(43) Another, in much more vehement tones, expressed the opinion that "The question of Indian competition is becoming a vey serious menace to the tailoring trade".(44) On behalf of these tailors the bespoke council launched a campaign to publicise the agreement among Indian tailors and to ensure that it was adhered to. The council proposed circulating the agreement to the Indian tailors through the Transvaal Indian Congress yet nothing seems to have come of this.(45) It was only when agents of the council visited these establishments and threatened prosecution that the Indian tailors began to adhere to the agreement.(46) In addition the TITA agreed to assist the GWU "in evey way possible" to organise the workers in the Indian owned workshops.(47) The GWU, encouraged by the progress made by the council, again began its attempts to organise Indian workers. The GWU executive met in August 1930 and started working out plans in connection with the affiliation of Indian workers to the GWU.(48) Finally, in June 1931 the GWU and the Indian tailoring workers entered into an affiliation agreement.(49)

A close examination of this agreement reveals that the GWU at the same time gave the Indian workers support yet still kept them

firmly within the GWU's ambit. The Indian Tailoring Workers Section was to pay the GWU an affiliation fee in return for administrative assistance. The executive of the Indian section controlled its own internal affairs, but it was "subject to the supervision of the Central Executive Committee of the Union".(50) In relations with management the Indian section did not have its own say either. The section had to consult the GWU before any final decision was reached with management.

The agreement between the GWU and the Indian section in effect performed a dual function. On the one hand it had created a parallel union to which the GWU would offer financial and administrative assistance thus facilitating the organisation of Indian workers by the parallel. Yet this support was in exchange for a great deal of control which the GWU was to exercise over its parallel. Seeking to monopolise jobs in an ever diminishing craft the agreement with the Indian tailoring workers gave them the means to accomplish this more effectively.

The related growth of worker organisation and the actions of the bespoke council did little to deter the Indian tailors from their practices of gross exploitation. Despite their assurances to the council they carried on very much as before claiming that they had to pay low wages in order to "cater for the native trade" which required cheaper garments.(51) The council refused to concede this point since Indian tailoring shops also catered for "a large number of European artisans, clerks, civil servants etc".(52) Lengthy negotiations on this issue were conducted and in 1933 an agreement was eventually reached whereby the Indian tailors agreed to observe all the terms of the agreement except

for the wage clause where they were exempted to pay 60% of the agreement rates.(53) Even then the contraventions continued unabated. The GWU's efforts to improve conditions of the workers were frustrated by workers who colluded with their employers and accepted lower wages than those prescribed in the agreement.(54) The Chairman of the bespoke council reported that "even under the new lower rates about &350 back pay was collected".(55)

The Indian section of the GWU therefore did not achieve very much in the direction of alleviating the conditions of the Indian workers. Most of the members had "failed to become loyal and honest trade unionists" and in the opinion of the GWU Central Executive, the Management Committee of the Section "was largely influenced by the bosses outlook on questions".(56) Furthemore the Section was proving difficult for the GWU to control. At a time when the GWU was suffering a critical shortage of money the section only offered to pay the GWU &1 a month affiliation fee, while the union demanded &2.2.0 per month for "three years loyal service.(57) This was at a time when the section was spending money on community organisation than the union in particular. The GWU was particularly angered by this expenditure. "All monies collected in the funds of the Union must be spent exclusively on matters affecting the Union and its members, and for no other purposes", the Central Executive Committee proclaimed.(58) The section's agreement with the union was terminated by the union *and* thereafter it seems to have collapsed as there is no further mention of it in the records. (59) Indian workers were later incorporated into the number two branch of the union established in 1935.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CLOTHING WORKERS' UNION

The organisation of African workers presented the WTA with a set of different problems from that when it tried to organise Indian workers. Foremost among these was the provision of the Industrial Conciliation Act which prohibited a registered union from having in its ranks pass - bearing blacks.

Registration was nonetheless not a major obstacle in the organisation of trade unions. In 1925 the Pact government had passed the Wage Act in order promote to employment among non - unionised white workers by setting high minimum wages through a Wage Board. As it was prohibited for the Board to discriminate on grounds of race and colour when making recommendations organised groups of African workers inundated the Board with applications from its inception in 1926.

