A somewhat strange figure

Allison Drew, *Between Empire and the Revolution. A Life of Sidney Bunting, 1873-1936*
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Sidney Bunting – a founder member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and a leading South African communist of the 1920s – was an extraordinary person who lived an extraordinary life. It was, indeed, so full of surprise and drama, that it might have merited a novel, not just an academic biography.

To begin with, Sidney Bunting seemed to be ill-suited for a career of a communist leader. Bunting was born in 1873 to a family of successful and well-off Wesleyan liberals. His father, Percy Bunting, was a lawyer, journalist and politician, and an admirer of Gladstone with whom he became close. From his early childhood, Sidney was exposed to the debates and pursuits of London's leading liberal intellectuals for whom his parents' home was a centre. Sidney studied History, Classics and Latin at St Paul's school, where he became an exemplary student. He also played music – a passion that remained with him until the end of his life. He went on to read Classics at Magdalen, Oxford, where he again was a star student. His

15 C Murray, "Displaced Urbanization: South Africa's Rural Slums", *African Affairs*, 86, 344, 1987; C Murray, "Structural Unemployment, Small Towns and Agrarian Change in South Africa", *African Affairs*, 94, 374, 1995

world was that of Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes and Cicero, as well as of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Haydn, Mozart, Brahms and Beethoven. He won multiple prestigious university prizes and awards, but narrowly failed to be elected to a fellowship at the college. He ended up working as a solicitor for a firm in the City, became a founder–member of the Oxford University Musical Union and joined the Fabian Society.

However successful and intellectually and aesthetically charged, Sidney's life seemed uneventful and predictable until 1900, when he volunteered to fight for the Empire against the Boers. Both of his parents were proponents of empire, and so was Sidney, who thought that Britain would use its power for the benefit of any country which it occupied. However, emotions were most probably also involved: he did not rush to the front until it became clear that he could not marry his cousin, Cornelia Bonté Amos, one of the few female medical students in the country. Bonté graduated in May 1900 and was sent to Egypt, Sidney sailed for South Africa in June. It was to be 16 years later that he eventually married.

With the war behind him, he returned to the life of a perfect English gentleman, though this time in Johannesburg: legal work, the Rand Club, the Johannesburg Musical Society. He however was mixing in Labour Party circles and by 1910 was caught up in politics. The very first strike that he observed as a politician on the left – the 1913 white miners' strike – shook his world profoundly, both because of the outspoken racism of the strikers and the cruelty with which the strike was suppressed.

In 1915, together with a handful of colleagues who had split away from South Africa's Labour Party, Bunting founded the International Socialist League, whose programme, slogans and policy were close to those of the Russian Bolsheviks, and which greeted the Bolshevik revolution with utmost delight. In July 1921, together with a number of comrades, Bunting founded the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and became its first treasurer. The same year, the party joined the Communist International (Comintern) – an international communist organisation centred in Moscow – formally becoming its branch and pledging to accept and implement all its political decisions, resolutions and directives. Bunting was one of the most energetic protagonists of this move.

One has to pause here to take in the scale and the improbability of this move. In 1921 Sidney was 48. By then he was a married man with two children and a prospect of a decent career either in politics or in business. By becoming a communist, he forfeited any chance of such a career. Moreover, until then his views were pretty much those of a liberal, allowing for a diversity of freely expressed opinions, a multiplicity of approaches and freedom of political action: this was the tradition that he imbibed with his mother's milk and seemed to follow, and at 48 his political vision must have been fully formed. Yet at that age and against the whole weight of his background, he undertook to subject himself to the strict discipline of the Comintern – and he fulfilled this pledge, toeing the line without deviation for the rest of his life. True, he attempted to reason with the Comintern, but once the line was defined, he was not the one to cross it.

