

***“I-Kongilesi Lilizwi ezindi ezindlwini  
(Congress’ Name is Household)”:***  
**Politics and Class in the Cape Province during the 1920s**

*Peter Limb\**

If one compares the historiography of Africa with those of say, Europe, America and India, there is a remarkable contrast: the latter have great depth of national, regional and local political histories, whereas Africa does not. There are relatively few national, regional or local histories of the major political parties or movements of Africa. Compare the wealth of studies on, say, Republican or Democratic parties in the United States of America, Labour or Conservative parties in Britain, or Congress in India with those on the ANC, ZANU-PF, or KANU. There are, of course, seminal works on African parties and one can make exceptions for themes of Nigerian or South African politics, for example, but generally, the published literature does not accord with the complexity of African political history. In part, this difference flows from the richer and more extensive publishing worlds outside of Africa, but the trend also influences the conveyor belt of dissertations and publications on Africa in the West. It reflects the response to the nationalist hagiography of the immediate post-colonial period and the subsequent abandonment by many historians of political history in favour of the new social history.

If African historians are to build a densely layered corpus of knowledge about the political domain, they must examine the whole ambit of relevant sources. Political histories should not neglect the local, just as socio-cultural history, grounded in particular communities, should meld into national history. By “local”, I signify a far broader constellation of social forces than Bala Achi or Toyin Falola, who appear to reserve the term “local histories” exclusively for amateur, often “ethnic,” history.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Peter Limb is Assistant Professor (Adj.) in History and Africana Bibliographer at Michigan State University. His current research interests include early ANC history and the history of the global anti-apartheid movement. This article was first presented as a paper to the African History Research Group, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in December 2005.

1. B. Achi, “Local History in Post-Independent Africa” & T. Falola, “Mission and Colonial Documents” in J.E. Philips (ed), *Writing African History* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2005), pp 374-380 & 266-283 respectively.

In South Africa, the period 1912 to 1940 was the time of formation of the African National Congress (ANC) and black labour bodies. Over the next four decades, the ANC would become the primary force for national liberation. The black labour movement would become a significant component of an anti-apartheid alliance that stood the test of time and in 1994 contributed to the ANC's election victory. My specific focus here is the complex relationship between politics and labour in general, and the ANC and black labour in particular, played out in one province, in one decade – the 1920s: a time of great political and labour turbulence.

### **The Historiographical Context**

There are virtually no comprehensive provincial ANC histories. This lacuna seems odd, given the strong reliance of the liberation movement on “people's history”, but can be ascribed to three causes. Firstly, the reluctance of many historians to embrace ANC history in a period marked by the trauma of reconciliation, with its call for collective amnesia, the temporary relegation from curricula of historical studies, and growing Government sensitivity to criticism. Secondly, the triumph in the academy of social and cultural history little interested in a political history that at first glance may appear tainted by African nationalist hagiography of earlier decades. Thirdly there is persistence of stereotypes among historians of African political movements; notably the view of a purely “middle-class,” elite ANC.

Elsewhere, I have re-interpreted the history of the early ANC to emphasise the interaction among different social classes and between social and political forces within the organisation. I show how the careful analysis of complex identities – class, gender, national, colonial, imperial, ethnic – helps us frame the history of movements such as African nationalism in their widest sense, from the perspective of the colonial subject or subaltern.<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on a related, but different theme: relations among different social strata as they played out in the provincial political sphere. It is an argument for the need to put

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2. P. Limb, “‘Representing the Labouring Classes’: African Workers in the African Nationalist Press, 1900-60”, in L. Switzer & M. Adhikari (eds), *South Africa's Resistance Press* (Ohio University, Athens – OH, 2000), pp 79-127; P. Limb, “Early ANC Leaders and the British World: Ambiguities and Identities”, *Historia*, 47, 1, May 2002, pp 56-82; P. Limb, “Attitudes to Class, Nation and Gender in the Early ANC.” Unpublished paper presented at the North American Labor History Conference, Detroit, October 2002; P. Limb, “Sol Plaatje Reconsidered”, *African Studies*, 62, 2003, pp 33-52.

revisionist political history (though one informed by advances of social history and cultural theory) and class back on the agenda of South African studies. It is a challenge to historians who recently have been somewhat hesitant to engage with the history of a new ruling political movement, to take political and regional history more seriously – and rigorously.

One exception to the paucity of provincial political studies, is La Hausse's splendid biography of two local activists that explicates little-known aspects of ANC (and Inkatha) regional history. La Hausse integrates into his narrative African and Zulu nationalism and themes of land, class, elites and tradition. He jousts with historians whose overarching characterisations of a black "petit bourgeoisie" induce neglect of wider political cultures.<sup>3</sup> Yet, ironically, despite his magnificent portraits of two hitherto obscure figures, we still await full-blown biographies of more seminal figures such as John Dube and Selby Msimang, and we lack detailed scholarly histories of the ANC in the provinces.

Conceptions of "nationalism" and the ANC in the 1920s remain ill-defined. In this decade, "African nationalism" was not defined, though there are scattered references to the term by ANC leaders, and though an inclination towards nationalist goals can be inferred from ANC policies and statements. A form of liberalism modified by African demands remained an important influence. Because this was a decade of embryonic nationalism, both in terms of nation-wide and regional political movements, and a period of intense experimentation and interaction of ideologies, represented by cross-fertilisation of traditional, liberal, Garveyite and socialist ideas in provincial congresses, it is best to characterise the ANC's bag of ideologies as syncretic or nascent African nationalism. Its relations with other organisations were more elastic than in the previous decade, and this propensity to experiment and cooperate established an important precedent later consummated in more formal alliances.