The clothing industry, as it was one of the largest employers of white labour in South Africa, was included in the Minister of Labour's first reference to the Wage Board.(60) It seems that he hoped that the wages set by the Board would entice even more whites into the industry. The Board, after much opposition from manufactureres who argued that they would have to close down if they paid higher wages, published a determination.(61) This determination only covered the clothing industry in the Cape, Natal and Free State since, the Board stated, the industry in the Transvaal was covered by an industrial council agreement.(62) The problem here was that the African workers in the Transavaal were not covered by the agreement. Both African clothing workers and the WTA were unhappy with the non-inclusion of the Transvaal in the determination since no official wage regulating body had

been constituted to cover the African's sphere of employment. Therefore, with the assistance of the Communist Party and the WTA, African workers in the clothing industry were organised into a representative body which could make representations to the Wage Board, the South African Clothing Workers' Union (SACWU). (63)

The SACWU launched a concerted campaign to press the Wage Board into extending the scope of its determination.(64) It is noteworthy that this pressure was exerted "indepedently and in conjunction" with the WTA.(65) The WTA was thus not only assisting in the organisation of African workers but also attempting to ensure that Africans were paid a legally enforceable wage which, in turn, would prevent undercutting of white wages. In 1928 wages of Africans in the industry varied from 7/6 to 20/- per week.(66) The starting wage for both white male and female employees was £1.0.0 per week, with the wages of females reaching £2.10.0 and males £5.0.0.(67) The low wages paid to African males did not threaten the jobs of white females, but rather white males who were engaged in skilled pressing. Since the leaderhip of the WTA was dominated by white males it is not surprising that the WTA pressed for a Wage Board determination to prevent this undercutting.

The second major problem in relation to organising African workers lay in the attitudes of the majority of the members of the WTA. While the leadership remained in the hands of white males it was Afrikaner women who were numerically dominant in the union. Although they were divided in the workplace from the African workers many of them had arrived in the city deeply imbued with specific racial attitudes. These attitudes centred

on the "notions of white 'baaskap' and Afrikaner exclusivism ". (68) Johanna Cornelius, for instance, related that it took her years to get used to the idea that the English were human "while for a long time after that she continued to regard the Africans as being 'pretty well sub - human'".(69) In her evidence before the GWU Commission of Inquiry in 1949, Johanna Pretorious, a member of the CEC, stated that she was educated so that she knew her place and the black knew its place.(70) In more blunt terms, another member of the CEC has stated that they (the whites in the clothing industry) had it in their minds that "'n Kaffir was 'n Kaffir" and "under no circumstances were they going to have blacks".(71)

There was thus a real reluctance on the part of the women to assist organising African male workers and to help them in their struggles. Johanna Cornelius recalled that:

> When Mr.Sachs brought it forward at a general meeting we should ask the same wages for black men because by that time they already came in as pressers as a white man I was opposed to that, I couldn't understand how a person could even say that.(72)

Racial categories were certainly a decisive factor in shaping the struggles of garment workers. White workers would welcome the assistance of African workers in their struggles when it threatened their bargaining position. They were, however, very reluctant to assist the African workers in their struggles. It was the fact that they were black rather than fellow workers which determined the actions of white workers. This is borne out by the events of May/June 1928.

In May 1928 at the African Clothing factory in Germiston three white workers were dismissed because they were organising for the WTA. White workers at the factory went on strike demanding the

re-instatement of the three women.(73) Workers in three other factories joined in the strike. At the core of the strike lay the fundamental issue of organising on the factory floor. Mr.Kramer, the owner of African Clothing, stated that a principle was involved in the strike, "that of whether they were to have control of their own factory or take instructions from union officials".(74)

The strike took on a festive atmosphere "of bright colours, gay processions, of laughter and joking, of music and dancing".(75)

On the third day of the strike the SACWU decided to ballot its members on whether to come out in sympathy with the strikers.(76) The members of the SACWU were in favour of such an action if the whites desired it.(77) A deputation from the SACWU visited the strikers who were gathered at the Apollo Hall at the time.

> The dancing at the Apollo was stopped and the offer (from the SACWU) was announced. It was received with cheers - and the dance continued.(78)

In the face of this joint action Kramer relented and reinstated the three workers. The Communist Party hailed this as a great victory for labour solidarity.(79) What was regarded as important was that the Africans had "struck to help the whites and not for any demands of their own".(80) But as Francine de Clercq has pointed out, this was an isolated incident in specific circumstances and is no way indicative of "a concerted effort by the union leadership and rank and file to develop links among workers across race and skill boundaries to build up a united labour movement".(81) Events later in the month confirm de Clercq's analysis.

Since the African workers in the clothing industry had begun attempting to organise into a trade union they had to endure

increasing victimisation and "severe persecution" from employers.(82) The manufacturers refused to negotiate with the SACWU, maintaining that the Native Affairs Department was "the natural representative of native workers".(83) The TCMA also opposed the attempts by the SACWU to effect a Wage Board determination to cover the clothing industry in the Transvaal. (84) When the issue of the right to trade union organisation among Africans on the shop floor arose management took an instransigent stand. It refused to grant this right and dismissed union officials in the factories.(85) On 6 June 1928 the SACWU became involved in its biggest struggle to date with management over this issue.

