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I see you” in the soil: the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) in the Western Transvaal, 1926-1934

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Abstract

This dissertation focusses on the history of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in the Western Transvaal and northern part of the Cape Province (what is today the North West Province) between 1926 and 1934. By employing archival research and an extensive set of archived interviews, the research unearths the trajectory of the ICU and its character as a political organisation in this region, which has been overlooked in the scholarship. Histories of land dispossession and capitalist expansion framed the ICU's emergence in South Africa and indeed its unfolding in the Western Transvaal as the capitalisation of agriculture pushed black sharecroppers and labour tenants into wage labour and onto employment on the diamond diggings. In Lichtenburg, where the economy centred on alluvial diamond mining, the ICU played a crucial role in a strike in June 1928 which saw 35 000 black workers down tools and helped spread its message spread across the Western Transvaal. The ICU's success in this region was uneven and dependent on the local political economy of towns and farming districts, as well as the presence of dedicated leaders in the face of hostile town administrations and malevolent white farmers. In the South-Western Transvaal, in Wolmaransstad, Makwassie, Ottosdal, Schweizer-Reneke and Bloemhof, the ICU rallied farmworkers against proletarianisation and took up the struggles of location residents in towns against passes and poor living conditions. In other parts of the Western Transvaal, like Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Mafeking, Taung and Vryburg, whose economies were linked to the Rand or Reserves, the ICU failed to make significant inroads and was affected to a greater extent by its general organisational decline. Throughout the region, the ICU held meetings where they articulated languages of freedom and subversion, calling for economic freedom and subverting the discourses related to the political and economic context of the region. Through the theory of Henri Lefebvre, this dissertation argues that the ICU's meetings and activity disrupted spatial segregation and played a critical role in reshaping the political economy. While charismatic leaders like Jingoes, 'Mote, Makhatini, Maleke, Modiakgotla and Kadalie kept the union going in the South-Western Transvaal up until 1934, the ICU's presence ultimately buckled under the pressure of repression, violence and the ICU's own organisational problems that included ideological contradictions and corruption. This dissertation concludes that the ICU's experience in the Western Transvaal, which included fighting for political and economic freedoms, defies the overall trajectory, according to which the organisation was a spent force by the 1920s, and sheds new insight onto its character which is best characterised through the label union-cum-protest movement.