Between 1912 and the 1950s, the number of black workers in South Africa and the number of ANC members both underwent enormous growth. Historians often have chosen to emphasise their differences, but many ANC members had strong sympathies for the rights

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3. P. la Hausse de Lalouvière, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c. 1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-c. 1936)* (University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2000).

and struggles of workers and shared a common national oppression; sometimes they could even be one and the same person. Workers viewed the ANC in complex ways and developed a variety of responses to its existence. Some ignored it. Others viewed it as an important presence on the political scene. Many workers who rose to positions of leadership in labour unions and other civic bodies, maintained close relations with the ANC. The intensity of these relationships fluctuated greatly, from place to place and over time.

Commentators tend to see a watershed in ANC history in the early 1950s, when the ANC led discontent among township dwellers into large-scale boycotts and became a mass organisation. ANC and labour history have separately been treated extensively in South African historiography and their relationship before 1940 rarely has been subjected to detailed analysis. Early ANC contacts with workers are treated as a curiosity.<sup>4</sup> There are good reasons for such views. Many leaders reeked of conformity, protesting their “loyalty” to Empire – though not to the settler state.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the increasingly pro-business policies of the ANC in Government since 1994 seem to confirm the picture of general ANC alienation from workers. A different story unfolds in the following pages.

The early history of the political involvement of workers similarly remains incompletely documented. This is due not only to scanty sources, but also prevailing ideas among labour historians. Early labour movement writers tended to depict history as a simple chronology of strikes. Later, Roux, as well as H.J. and R.E. Simons explored connections among labour, socialist and nationalist movements.<sup>6</sup> Within such works, however, individual working lives rarely surface in any detail. This is unsurprising, given that most African working people laboured in un-unionised mine, farm, domestic and informal sectors largely invisible to historians. However, the new labour and social

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4. P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress 1912-52* (Hursy, London, 1970), p 243; T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Longman, London, 1983); F. Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the ANC* (James Currey, London, 1989), pp 37-44.

5. Limb, “Early ANC Leaders and the British World”.

6. E. Gitsham and J. Trembath, *A First Account of Labour Organisation in South Africa* (Commercial printers, Durban, 1926); E. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope* (Gollancz, London, 1948); H.J. & R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (IDAF, London, 1983).

histories from the 1970s did much to widen perspectives and highlight black working lives.<sup>7</sup>

ANC history often has been interpreted in terms of ideologies such as liberalism, populism and nationalism.<sup>8</sup> Congress certainly employed liberal ideas in profusion, yet activists also made use of traditional, nationalist, socialist and democratic ideas and imagery. Some branches experimented with a range of ideologies, and sought to articulate the desires and invoke traditions of disparate African social strata. Leaders were not all cast from the same monolithic “petit bourgeois” liberal mould invoked by historians, but came from a range of social backgrounds, not just from professional or intellectual origins. The intelligentsia, as Anderson argues, did play a pivotal role in developing nationalism, particularly in colonies with a stunted indigenous bourgeoisie such as South Africa, but its role in “inventing” nationalism should not, as Smith warns, be exaggerated to exclude “pre-modern ethnic ties.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas the dominant tendency of national ANC politics can be characterised as liberal, it also drew on thoughts and actions “from below.” The precise nature of the ANC and its relations with different social strata must be sought in the complex interplay of socio-economic and political forces.

The ANC and black worker movements can be seen as competing struggles; equally, they can be viewed as complementary. The rigid and repressive nature of settler capitalism influenced the history of both. Black unions, especially in the mines, were barely legal for much of the twentieth century. Even black professionals, many prominent as African nationalists, found their social mobility and capital accumulation restricted by segregation and apartheid laws compelling them to inhabit more or less the same general neighbourhoods as workers. Contact

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7. See, for example: I. Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry* (James Currey, London 1992); J. Wells, *We Now Demand!* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1993); B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1991).
  8. Walshe, *African Nationalism*. P. Rich, *Hope and Despair: English-Speaking Intellectuals and South African Politics 1896-1976* (British Academic Press, London, 1993), pp 92-93, argues that from the late 1940s the ANC developed a new kind of nationalism, more populist in thrust and less based upon liberalism.
  9. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London, 1983), pp 13-15, 137; A.D. Smith, “The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?”, in M. Ringrose & A. Lerner (eds), *Reimagining the Nation* (Open University, London, 1993), pp 9-28, 23. The question of “organic” intellectuals (*pace* Gramsci) in the ANC remains a neglected field.

between the ANC and workers was facilitated by the geo-spatial proximity of black social strata and a shared national oppression and history. Relations developed between these two formations in the crucible of everyday struggles. Recent regional studies suggest that such ties were more substantial at the regional level.<sup>10</sup>

There is no comprehensive history of the ANC in the Cape, but there are good studies of important events involving urban and rural-based Eastern Cape ANC leaders. Beinart and Bundy, in a wide-ranging survey of popular movements, uncovered the history of temporary, if fraught, alliances between urban-based ANC leaders and various rural millenarian, women's, and Garveyist bodies. These alliances failed to survive due to local parochialism and the inability of outsiders to understand rural-based idioms or "class solidarities of rural radicalism".<sup>11</sup> Aspects of Cape African political history have also been revealed by Ntsebeza, whose recent study of Xhalanga discusses the complexities of local politics and the role of chiefs, yet fails to notice the presence of the Transkeian ANC in the 1920s. In part, the continuing lack of awareness of historical continuities is based on the lack of integrated regional political histories, the rectification of which this study hopes to correct in part.<sup>12</sup>

### **Congress in the Cape: Background to its Socio-Political Networks**

An important reason behind ANC declarations of support for black workers was a developing interest by its precursors in wider social issues affecting Africans. South African Native Congress (SANC) leaders testifying before the 1903 Native Affairs Commission tried to articulate labour interests. In 1906, the SANC sent a protest telegram to the Prime Minister arguing that unjust "labour clauses" should be "totally repealed". Despite its moderation, in 1906 the SANC criticised the hostility of the "capitalistic press" towards black rights. It defended