The strike organised by the SACWU in June 1928 in many ways parallels that of the previous month under the auspices of the WTA. A presser, Alfred Sepobe, who was employed at Clothing and Shirt Manufacturers owned by S.Wunsh, was dismissed because of his trade union activities.(86) His fellow African workers in the clothing industry in Johannesburg, numbering between 200 and 250, came out on strike demanding his reinstatement.(87) According to union officials this was the first ever strike by Africans in South Africa on the point of trade union organisation.(88) The Rand Daily Mail also asserted that the refusal of the strikers to meet with officials of the Native Affairs Department was "unprecedented in the history of native industrial troubles".(89)

The strikers marched to the Communist Hall in Fox Street carrying the red banner of the Clothing Union. There they listened to speeches made by the leader of the union and the Communist Party and were issued with polony, bread and butter.(90) The SACWU

tried to persuade the white workers to join them in their struggle but without success, the WTA did not even issue a message of sympathy.(91) Management called in the police and the chairman and the secretary of the union, Makabeni and Thibedi, were arrested and charged with intimidation and 100 other strikers were charged with dessertion and for conducting an illegal procession through the streets of Johannesburg.(92) In the cells of Marshall Square prison management reached an agreement with the strikers. The strikers were told that they would be released on bail as long as they returned to work.(93) In the position which they were in the strikers had little alternative but to accept the terms which were offered. The strike fizzled out and was officially called off on 18 June. The strikers were sentenced, under the Masters and Servants Act, to ten days imprisonment or a £1.0.0 fine, and about a quarter of them opted for the latter alternative. The white workers had not been prepared to assist the black workers in their stuggles and all that their union,the WTA, could say was that because of "the many complications in connection with the dispute" it had decided to remain neutral.(94)

When Solly Sachs became general secretary of the GWU in November 1928 its position on organising black workers did not alter much. Although he was a firm believer in a non - racial South Africa he realised that the racist attitudes of white workers made the creation of a united front between black and white workers totally impracticable.(95) The only realistic strategy was first and foremost to inculcate the white workers with a non - racial working class consciousness. For this reason Sachs promoted the idea of separation of the workers to avoid racial friction and at the same time to educate white workers to become members of a

united working class. What tended to occur in practice, however, as a result of both the theoretical and tactical position held by Sachs, is that he concerntrated almost exclusively on the struggles of white workers and all but neglected the struggles of black workers. With white workers themselves reluctant to join with black workers the GWU was not set on the road of inter - racial solidarity. When the general strikes broke out in the clothing industry in 1931 and 1932 black workers were virtually ignored by the union.

In August 1931 an agreement had been reached between the SACWU and the GWU that in the event of an industrial dispute they would assist each other.(96) When the general strike broke out in 1931, however, the the GWU did not call on the SACWU and conducted the strike unilaterally. All the African workers were locked out and did not receive any strike pay.(97) As long as the African workers were locked out there was no need to bring them into the fray as had been the case in May 1928. The Communist Party accused the GWU leadership of becoming "more and more the agent of the bosses in splitting the ranks of the workers and in betraying their struggles".(98) As a result of these tactics the African Federation of Trade Unions (AFTU) set up by the Communist Party began to organise among clothing workers. It appealed to strikers to demand strike pay for African workers and "to fight against the attempts of the Trade Union bureaucracy to betray their struggle".(99) The AFTU failed to become a significant force, in particular failing to make any headway among white clothing workers who were tied to their ideas of racial exclusivism.(100) As the strike ended with an agreement to maintain the status quo African workers returned to work but did

not collect any strike pay for the time they were locked out. The CP asked Gana Makabeni to sever the SACWU's connection with the GWU because of the GWU's exclusivist tactics, but Makabeni, with his wage guaranteed by the GWU, refused to do this.(101) He was consequently expelled from the party.(102)

Towards the end of 1931 the GWU and the SACWU again started pressing for a Wage Board determination to cover African workers in the industry. This time it seemed that their efforts were going to be successful and this caused much bitterness among employers. Some of them attempted to stir up the workers against the leadership of the GWU, Sachs in particular. They banked upon the racialism of the workers to oust Sachs from the leadership and to institiute a regime which would not pursue the determination. They offered the author Herman Charles Bosman &25 to publish an article, in his newspaper the NEW LSD, which was scathing in its criticism of Sachs. Bosman then went to Sachs and offered not to publish the article if Sachs paid him &50, but Sachs turned the offer down.(103) In the next issue of the NEW LSD Sachs was accused of going