More often than not, relocation to colonies had the effect of moving politicians' (and ordinary citizens') views to the right, not the other way round, so Bunting was pretty unusual. One of the achievements of Drew's book, is her way of showing how unusual he really was. Biographies of communist leaders typically describe their communist activities – but little else. Drew has recreated the lives and careers of some of Bunting's relatives and friends, which allowed her to show how he could have lived – but chose not to. Of particular importance here is the life of Sidney's cousin, Jack Lidgett, two years his senior. Sidney and Jack found themselves looking for opportunities in Johannesburg at about the same time, and undertook to manage the old and non-productive family business – a farm in Natal. Jack was to become the manager *in situ*, Sidney was to provide legal advice and to visit the farm regularly for discussions and consultations. And so it was. Jack busied himself with the practicalities of growing wattle – labour, production, harvesting, marketing, construction, and so on. Sidney did the paperwork. Through all ups and downs – and Drew presents a detailed information on the development of the farm, year in, year out – Jack's part of the business grew, and Sidney's shrank. Their politics diverged further and further, until they found themselves at the opposite ends of the political spectrum, and so did their fortunes: Jack ended up as a prosperous farmer, and Sidney as a pauper who could not support his family. Jack's was a typical life of a young white man in the colonies. Sidney's was definitely not.

What was it in his character or in his earlier life that could explain this? Or could it be the influence of his wife, Rebecca – a Jewish émigré from Lithuania, a prominent communist and a founder member of the CPSA in her own right? Or was it the magnitude of the Russian revolution that drew Bunting into its orbit, as happened to so many other socialists and liberals? Or could it be that he simply had not fully understood what he was taking upon himself? Unfortunately, Drew gives no explanation for this most important development in Sidney's entire life.

Bunting occupied several leading positions in the ISL and the CPSA, and for many years edited the CPSA's newspaper, working tirelessly and selflessly often at the expense of his own health and his family's well-being. In order to give all his time to the party, he gave up his income, leaving his legal practice and later resigning as a manager of the farm.

Uniquely amongst his comrades, Bunting saw the importance, for the future of his then predominantly white party, of attracting Africans into its ranks. Long before the Comintern, in 1927, mandated the slogan of an "independent native republic" as the CPSA's programme for South Africa, Bunting made African membership and the relations between black and white party members a big issue within the CPSA. The problem of solidarity – or the lack of it – between white and black labour remained his anguish and his main preoccupation until the end of his political career. One cannot say that he created a growing African following for the party single-handed, but he was the first to start this process and he contributed all his passion and talent to it.

In 1922 Sidney and Rebecca represented the CPSA at the fourth Comintern congress in Moscow, but in the late 1920s, Sidney fell out of favour with the organisation. The wisdom of a "native republic" as opposed to a "proletarian republic", escaped him, and he attempted to defend his view, but then bowed to the Comintern's authority and preached the "native republic". However, the very fact that he had

attempted to argue against the Comintern's instructions, left him damaged, tainted in the eyes of some of his colleagues, and they were not to forget such mistakes.

Bunting's greatest achievement was his 1929 election campaign in Thembuland – an area which was then part of the Cape Province, later became part of the Transkei, and is now part of the Eastern Cape province. For most of his compatriots and contemporaries, it was still "darkest Africa", but some of the Cape's black inhabitants still had a vote from pre-Union days and could elect their (white) representative to the Cape parliament. Sidney, now 56, Rebecca, and Gana Makabeni, one of the first black communists, set off to preach communism – the "native republic", to be more precise – to rural people, mostly illiterate and certainly without a knowledge of English. They travelled in a caravan from early March till late July 1929, in an area where it gets really cold in those winter months, speaking to large and small gatherings (Sidney spoke, Gana translated), suffering from harassment by the authorities and local whites, and fighting the banning orders laid on them by the government. Sidney lost the election, but his campaign made a huge impact: thereafter the CPSA was known as "Bunting's party" in this area and among broader circles of the African population.

Taking into consideration all the unfavourable circumstances it was also remarkable that he did not lose badly – he got 12,5 per cent of the vote and kept his deposit. The pressure on him had been so strong that such a defeat could be seen by his colleagues as a victory, but if so, it was a Pyrrhic victory. In the wake of this campaign, Sidney organised the League of African Rights in order to fight against a new set of discriminatory laws then being enacted. The League was not a communist organisation, for Sidney's idea was to unite Africans of every shade of opinion and faith in legal opposition to the new legislation. This was a successful tactic. The idea did not get universal support, but Communists worked with the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Union – a huge African trade union organisation – and succeeded in convening the conference of the League in December 1929 which called for united action against the new laws. The Comintern did not approve: Moscow wanted the African masses to fight not by petitions but by radical revolutionary action under its own banners – and thought that they were ready for it. It was also at that time that the Comintern was beginning to "bolshevise" its member parties, bringing to power a new, Stalinist generation of leaders who were prepared to toe the line even more slavishly than before. This was accompanied by the campaign against "Trotskyism" – which, in the Soviet Union, led to the physical extermination of the communist "old guard", and in communist parties throughout the world to a witch-hunt for Trotskyites and to the expulsion and often death of scapegoats.