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10. P. Delius, "Sebatakgomo and the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association", *Journal of African History*, 34, 1993, pp 293-313; J. Cherry, "The Making of an African Working Class, Port Elizabeth 1925-63." MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1992.
  11. W. Beinart & C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), p 39. On women in the early ANC, see: F. Ginwala "Women and the ANC 1912-1943", *Agenda*, 8, 1990, pp 77-93.
  12. L. Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of the Land in South Africa* (Brill, Leiden, 2005).

consumption of “kaffir beer” by black workers who “feel the need of something to quench their thirst after violent exertions.”<sup>13</sup>

Most SANC leaders received more formal education than labourers, but bonds with workers/artisans soon developed. A meeting of fifteen SANC delegates in King William’s Town in 1902 included a printer, store-worker, apprentice carpenter, editor, clerk and two teachers. Today, most such occupations are represented in trades and labour councils. Yet historians of this early period have chosen to exclude black workers with any skills from their conception of “worker”. This is due to a focus on the *fin de siècle* (temporary) social mobility of artisans, accompanied by capital accumulation and the limited number of semi-skilled African workers at the time, but it posits an artificial dichotomy in African society; by the 1920s, African accumulation had effectively been blocked.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of effective African trade unions, workers turned to educated Africans to help seek redress. Alfred Mangena, a lawyer and SANNC (see below) founder, taught dockworkers in Cape Town and lobbied on their behalf during a strike. In August 1901, he protested against the overcrowded housing of Ndaneni residents, chiefly workers, urging them to form “their own Council.” He was “appointed by the natives at the Dock location to act as their senior secretary”. One reason for this concern was his background – he had worked as a labourer in Cape Town where, Mweliso Skota writes, he fought for “improvement of the conditions, wages and treatment of his fellow labourers. He started a workers’ organization and held meetings every week ... Whenever there was trouble between the employers and employees, Mangena and his committee went there to fight for the rights of the workers.”<sup>15</sup>

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13. *Native Affairs Commission 1903-1905*, 2, pp 386-387, 503-504; “Rules of the Native Congress”, *Izwi LaBantu*, 16 June 1903; Cape Archives Depot (hereafter CAD—now National Archives), Cape Town: Native Affairs (NA) 544/579, SANC telegram, 3 July 1903. In response, the State conceded that Congress constituted “as fairly representative a body of advanced” blacks as possible: CAD: NA 544/579: L.S. Jameson minute 1/363, 31 May 1906; Civil Commissioner King Williams Town – Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), 24 July 1902; SNA “Memorandum on SANC”, 28 April 1906; SNA “Memorandum: SANC”, 25 July 1902; *Izwi LaBantu* 14 April 1906.
  14. CAD: NA 544/579, SNA, “Memorandum: SANC”, 25 July 1902, “Names of Natives Who Met ... under the Designation of ‘The Native Congress’”. See: H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974).
  15. *African Spectator*, 10 August 1901; Z.K. Matthews, “Advocate Alfred Mangena”, *Imvo*, June 1961; Headmen to Table Bay Harbour Board,

After the 1912 formation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNK, from 1923 known as the ANC), its Cape constituents – the Cape Native Congress and Bechuanaland-Griqualand West Congress – remained active at the provincial level. Branches included Ndabeni, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Queenstown. Most members appear to have been drawn from middle strata, but people with working-class experience joined, including migrant worker Thomas Zini and S.B. Macheng, who had worked as a labourer. Some wage earners with radical ideas, such as James Ngojo, a court interpreter with experience in the socialist Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), also joined.<sup>16</sup>

The Cape Peninsula African population was more proletarian than petit bourgeois. As ANC leaders began to mobilise in Cape Town, they were drawn into labour issues. The Cape Congress, led by Reverend Z.R. Mahabane, took up the cause of the 1918 “bucket” strikers in Johannesburg, calling for protest meetings in solidarity.<sup>17</sup> Mahabane had joined Congress in July 1917 and became its president in 1919. He claimed to be “voicing the feelings of a large number” of Africans when he protested against the ill-treatment of strikers. Careful to profess his

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10 October 1901, cited in S. Dubow, “African Labour at the Cape Town Docks 1900-1904”, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 4, 1984, pp 108-134, 123; V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride & Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), pp 183, 207; M. Skota, *The African Who's Who* (Author, Johannesburg, 1966), p 9. Later, Mangena's defence of Bhambata revolt prisoners was pilloried in the white press: CAD: GH175, 1097. In 1914 he assisted anti-dipping protests in Transkei where migrant labourers had imbibed lessons from Rand strikes. See: C. Bundy, “‘We Don't Want Your Rain, We Won't Dip': Popular Opposition, Collaboration & Social Control in the Anti-Dipping Movement, 1908-1916”, *Hidden Struggles* (Ravan Press, 1987), p 202. Evidence of direct links here to Congress is thin, but it is conceivable general notions of Congress as the people's representative were emerging among some migrant workers.

16. T.D. Mveli Skota (ed), *The African Yearly Register* (Esson, Johannesburg, 1931), pp 137, 175; *Imvo*, 17 June 1913; B. Kinkead-Weekes, “Africans in Cape Town: The Origins and Development of State Policy and Popular Resistance to 1936.” M Soc Sc dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1985, p 205.
17. R. Kingwill, “The African National Congress in the Western Cape: A Preliminary Study.” BA Honours, University of Cape Town, 1977, Chapter 2; W. Hofmeyr, “Agricultural Crisis and Rural Organisation in the Cape, 1929-1933.” MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1985, p 74; *Cape Times*, 14 June 1918, p 21.



Empire loyalty,<sup>18</sup> he stressed that “feeling is growing among all the native workers ... that they are being underpaid”. Part of this empathy for workers relates to Mahabane’s work experiences. He had worked as a poorly paid teacher and court interpreter before turning to religion in 1908.<sup>19</sup> Another reason was his emphasis on the cohesion of Congress. When State and employers pilloried black workers, an organisation giving priority to African unity was compelled by African public opinion not to stand aloof.