> to the Inchape Hall and sways in the arms of skokiaan-reeking Zulu and Basuto women...It is humiliating for a white woman to have to compete, for a white man's favour, with black kaffir women from the kraal. We understand that Sachs enjoyed these dances. We wonder what it is that attracts him to kaffir women. Do you like their frizzy hair, Sachs? Or their prognathous jaws? Or their African fragrance?(104)

It is noteworthy that this article pointedly asked the question: "We wonder how the thousands of factory girls, whose votes placed Sachs in office will feel about this?"(105) The answer came in court when when Sachs sued the editors of the NEW LSD for defamation. Mary Mcnoughton, a member of the GWU and a friend of Sachs stated:

> If what was written about Sachs were true, I would not want him to be the secretary of my

Union. And if they were true the GWU would have done a service by his being shown up.(106)

The case proved beyond doubt that the article was slanderous and only contained the slightest hint of truth. Sachs had never danced in his life before and certainly not "swayed in the arms of Skokiaan reeking Zulu or Msutu women".(107) Sachs won the case and afterwards Bosman asked for a cut of the costs and damages since Sachs would never have acquired the money if Bosman had not published the article.(108) Althogh the publication was hawked outside Germiston factories it never aroused the ire of the white workers enough to usurp Sachs. The fact that this tactic failed says a great deal about the confidence of the workers in the leadership acquiring benefits for the workers, particularly after the successful 1931 strike where they had managed to offset a reduction in wages. Once the article was proved to be largely false little notice was taken of it.

In April 1932 a Wage Board determination was finally published by the Minister for areas of the clothing industry not covered by the agreement. In terms of Wage Determination no.42 the minimum wages laid down or males were £0.17.6 for the first year of employment rising to £3.0.0 when the employee became qualified in the sixth year. In the case of females it took three years to qualify and the wage ranged from £0.15.0 to £2.0.0(109) The determination ensured that the wages of whites would not be undercut something the GWU had been pressing for in its call for a determination.

In 1932 there was another general strike in the clothing industry but this time it was unsuccessful, and a 10% wage reduction was accepted. After the strike the Minister of Justice, Pirow, issued Sachs with a banishment order accusing Sachs of promoting

hostility between Europeans and non-Europeans.(110) Sachs found this charge absolutely absurd since he had devoted all his life "to the promotion of harmony between the European and non-European members of the Union".(111) That Sachs was accused of formenting revolution in 1932 is laughable for Sachs made no attempt to organise blacks in the '32 strike.(112) When asked at the mass trial of members of the union accused of scabbing in the 1932 strtike why the union did this Sachs answered:

> Because the policy of the union was not a correct policy for the workers...I admit that we have not carried out the correct policy in regard to the native workers.(113)

The GWU Central Executive was more intent on preventing African workers entering the struggle as it might have caused divisions among the white workers. This was the reason that Malan, the GWU chairman, put forward for not bringing Africans into the struggle when he gave evidence at the same trial.

> Defender:Knowing that unity is absolutely neccessary to win a strike, why did you not put forward demands for the natives?
> Malan:Because the white workers said that they did not want to mix up with natives, although...they were working for the same boss.(114)

Thus was created the GWU's racial structure of maintaining separate branches in order to ensure that the union remained intact.

The SACWU was one of the few African trade unions to survive the depression. It was the 1932 Wage Determination which resuscitated what appeared to be a dying union. Gana Makabeni was no longer receiving wages from the GWU as the GWU's own funds were depleted following the 1931 and 1932 strikes. He went out to work in a factory and could only devote a limited amount of time to SACWU work.(115) With the publication of the Wage Determination no.42 the fighting spirit of the SACWU was restored and it began pushing for the determination to be strictly enforced. It also

pressed for inclusion under industrial council agreements. The latter question was to take up a great deal of the SACWU's time in the 1930s and 1940s. Financially, once the GWU was on a sound footing, it started paying Makabeni's salary again, thus ensuring a full-time organiser. The GWU also provided the SACWU with equipment such as typewriters and cars.(116)