Bunting became such a scapegoat in the South African party. Late in 1930, Douglas Wolton, Bunting's – and the Party's – nemesis, arrived from Moscow. Wolton, a British and South African communist, had, like Bunting, campaigned in the 1929 election, and lost by a far greater margin in a much more conventional coloured area. He had left for England, but now returned, bringing with him the torch of bolshevisation. Bunting was accused of white chauvinism and of promoting a right-wing agenda. This unleashed an anti-Bunting frenzy among the party leadership and, although a large group of African supporters tried to fight for him, in 1931 he was expelled from the party and then from all the party front organisations, such as the Friends of the Soviet Union. The accusations against him were nonsensical (using reformist and social democratic measures and factional activities against the Party

line) and the campaign against him truly ugly. The behaviour of his former comrades towards their fallen leader bordered on insanity: more than once he found a woman comrade and former friend showing her posterior to him with her skirt pulled up – once in the presence of his son.

The CPSA left the League of African Rights which immediately collapsed. The squabbles in the Party, with accusations and counter-accusations and factions expelling one another, continued into the late 1930s. Wolton and his wife Molly, who led the bolshevisation campaign, returned to England in 1933, leaving the Party to its own devices. By the late 1930s, the Party was on the verge of complete collapse.

The expulsion shattered Sidney. The Party was his life, and he firmly believed that he – or any other communist – neither should, nor could act without it. His last years were terrible. His comrades turned away from him, and those who did not, suffered the same fate as he did. The Party expelled even his black followers, which must have been particularly painful for him. His reputation as a "native lover" and a political freak made his relations with his relatives in London and South Africa increasingly difficult. He was also left without any means of existence. It was too late to restart his legal career from scratch: in 1931 he was 58. He ended up playing the viola in an orchestra to support his family. Even this proved too hard – the job involved a lot of travelling, so the family had to survive on Rebecca's sewing.

Bunting lived to see the change in the Comintern's line: at its seventh congress in 1935, the Comintern made a U-turn to promote exactly the same policy that Bunting was trying to introduce in 1929-1930. Some other expelled members were invited back to the Party, but Bunting was never rehabilitated: neither then, nor later. A partial redemption came only after his death in 1936: his supporters, mostly black, organised a massive "red" funeral for him, at which the left of all persuasions gathered to pay their last respects.

Allison Drew has written an amazingly detailed chronicle of Bunting's life. We learn where his father's family spent its every holiday, what marks Sidney got at school, what disputes he participated at and with what result. We discover the background of his school teachers and university lecturers, and what the rooms he occupied in Magdalen looked like. We learn every turn of Sidney's prolonged involvement in the family business in Natal. Then there are his writings, his speeches and his letters to his wife and sons, as well as detailed accounts of Party meetings. Drew's list of notes takes 40 pages and contains every possible relevant archival collection and book. It is an engaging account of a life of an outstanding personality.

Yet, the book is not without fault. There are printing errors and the sources of some references are not clear. There are gaps too, even besides the key question of why Sidney became a communist. Despite the detail, Bunting as a person remains outside the scope of this book. The same is even truer of Rebecca. She was a powerful personality and a formidable politician who was not just a support for Sidney, but a major influence in his life. Drew provides a lot of detail about her – even of her illnesses – yet Rebecca's persona remains even more mysterious than Sydney's. Drew does not offer explanations or guesses to the reader: she offers facts, but not interpretations. This is a pity.

Bunting may seem a somewhat strange figure among South African communists, but there is no doubting his great talents or his utmost dedication to the cause of the downtrodden. There is also no doubting his vision and role in shaping South Africa's future the way it is now.

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