The Cape Congress organised a delegation to the mayor to urge a minimum wage. These events took place against a backdrop of growing propaganda work by socialists. After 1918, IWA leaders Cetyiwe, Kraai and Ngojo gravitated to Cape Town. Black unions were formed there, namely the Industrial Workers Union in 1918; an IWA branch in July 1919; and the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) in November 1919. They began to spread socialist ideas among Africans on the docks and among “considerable numbers of Coloured and Native people ... in District Six”.<sup>20</sup> During a dock strike organised by the ICU in Cape Town in 1919, a joint ANC-IWA-ICU meeting in Ndabeni heard Mahabane back their demands. In December 1919, Congress supported the first major ICU-led strike.<sup>21</sup>

In the Eastern Cape, Congress leaders supported, if inconsistently, better labour conditions. Walter Rubusana stood for Cape Provincial

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18. C. Saunders, “African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire before and after the South African War”, in D. Lowry (ed), *The South African War Reappraised* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000), pp 140-149. Saunders argues that Africans’ Empire loyalty can be interpreted as “a kind of anti-colonialism”. Limb, “Early ANC Leaders.”
  19. Carter-Karis Collection (hereafter CKC): film 2:XM10:91/2, questionnaire reply by Z.R. Mahabane to G. Carter 1959; Z.R. Mahabane, “Premier and Rand Natives”, *Cape Times*, 13 July 1918; Z.R. Mahabane, “The Industrial Situation on the Rand and Natives”, *Imvo*, 30 July 1918; T. Matshikiza, “Long Life, Great Times”, *Drum*, May 1957.
  20. P. Wickins, “General Labour Unions in Cape Town 1918-1920”, *South African Journal of Economics*, 40, 1972, pp 275-301; *Imvo*, 31 December 1918; National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter NAD): Secretary for Justice (hereafter JUS) 3/527/17, South African Police (hereafter SAP) Report, 10 July 1919; E. Mantzaris, “The Promise of the Impossible Revolution: The Cape Town ISL 1918-1921”, *Studies in History of Cape Town*, 4, 1984, pp 145-173, 148.
  21. P. Bonner, “The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-1920: The Radicalisation of the Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand”, in S. Marks & R. Rathbone (eds), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa* (Longman, London, 1982), pp 270-313; *Natal Advertiser*, 10 March 1919; *The International*, 19 December 1919; *A.P.O.*, 30 December 1919.

Council in 1912 with a programme of less tax for the poor and a solution to the labour question. As SANNC Vice-President, he actively opposed the harsh effects of the 1913 Natives' Land Act on rural toilers. He was aware of labour's plight, but feared a class struggle. In August 1918, when 2 000 East London dock, rail and store-workers threatened to strike over high prices, he tried to dissuade them. In 1919, he negotiated a successful, but very meagre, pay rise.<sup>22</sup>

There was closer contact between the ANC and the first black unions in Port Elizabeth. Samuel Masabalala served in the Port Elizabeth Congress Executive from 1919, as well as in the SANNC Executive Committee. He had ample working-class experience, having worked as a driver, mine-worker, fitter, electrician, teacher and also as a pharmacist's clerk and insurance agent. He formed the Industrial and Commercial Coloured and Native Workingmen's Union in 1919.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere in the Eastern Cape, ANC contact with workers was less pronounced; a fact related to lower levels of proletarianisation and obstacles to ANC growth. The ANC Women's League in Queenstown told Ngojo in 1919 that the government had bribed chiefs not to attend ANC meetings. A measure of the commitment of some ANC activists to labour was however evident in 1920 when Ngojo, representing Congress, travelled north to the Tlaping diamond diggings, gaining popularity among labourers for demanding higher wages and the abolition of passes.<sup>24</sup>

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22. A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1984), p 248; School of Oriental and African Studies, London (hereafter SOAS): Ms. 380263 1969, S. Lusipo, "U-Boni Dr Walter Benson Rubusana", citing Rhodes letter, 12 May 1900; SOAS: Ms. 380264, "Letters of W.B. Rubusana 1910-22", Rubusana – J. Harris, 17 January 1917; South African Native Races Committee, *The Natives of South Africa* (London, 1901), p 297; "Dr. Walter B. Rubusana", *Imvo*, 26 August 1961; NAD: JUS, SAP Report on meeting of 23 August 1918, "Native Unrest at East London"; NAD: JUS 3/527/17, translation of "Money Complaints", *Abantu-Batho*, 29 August 1918 & 5 September 1918; P. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (OUP, Cape Town, 1978), p 51.
23. G. Baines, "The Port Elizabeth Disturbances of October 1920." MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 1988, pp 45, 78, 103-134; Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa*, pp 51-55; J. Mancoe, *The Bloemfontein Bantu & Coloured People's Directory* (White, Bloemfontein, 1934), p 73; Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp 74, 240; G. Baines, "From Populism to Unionism: The Emergence & Nature of Port Elizabeth's ICWU, 1918-1920", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 1991, pp 679-716; Skota, *African Yearly Register*, p 187.
24. NAD: JUS 3/527/17, S. Mgedeza – CID Johannesburg on ANC meetings,

Congress leaders prominent as editors of Cape regional newspapers expressed race-class solidarity.<sup>25</sup> The editor of *Izwi LaBantu* (“Voice of the People”, published in East London from 1897 to 1909), Allan Soga, was active in the SANC and saw its role as one of confronting “all questions affecting the social problems and welfare” of blacks.<sup>26</sup> This was vividly seen in *Izwi LaBantu*’s labour reporting, which condemned the whipping of mine-workers and the “chapter of horrors” of their exploitation.<sup>27</sup> Yet, though it spoke *about* workers, it backed “the more intelligent and educated men and property holders” to lead black opinion.<sup>28</sup> One reason for this interest, was the Eastern Cape’s position as a migrant labour depot; others were Soga’s experiences as labour official and agent, giving him glimpses into workers’ lives and influence of socialist ideas. By 1920, Soga had abandoned both “socialist” and ANC leanings.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, *Izwi LaBantu* helped to form a bedrock of sympathy for black workers within Congress circles.