The circumstances under which the the relationship between the GWU and the SACWU operated in the 1930s altered in various ways. One of the most important changes was the interest in the clothing industry displayed by the government. This interest must be viewed in the context of the influx of poor whites into the cities. Between 1924 and 1933 the number of poor whites increased from approximately 200 000 to 300 000.(117) Their existence posed a political threat to the dominant classes through their potential militancy and the support they could lend to the African dominated classes.(118) The state, "acting to defend the position of the dominant classes...became engaged in seeking to transform the material conditions of existence of the 'poor whites' by relocating them in various places in the division of labour".(119) Initially relief works, such as digging and road building, funded by private capital and the state were set up to provide temporary employment. Juvenile Affairs Boards were established from 1914 onwards to provide poor whites with industrial training and find jobs for them which would involve the utilisation of their skills.(120) The resposibility for these schemes devolved entirely upon the state as capital withdrew its support once the schemes began taking on a permanent basis.(121) The Pact government extended the relief schemes in addition to creating employment opportunities for whites in government

service and on the railways.(122) After the depression the state again attempted to shift part of the accountability and financial burden of finding employment for poor whites onto industry. The fusion government began calling on industrialists "to accept their 'fair share' of the 'responsibility' for solving 'the poor white problem'".(123)

The clothing industry in particular was viewed as an alternative avenue of employment for poor whites, in particular for young males. Pressing would be an alternative to "pick and shovel work at 6/- per day of which the Government may have to pay 50% to get even this work for them".(124) It would be much more preferable for the Department of Labour "to see the natives employed on pick and shovel work and Europeans employed in the clothing industry. (125) The government began putting pressure on the clothing manufacturers to employ whites instead of Africans as pressers. Following "direct representation made by the Department to employers" some 200 white pressers were employed in the industry. (126) Nonetheless when the East Rand Juvenille Affairs Board paid a visit to clothing factories in Germiston it found that these factories were still employing African pressers.(127) The employers maintained that the existing legislation prevented them from replacing Africans with whites in this sphere.(128)

> The Native pressers were operating on a much lower scale than the white pressers, and they had to do the same work. He felt that if the Government would give the factories the definite assurance that white pressers need not be paid more than about £5 per month, and that the existing ratio of two unqualified white pressers to every qualified one would not be enforced for at least a reasonable time, the factories would be able to absorb another 120 white boys.(129)

On this basis the government attempted to exclude pressers from the industrial council agreement negotiated between the TCMA and the GWU and bring the wages of whites to a more competitive level

with the wages of Africans.(130) The effect of this would have been a reduction in the wages of white pressers, something the GWU would not tolerate.(131) Unable to secure the acquiescence of the GWU to its plan the Department became more agressive and refused to publish the agreement unless it was extended to Africans.(132) The wages of whites would then not be reduced but those of Africans increased. This time it was the manufacturers on the industrial council who did not accede to this request because they did not want to pay the higher wages and feared closer cooperation between the SACWU and the GWU as a result.(133) The council did, however, assure the Divisional Inspector of Labour, that the publication of the agreement as it stood would not lead to a massive dismissal of white pressers.(134) The Minister therefore decided to publish the agreement but told the inspector to monitor carefully the position of pressers and note any attempt to replace whites by Africans.(135)

In April 1935 the Department once again urged that that the industrial council agreement be extended to Africans. The council again refused to do this but it did agree to exempt pressers from the agreement. Experienced ppressers were to be paid &3 per week (the wage under the Wage Determination) "in order to obviate the replacement of Europeans by Natives".(136) On this basis the Divisional Inspector of Labour reported that there was "little likelihood of any reduction in the percentage of unskilled civilised labour resulting from the publication of the Agreement". (137) The Minister therefore decided to publish the agreement.(138)

The Council's refusal to extend the agreement to Africans thus seems to have come from the TCMA rather than the GWU. The GWU had a major interest in extending the agreement (to protect the position of its male members in particular). For the TCMA, on the other hand, the inclusion of Africans could set a precedent and place the Africans in a much stronger bargaining position. In the 1940s the TCMA expressed this very fear when the SACWU made representations to be included in the agreement.

> a very dangerous principle was involved. It meant that the African Workers' Union could be involved with the Garment Workers' Union and by this the latter would add some three thousand workers to those on whose behalf it would submit demands.(139)

So, as well as Africans strengthening their bargaining position, the GWU would also.

The attitudes of white workers towards cooperation with Africans was also undergoing changes in the thirties. This was a result of the vibrant shop-stewards organisation which was created in the GWU and as a consequence of this white workers coming into closer contact with the leadership.(140) Johanna Cornelius changed her previous racialist stance because she had "been taught correctly". (141) It seems that the higher up in the leadership hierarchy one went the more one became subject to influence from the leaders, Sachs in particular. Basil Davidson commented, in 1952, that under Sachs' leadership some of them "have lost their prejudices altogether and have grown into comletely sane and forward-looking human beings".(142) The shop-stewards in particular had taken this progressive attitude to the colour question.(143) This made for a more amicable relationship with the SACWU.