Solomon Plaatje, inaugural SANNC Secretary, similarly drew attention to labour in papers he edited. *Koranta ea Becoana*

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- June 1919; T. Clynick, “Chiefs, Diggers and African Labour: The Tlaping Diamond Rush 1920-1921”, *African Studies*, 54, 1995, pp 73-93, 91.
25. Limb, “Representing the Labouring Classes.” On solidarity, see: A. Wildt, “Solidarity: Its History and Contemporary Definition” & K. Metz “Solidarity and History”, in K. Bayertz (ed), *Solidarity* (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1999), pp 209-220 & 191-207 respectively. Also see: P. Limb, “Apartheid, Solidarity, and Globalisation.” Unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on a Decade of Freedom, Durban, October 2004.
26. CAD: NA 544/579: A.K. Soga – Civil Commissioner East London, 25 April 1906; SNA, “Memorandum: S. African Native Congress”, 25 July 1902; SNA 1/237, 4 July 1903.
27. *Izwi LaBantu*, 8 February 1909, 16 March 1909, 6 May 1902, “The Rand and Labour” – 4 November 1902, “Native Labour” – 29 September 1908, “Native Labour” – 8 February 1909, 13 October 1908; 9 July 1901, 6 August 1901, 3 September 1901, 3 December 1901, 19 May 1908, 26 May 1908, 21 July 1908, 24 November 1908, 13 January 1909, 13 February 1906, 20 February 1906.
28. *Izwi LaBantu*, 16 March 1909, 8 February 1909, 23 February 1909; 13 October 1908, 29 September 1908, 20 October 1908; 9 July 1901, 6 August 1901, 3 September 1901, 26 November 1901.
29. *Izwi LaBantu*, 6 May 1902, 27 May 1902, 21 July 1908, 3 November 1908, 3 December 1901, 4 February 1909, 16 April 1909; Free State Archives (hereafter VAB): G113 461/6, Soga – Governor Orange River Colony, 27 March 1909; *Black Man*, November 1920. Shifted sideways from Native Affairs to the Labour Office, Soga monitored conditions of Cape labourers in the Transvaal, but resigned in the face of opposition from Kruger. See: S. Allen, “Mr Alan Kirkland Soga”, *Colored American Magazine*, February 1904, pp 114-116; C. Saunders, “Ngcongco, Jabavu and the South African War”, *Pula*, 11, 1997, pp 63-69.

(“Bechuana’s Gazette”, published in Mafeking from 1901 to 1908) was owned by Congressman Silas Molema. Historians have downplayed Plaatje’s commitment to labour, but *Koranta ea Becoana* often highlighted black miners’ low wages and mistreatment,<sup>30</sup> and urged Africans to do more to redress such wrongs.<sup>31</sup> The harsh and discriminatory treatment of labourers was frequently denounced.<sup>32</sup> Plaatje recognised black workers as being vital to the economy – and *Koranta ea Becoana* was their defender, with Plaatje revealing his distaste for their involvement in class struggles.<sup>33</sup> From 1910 to 1915, he edited *Tsala ea Batho* (“Friend of the People”) from the mining town of Kimberley where, with its high demographic ratio of workers, Plaatje’s airing of worker issues made obvious sense.<sup>34</sup>

Early Congress statements in support of labour rights, the involvement of some members in early unions, and the labour reporting of Congress-aligned newspapers helped to keep workers before the eyes of Africans. This commitment was neither uniform nor radical, but helped to establish Congress as a force sympathetic to the broader aspirations of black workers.

## The Roaring Twenties

The 1920s were a tempestuous decade that saw the largest pre-Second World War black labour strike, the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and branches of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), as well as the mercurial rise and fall of the ICU. It saw a white employees’

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30. *Koranta ea Becoana*, 13 September 1902, 11 October 1902, 15 November 1902, 20 June 1903, 25 July 1903, “Asiatic Labour” – 29 August 1903, “Native Labour” & “Natives in Transvaal” – 31 December 1902, “Native Labour” – 17 January 1903, “Hats Off for the Colonial Secretary” – 24 January 1903, “Labour” – 4 November 1903. Also see: B. Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876-1932* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg 1982).
  31. *Koranta ea Becoana*, “Labour Commission” – 23 September 1903, “Native Petition” – 7 February 1903.
  32. *Koranta ea Becoana*, 20 June 1903, 23 September 1903, “Native Miners’ Mortality” – 30 September 1903, “De Beers” – 9 May 1903, “De Beers Compound” – 20 June 1903.
  33. *Koranta ea Becoana*, 2 December 1903, 28 October 1903, 25 July 1903, 2 December 1903, 18 April 1903, 24 January 1903, 28 October 1903, 18 November 1903, 11 November 1903.
  34. *Koranta ea Becoana*, 4 April 1903, 27 June 1903, 18 April 1903, 14 March 1903, 7 March 1903; Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, pp 109, 125; Limb, “Representing the Labouring Classes”, pp 90-91.

armed revolt that was literally bombed into submission, and a subsequent Pact Government of the white Labour Party and Afrikaner Nationalists. The decade closed with the rise of a pro-communist ANC President. Historians have neglected the history of the ANC in the 1920s, arguing that the ICU, CPSA and Joint Councils eclipsed it. However, important and enduring alliances involving the ANC began forming during this decade.

In the 1920s, as in its first decade, ANC provincial structures continued to be loosely composed and poorly financed. In the Cape, these were the Cape African Congress (CAC); the ANC Western Province or ANC(WP), which split in 1926; the Transkeian African Congress; Bechuanaland and Griqualand West Congress. Writers have seen this as a period of ANC decline. A supporter wrote in 1933: “All went smoothly until 1920, but from that time there has been trouble.”<sup>35</sup>

Estimates of nation-wide membership vary from 1 000 to 4 000 in the inter-war years. The 1920 Pass Laws Committee and 1925 Native Churches Commission noted increasing ANC membership and influence. Press and State estimates of membership and attendance at mass meetings suggest a total of 3 000 to 4 000 people in the early 1920s in the Cape. Mahabane in 1920 put Cape membership at 1 200. In 1926-1927, he estimated national “membership” to be 100 000, a gross exaggeration, but probably meant to suggest supporters rather than paid-up members. He told a State committee: “I cannot tell you how many members have paid ... for the last two years no subscriptions have been paid.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1920, ANC rival D.D.T. Jabavu conceded its wider influence – it articulated “the strongest single volume of native feeling”. An inter-locking of membership or cordial relations between it and Advisory Boards, Vigilance Associations, the 20 000 strong Ethiopian Church (Henry Reed Ngcayiya of the ANC was its leader) and the Cape Native Voters’ Convention means that one must qualify any assessment of ANC influence by the distinction between paid and indirect membership of these affiliates and supporters. There even were joint meetings between the ANC, ICU and CPSA.<sup>37</sup>

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35. M.W. Somntunzi to *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 8 July 1933.

36. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp 65, 239-244; *Minutes of Evidence: Select Committee on Native Affairs* (SC10A-20), p 27, *Minutes of Evidence: Select Committee on the Subject of the Native Bills* (SC10-27), p 299.

37. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp 239-244.

Despite this wider influence, the ANC lacked a mass membership, making its ability to establish contact with and represent workers largely symbolic. Govan Mbeki asserted that it was “top-heavy with very little support amongst the masses”. Its class structure remained largely non-proletarian. It drew its leadership “essentially from ministers, small-scale entrepreneurs, clerks ..., journalists, lawyers ... and artisans”.<sup>38</sup> The proletariat was too fragmented and unorganised to impact heavily on the ANC, but there were workers in the ANC and several of its “middle class” figures had experienced wage-labour.

Neither the ICU, nor CPSA, nor black industrial unions however succeeded in retaining many African workers either. Whilst a massive growth in ICU numbers took place in 1927 to 1928, especially in rural Natal, the bulk were rural toilers with only fleeting membership. By 1929, the ICU had collapsed. The CPSA and Federation of Non-European Trade Union (FNETU) attracted some industrial workers, but remained small. The CPSA claimed to have 1 600 blacks out of a total of 1 750 members in 1928, but this number had declined markedly by the early 1930s. FNETU in 1928 claimed to have 10 000 to 15 000 affiliated members (an exaggeration), but had disappeared by 1931. On the surface these groups appear to have temporarily eclipsed the ANC, but its 1 000 to 4 000 paid-up members were roughly comparable in number with CPSA figures.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst Congress suffered splits related to the success of other movements that limited ANC potential appeal to workers, ANC branches continued to attract some black workers to their ranks and in general went on standing up for their rights. Direct connections with fledgeling labour unions and workers were often easier at the grassroots level, away from the high politics of national ANC deliberations.

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38. G. Mbeki, *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A Short History* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1992), pp 37, 43; Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp 239-244.

39. H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1987), pp 2, 112, 282, 148. Police claimed that Natal ICU membership was 2 842 in 1929. See: *Natal Mercury*, 10 July 1929; B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (Inkululelo, London, 1986), pp 44-46; E. Roux, *S.P. Bunting, a Political Biography* (Mayibuye, Cape Town, 1993), pp 104, 82; Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London (ICS), *South African Institute for Race Relations Collection*: J. Ford, “Affiliation of FNETU to RILU” 1928; NAD: JUS, [S.P. Bunting] “Statistics of SA Labour: Report to RILU”, [1929].

In the twenties, the ANC in the Cape attempted to speak on behalf of black workers and from time to time mounted actions to protest against attacks on them. ANC activists with strong labour contacts in the early twenties included Ngojo, Kraai and Masabalala. Their presence not only ensured that Congress discussed labour issues, but was also a reminder of radical alternatives. In 1922, Ngojo was the Cape Congress' chief organiser. He affirmed that "people may have the right to withhold their labour", but condemned the shooting of black workers on the Rand by white commandos. Kraai, Mahabane and William Oliphant, Cape Town Secretary, was part of a Congress delegation to the 1920 Pass Laws Commission. There was substantial agreement between Congress moderates and radicals on defending the rights of black labour – all "agreed that the pass system tended to keep down wages".<sup>40</sup>

Reverend Mahabane used his position as Cape Congress President to support black worker rights. Addressing the Pass Laws Commission, he argued that passes underpinned the whole system of cheap black labour in industry and agriculture. "More attractive conditions of work and better wages would automatically solve the problem of native labour. Force was unnecessary to induce natives to work." Masters and Servants Acts' discrimination "rendered the servant liable to criminal prosecution for absence from or desertion from work" – instead, it was suggested, the State should have intervened in labour disputes.<sup>41</sup>

Mahabane was a principled supporter of the view that "trade unionism [for Africans] must be given statutory recognition". His presidential address to the 1920 Cape Congress conference focused on the colour bar and "restoration of our National solidarity and identity as a distinct people in the political economy of South Africa". He drew attention to "glaring disparity in the relative rate of pay" between black and white workers. He even urged Africans to "agitate". His 1921 presidential address highlighted "the manly and heroic proletariat of the non-European labourers of Port Elizabeth". The "poor black man is ... reduced to ... utter voicelessness ... votelessness, hopelessness, powerlessness, defencelessness, homelessness, landlessness". This sort of rhetoric was as radical as any other black political statements in the country at the time. Mahabane's annual address of 1922 commented on the Rand Revolt. In 1925, he criticised the "civilised labour" policy "whereby Bantu labourers ... have been replaced by poor whites .... after

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40. *Cape Argus*, 25 February 1920; "Shooting of Natives", *Imvo*, 31 March 1922. SC10-27: Njogo remained active, p 289.

41. *Cape Argus*, 25 February 1920.