The changes in the labour process during the 1930s, and in

particular the introduction of the conveyor belt system, meant that workers were coming into less and less contact with each other on the factory floor.(144) Africans were completely separate from whites in the work environment and there is little evidence of racial friction. Pressing was becoming increasingly mechanised. In place of hand irons the Hoffman press was being used. According to one factory owner "the output of an employee operating a Hoffman press was five times that could be turned out by the same employee pressing by hand".(145) Despite the drop in numbers of African males in the industry in 1934 (mainly doing pressing) from 1936 onwards the trend was reversed. Pressing came into its own as an operation with separate rooms and even whole factories being set aside for it. This allowed for greater organisation among African workers. By 1938 the SACWU had 429 members (approximately half the total African workforce in the industry).(146) It had also established a stop order system in four factories by mid 1939. (147) Indeed, African clothing workers were one of the highest paid groups of African workers in Johannesburg in 1939.(148) These gains were made with the aid of the GWU and Sachs in particular who gave both financial and organisational assistance.(149)

CONCLUSION

This examination of the GWU's racial policies in its early years reveals that it did not commit itself to a racially inclusive approach. While certainly it did not organise only among white workers to protect its constituency, it also never totally ignored racial lines and organised on a broad basis. It instead opted for an intermediate course of organising black workers in parallel trade unions. This type of separation was necessary, according to the union leadership, in order to maintain the

essential unity of the GWU. It became an even stronger reason when the Afrikaner Nationalists tried to destroy the GWU in the late 1930s using racism as one of their weapons.

While it may be argued that in the general context of the white South African workforce this attitude of partial separation of the GWU's was unique, it was a far cry from genuine inter - racial solidarity. This enabled the GWU, on the one hand, to assist in the organisation of black workers, but on the other to ensure that the bargaining power of its own members was not undermined. Through the control of these black trade unions, a trend which intensified in the late 1930s as more and more black workers entered the industry, the bargaining position of the white workers in the clothing industry in the Transvaal was firmly insured.

FOOTNOTES

(1) R.Davies, 'The 1922 Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa'. In B.Bozzoli ed., Labour, Townships and Protest, Johannesburg (1979), p.319.

(2) F.de Clercq, 'The Organised Labour Movement and State Registration: Unity or Fragmentation', South African Labour Bulletin (SALB), vol 5, nos 6 and 7, March 1980, p.19.

(3) Industrial Conciliation Act, 1924. Government Gazette (hereafter GG) no.1380, 31 March 1924

(4) J.Lewis, 'Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers' Union'. In E.Webster ed., Essays in Southern African Labour History, Johannesburg (1978), pp.189 - 190.

(5) New Statesman and Nation, 4 August 1951.

(6) This later period is examined in L.Witz, 'Support or Control? The Children of the Garment Workers' Union', seminar paper presented at the African Studies Institute Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, March 1985.

(7) This potted version of the GWU's early history is based upon L.Witz, 'Servant of the Workers: Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers' Union, 1928 to 1952', MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984.

(8) Statistical information supplied by the WTA to Census and Statistics Office, 30 September 1925; 30 September 1928. Records of the GWU, University of the Witwatersrand Library (hereafter GWU), Aab 1.45.

(9) E.S.Sachs, Garment Workers in Action, Johannesburg (1957), p.169.

(10) Memorandum submitted by the WTA to the Minister of Labour, no date. GWU Aab 1.100.

(11) 'Some Truths For Our Members',1926. GWU Aab 2.4.

(12) Sachs, Garment Workers, pp.169 - 170.

(13) GWU Constitution, 2 July 1929. GWU Bcc 1.33

(14) Ibid

(15) Ibid

(16) Ibid

(17) Industrial Census Reports 1925 - 1926, UG 32' 1928; 1926 - 1927, UG 51' 1928; 1928 - 1929, UG 44' 1930. The reason why these figures can only provide rough indications is that they do not merely cover the making of clothing apparel but textile fabrics as well.

(18) Ibid

(19) Ibid

(20) Ibid

(21) Glass, Secretary WTA, to Secretary of International Clothing Workers' Federation, (ICWF) Amsterdam, 25 May 1927. GWU Aab 1.80.

(22) TCMA Memorandum Concerning the Clothing Industry on the Witwatersrand, no date. GWU Aab 1.180.

(23) Ibid

(24) Ibid

(25) Ibid

(26) J.Lewis, 'The New Unionism: Industrialisation and Industrial Unions in South Africa 1925 - 1930', SALB, vol 3, no 5, March/April 1977, p.44.

(27) Glass to general secretary ICWF, 25 May 1927. GWU Aab 1.80.

(28) Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary Transvaal Indian Tailors Association, 14 March 1930. GWU Bba 1.75; Memorandum submitted by the GWU to the Industrial Legislation Commission, 30 September 1932. GWU Ead 3.1.

(29) Memorandum, Ibid; Industrial Census Reports, 1929 - 1930, 1932 - 33.

(30) Minutes CEC WTA, 21 February 1929. GWU Aaa 1; Memorandum, Ibid.

(31) Minutes, Ibid.

(32) Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary TITA, 14 March 1930. GWU Bbc 1.75; Sachs to Divisional Inspector of Labour, 14 May 1929. GWU Aab 1.106.

(33) D.Colraine to W.H.Andrews, 12 October 1928. GWU Dac 1.2.

(34) Minutes CEC WTA, 21 February 1929. GWU Aaa 1.

(35) Ibid

(36) Ibid

(37) Ibid

(38) Ibid

(39) Ibid; WTA pamphlet 20 March 1929. GWU Aab 1.106.

(40) The Star, 25 March 1929.

(41) Minutes CEC WTA, 7 April 1929. GWU Aaa 1.

(42) Minutes CEC WTA, 30 April 1929. GWU Aaa 1.

(43) Industrialists' Reports to the Industrial Census, UG 51 '1928.

(44) Ibid; See also Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary TITA, 14 March 1930. GWU Bbc 1.75.

(45) Minutes CEC WTA, 21 February 1929. Aaa 1.

(46) Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary TITA, 14 March 1930. GWU Bbc 1.75; Industrial Council Bespoke Tailoring Chairman's Report 1 April 1932 to 31 December 1933. GWU Cca 1.2.

(47) Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary TITA, 14 March 1930. GWU Bbc 1.75.

(48) Acting General Secretary WTA to van der Horst, Acting Divisional Inspectoor of Labour, 23 August 1930. GWU Bbc 1.3.

(49) Agreement between the GWU and Indian Tailoring Workers, June 1931. GWU Bbc 1.75.

(50) Ibid

(51) T.Naran, Secretary TITA, to Secretary Industrial Council, 12 February 1930. GWU Cba 1.8.

(52) Secretary Bespoke Council to Secretary TITA, 14 March 1930. GWU Bbc 1.75.

(53) Chairman Bespoke Council Report, 31 December 1933. GWU Cca 1.2.

(54) General Secretary GWU to Secretary Indian Section, 1 March 1934. GWU 8bc 1.75.

(55) Chairman Bespoke Council Report, 31 December 1933. GWU Cca 1.2.

(56) Sachs to Secretary Indian Tailoring Section, 1 March 1934. GWU Bbc 1.75.

(57) Ibid

(58) Ibid. It is not known on what community organisation the money was spent. Hence, it is difficult to assess the GWU's dissaproval.

(59) Although, of course, this does not necessarily indicate its demise as the records regarding the Indian tailors are sketchy.

(60) Wage Board Report for the three years ended 28 February 1929, p.1.

(61) Ibid, p.51.

(62) Ibid, p.50.

(63) Rand Daily Mail, 8 June 1928.

(64) Memorandum submitted by the SACWU to the Wage Board on 28 May 1931, GWU Eab 2.2.

(65) ibid

(66) Memorandum submitted by the SACWU to the Industrial Legislation Commission of Inquiry, January 1949. GWU Bcg 1.

(67) Industrial Council Agreement, Clothing Industry, Transvaal, 17 August 1928. GN 1408.

(68) C.J.Walker, "Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics: The Federation of South African Women, its Roots, Growth and Decline',MA, UCT,1979, p.97.

(69) B.Davidson, "The Hope for White and Black', New Statesman and Nation, 4 August 1951.

(70) Proceedings GWU Commission of Inquiry, 1949, p.2145.

(71) Interview with R.du Preez et al, Industrial Council Offices, 17 November 1982.

(72) Interview with Johanna Cornelius, supplied by Stanley Greenberg.

(73) Rand Daily Mail (hereafter RDM), 21 May 1928.

(74) RDM, 22 May 1928.

(75) Ibid

(76) E.Roux, Time Longer Than Rope, Madison (1972), pp.209 -210.

(77) Ibid

(78) Ibid; RDM, 22 May 1928.

(79) Roux, Time, pp.209 - 210.

(80) Ibid

(81) de Clercq, 'The Organised Labour Movement', p.23.