African workers have done pioneer work in the field of labour and helped to lay the foundations of the industrial system”. Despite his rhetoric of solidarity, it is unclear to what extent workers supported Mahabane. Police reported that his speeches highlighting the role of Congress to mass meetings in 1921 were “met with a fair amount of opposition”. Mahabane articulated the sort of liberalism current at the time among Africans that saw him, when defending the Cape African franchise against the Hertzog Bills, speak of the “benign reign of Queen Victoria of revered memory”, but he continued to speak out on labour matters. In 1928, he stressed that bitterness among Africans had intensified with the “‘civilised’ labour policy” predicated on “the dismissing of the Africans from all skilled or semi-skilled employment to make room for ‘poor whites’”. The “differential treatment of native labourers by their individual employers ... in respect to wages, awakens and constantly fosters deep resentment”. These cases demonstrate Mahabane’s concern for African labour. In part, this was influenced by his formative years – as has been mentioned before, he worked as a poorly paid teacher and court interpreter before becoming a minister – but also derived from ongoing ANC policy.<sup>42</sup>

The Cape Congress at times expressed radical opposition to oppression. In early 1924, a mass meeting in Wynberg characterised State legislation as aiming “to reduce the social, political and economic status of the aboriginal races to that of a slave, if not below”. It decided to adopt “passive resistance” and declared that State-sponsored “Native conferences” did not reflect African opinion, which the ANC rather represented.<sup>43</sup> Yet it never carried out such resistance consistently. Nevertheless, sentiments from the 1920s indicate the presence of thinking in accord with radical views.

ANC ties with workers tended to be closer in the more industrialised towns. Besides Cape Town, this included East London, Port Elizabeth and Kimberly. East London locations had a predominantly working class base. In 1920, the East London Native

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42. G. Carter & S. Johns (eds), *The Good Fight: Selected Speeches of Rev. Zacheus R. Mahabane* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1965), pp 10, 13-28; Z.R. Mahabane, *The Colour Bar: Three Presidential Addresses* (Lovedale Press, Lovedale, 1922); NAD: JUS 3/1064/18, SAP – Secretary of Justice, 1921. Z.R. Mahabane to *African World*, 24 October 1925; Z.R. Mahabane, “Problems of the African Church”, in M. Stauffer (ed) *Thinking with Africa* (?), London, 1928), pp 135-146; VAB: CO394 2042/1/06.

43. “More ‘Native Bolshevism’”, *The International*, 11 January 1924.



Employees' Association sought Congress support. The ICU's East London branch (formed in 1922) adopted a cautious approach to industrial relations, but after 1929, the Independent ICU, if characterised by a combination of labour and "Africanist and separatist" influences, more directly articulated working-class grievances. Congress in East London seems to have been largely eclipsed by the ICU, though little is known of its history. In Port Elizabeth closer ties developed. ICWU leader Samuel Masabalala sat on the Cape Congress and SANNC executives. He gained strong rank-and-file support for a major strike in 1920, but faced fierce opposition from the State. The authorities invited Rubusana, who had defected from Congress to the more conservative Bantu Union, to stem the rising tide of militant black labour. Masabalala's arrest prompted independent worker action that mobilised 2 000 to 4 000 protestors. Police and white vigilantes opened fire, killing twenty-three Africans. It took months for the Port Elizabeth ICU to be resuscitated by James la Guma and there is no evidence that he was able to re-establish such close ties quickly, but memory of the events lingered in popular consciousness, helping to explain why relations between workers and the ANC intensified in later decades when the city became an ANC bulwark.<sup>44</sup>

In the Northern Cape, the ANC maintained the interest in workers which Plaatje had developed. ANC influence remained strong in the mining town of Kimberley. Bechuanaland and Griqualand West ANC leaders included S.B. Macheng (founder and organiser) and Mveli Skota, the president, who had worked as a clerk and court interpreter. Henry Matyalana, CAC executive member, worked there as a caretaker. Working-class experience did not necessarily guarantee a "radical" stance: Macheng, previously a mine-worker, opposed Josiah Gumede's ANC presidency. Some workers identified with Congress.

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44. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa*, p 51; C. Kadalie, *My Life & the ICU* (Cass, London, 1971), p 53; G. Minkley, "Did Not Come to Work on Monday": The East London Waterfront in Comparative Perspective c. 1930-1963", in P. Alexander & R. Halpern (eds), *Racializing Class, Classifying Race* (St. Martins, New York, 2000), pp 193-212; L. Switzer, *Power & Resistance in an African Society* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993), p 251; Beinart, *Hidden Struggles*, p 275; Baines, "Populism"; Skota, *African Yearly Register*, p 187; SOAS: Letters of Rubusana, Magistrate – Rubusana, 17 October 1921, enclosing £10 for injuries suffered at a meeting "attended at the request of the Supt. of Natives"; *Report of Commissioners to Enquire into the Causes of ... Native Disturbances at Port Elizabeth on 23 Oct. 1920*; *Black Man*, November 1920; Cherry, "Making of an African Working Class". The Bantu Union "firmly object[ed] to all strike agitation". See: *Cape Times*, 4 August 1920.

John Gaetsewe worked as a messenger in Kuruman in the 1920s. He recalled becoming “a member of the ANC long before my trade union”, suggesting either that national oppression was uppermost in the minds of some workers, or that they saw the ANC as supportive of their demands. Some Kimberley women, such as Mrs Nuku, a social worker and Women’s League chairperson, and Mrs Phala, were active in Congress, but little is known of them.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Western Cape: Freeing Africa “from the Incubus of European Capitalistic Control”**

The general tendency among historians is to view the twenties as a period of decline for the ANC, and rise in the ICU’s influence, yet in the Western Cape, it was rather the opposite, with the ANC moving markedly to the left and gaining a substantial increase in membership among workers. Most historians view this phenomenon as a brief (1929 to 1931) radical flirtation, but when one considers the duration of broader ties forged with workers, then the period of contact becomes longer and stretches from 1925 to 1933.<sup>46</sup>