(82) Memorandum submitted by the SACWU to the Wage Board, 28 May 1931. GWU Eab 2.2.

(83) RDM, 13 June 1928.

(84) TCMA memorandum, no date. GWU Eab 2.2.

(85) T.W.Thibedi, Secretary SACWU, to Secretary South African Trade Union Congress, 14 May 1928. GWU Dac 1.2.

(86) RDM, 7 June 1928; 8 June 1928.

(87) RDM, 7 June 1928; Roux, Time, pp.209 - 210.

(88) RDM, 11 June 1928.

(89) RDM, 8 June 1928.

(90) RDM, 7 June 1928; 8 June 1928.

(91) RDM, 7 June 1928.

(92) RDM, 9 June 1928; 13 June 1928; 14 June 1928.

(93) RDM, 4 June 1928.

(94) D.Colraine, Secretary WTA, to C.B.Tyler, Acting Secretary Trade Union Congress, 28 June 1928. GWU Dac 1.2.

(95) Lewis, 'Solly Sachs', p.180.

(96) Umsebenzi, 10 July 1931.

(97) The Star, 30 October 1931; Umsebenzi, 13 November 1931.

(98) Umsebenzi, 13 November 1931.

(99) Ibid

(100) M.Stein, 'African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand, 1928 - 1970', BA Hons, University of the Witwatersrand, 1977, p.27.

(101) H.J. and R.E.Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, Harmondsworth (1969), p.448.

(102) Ibid

(103) Interview with Ray Edwards, Sachs' first wife, 8 April 1983; B.Sachs, Herman Charles Bosman, Johannesburg (1971), pp.16, 41.

(104) Rex v Blignaut and Malan, 1932. GWU Bcc 1.2.

(105) Ibid

(106) Ibid

(107) Ibid

(108) Interview with Ray Edwards.

(109) Wage Determination no. 42, GG no. 2031, 22 April 1932.

(110) Sachs to Julius, 12 April 1933. GWU Bce 2.1.

(111) Ibid

(112) Sachs, Garment Workers, p.69; Secretary for Justice to D.H.Epstein (Sachs' Lawyer), 10 November 1932. Central Archives Depot, Pretoria (hereafter CAD), Justice files 595.

(113) Minutes of Proceedings of Mass Trial, 6 April 1933. GWU Bch 7.3.

(114) Ibid

(115) Stein, 'African Unions', p.22.

(116) G.Makabeni to General Secretary GWU, 14 July 1948, Re: Debts SACWU to GWU. GWU Cba 1.4.2.3.

(117) Report Carnegie Commission of Inquiry, vol 1.

(118) R.Davies, Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa 1900 to 1960, Brighton (1979), p.100.

(119) Ibid, p.101.

(120) Ibid

(121) Ibid, P.105

(122) Ibid, p.225.

(123) Ibid, p.258.

(124) R.H.Miller, Divisional Inspector of Labour, to Sachs, 6 January 1934. CAD, Secretary for Labour files (hereafter Arb) 1023

(125) Ibid

(126) Divisional Inspector of Labour to Secretary for Labour, 9 January 1934. CAD Arb 1023.

(127) Witwatersrand East Juvenille Affairs Board, Executive Committee Meeting, 14 March 1933. CAD Arb 394.

(128) Ibid

(129) Ibid

(130) Divisional Inspector of Labour to Secretary for Labour, January 1934. CAD Arb 1023.

(131) Memorandum by Chief Clerk "C" Division on Industrial Council Agreement. CAD Arb 1025.

(132) Ibid

(133) Secretary For Labour to Divisional Inspector, 13 February 1934. CAD Arb 1023.

(134) Ibid

(135) Ibid

(136) Divisional Inspector to Secretary for Labour, 1 April 1935. CAD Arb 1023.

(137) Divisional Inspector to Secretary for Labour, 5 April 1935. CAD Arb 1023.

(138) Notice of Publication, 9 April 1935. CAD Arb 1023.

(139) Minutes General Meeting TCMA, 19 February 1934. Tcma Minute books at TCMA offices.

(140) See Chapter Two of L.Witz, 'Servant of the Workers'.

(141) Interview with Johanna Cornelius, supplied by Stanley Greenberg.

(142) Davidson, 'The Hope'.

(143) Ibid

(144) See Chapter Two of L.Witz, 'Servant of the Workers'

(145) Wage Board Report no. 364, 20 August 1935. CAD Secretary of Trade And Industry files no.854.

(146) Stein, 'African Unions', p.34.

(147) Ibid, p.78.

(148) Ibid

(149) Ibid