Under James Thaele, the ANC(WP) took the initiative in attempting to find practical solutions for worker problems after the ICU lost ground in Cape Town. In 1925, it decided to establish a labour bureau to give “the very best advice and assistance towards placing every member of Congress (male or female), who may be out of work, in employment”. The scheme’s restriction to ANC members made this an impractical solution to general black unemployment, but it indicates Thaele’s attention to labour issues.<sup>47</sup>

The ANC(WP) began to organise mass protests against political repression and exploitation. Contact with workers was facilitated by

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45. Skota, *African Yearly Register*, pp 175, 193, 230, 237; Walshe, *African Nationalism*, p 227; *Abantu-Batho*, 11 September 1930; B. Turok, “A Peasant’s Son Turned Trade Unionist”, *Sechaba*, 5, 4, 1971, p 16. Space precludes detailed treatment of the Northern Cape, but see: Willan, *Sol Plaatje*; Limb, “Sol Plaatje Reconsidered.”
  46. Hofmeyr, “Agricultural Crisis”, Chapter 3. Hofmeyr argues that before 1930, “the conservative petty bourgeoisie” dominated the ANC, but a shaky alliance formed between Garveyists and communists.
  47. “Progressive Move of Congress”, *African World*, 10 October 1925. Thaele also took on the ICU at meetings in Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg. See: “Kadalie and Thaele”, *The Star*, 12 April 1926 (Clipping in Marwick Papers, Campbell Collections, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal).

several factors. Firstly, Thaele had been active in the ICU from 1923 and helped to edit its organ, *Workers' Herald*. Secondly, through his paper *The African World*, he popularised a form of Garveyism friendly to socialist movements and he addressed, if somewhat idiosyncratically, labour issues. Thirdly, co-operation between the ANC and CPSA in the Western Cape was aided by the CPSA's Africanisation and, after 1927, Gumede's radical ANC national leadership. Black communists such as La Guma and Johnny Gomas who, after their expulsion from the ICU in 1926, increasingly devoted their energies to African liberation, formed a socialist ginger force within Congress and assisted united action. The "Black Republic" slogan adopted by the CPSA in the late 1920s was strongly advocated by Capetonian communists and had some analogy with Garveyism, facilitating alliance with the ANC(WP), which adopted the slogan's broad contours. Co-operation with the CPSA included unrestricted sale of its organ *Umsebenzi* at ANC meetings. Fourthly, the ANC(WP) became more attractive to radicals by splitting from the Cape African Congress in 1926, thereby removing a moderating influence. Simultaneously, another force restraining radicalism, the Joint Councils of Europeans and Natives, lacked strong support among Africans in Cape Town, whilst the established Cape Coloured pressure group, the African Political Organisation, moved to the right. Fifthly, the ANC had branches in areas inhabited chiefly by African workers, such as Ndabeni, Elsie's River and Wynberg. With migrant workers increasingly forming the bulk of continuing growth in the Cape Peninsula's African population, it was logical that the ANC should address worker issues to reflect its immediate constituency. Sixthly, the activities of black unions, such as the ICU, and political groups, such as the CPSA, indicate that socialist ideas were presented to some African workers, notably among workers on the docks. Finally, some black workers actually joined the ANC(WP).<sup>48</sup>

These closer relations are revealed in the *African World*. Founded in 1925 with the Garveyist slogan "Africa for Africans", it attempted to articulate labour demands or at least subsume these under a black nationalist agenda. In true Garveyist style, it looked forward to a near future in which "large businesses [were] owned by blacks". If Garveyism underpinned *African World's* philosophy, then the ANC was its *raison d'être*. Congress had, stated the editors, "championed a fearless aggressive fight for the inherent rights of the African race." By

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48. Hofmeyr, "Agricultural Crisis", pp 74-79; Z.R. Mahabane, "Western District Branch ...", *Ilanga lase Natal*, 26 November 1926; R. Kingwill, "ANC in the Western Cape", p 14 & Chapters 2-3.

the end of June 1925, the masthead carried the sub-title: “The Mouthpiece of the Cape African Congress.” Staff included sub-editor Arthur Ndollo (Congress’ choir conductor) and assistant-editor Johnson Dlwati (ANC Assistant-Secretary).<sup>49</sup>

*African World* combined Garveyist and anti-capitalist rhetoric. “Constitutional agitation and the cultivation of race-pride” were required to free Africa “from the incubus of European capitalistic control”. Here “capitalist” appears synonymous with white domination. The ANC, it noted, “does not encourage or discourage Capitalism”, but *African World* advocated a general strike – at least in theory. It urged Congress, “as a government in embryo” of all Africans, to combine with the ICU to adopt a two-stream policy of “‘**Passive Resistance**’ and a **Strike** ... with a view to bring to a standstill ... within 24 hours the Mining Industry.”<sup>50</sup>

*African World* was less supportive of actual strikes. Commenting on the 1925 seamen’s strike, it felt “a struggle of this kind at all times is a thing to be deplored”. Sympathy with strikers was possible, as blacks had “no appeal from the civil and economic tyranny”, but “we must ... not [be] drawn into the quarrel”. Labour reform was possible, but communist tactics were rejected. Yet *African World* did not exclude leftist contributions: it published communists Bransby Ndobe, Thomas Mbeki, Josiah Ngedlane and Stanley Silwana, and reproduced CPSA articles.<sup>51</sup>

The *African World* often discussed workers in conjunction with broader politics. Correspondent Joel Nduma combined belief in the dignity of labour with faith in the ANC’s historic role: “through labour many [of] our comrades subdue their difficulties and redeem their lives from barbarism ... The ANC, with its well advised leaders and comrades stands [as] a bright star to the thinking man”. The ANC organ was

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49. *African World*, 23 May 1925, 30 May 1925, 13 June 1925, 27 June 1925, 11 July 1925, 25 July 1925, 8 August 1925, 22 August 1925, 9 January 1926; R. Vinson, “In the Time of the Americans: Garveyism in Segregationist South Africa, 1920-1940.” PhD thesis, Howard University, 2001.

50. *African World*, 12 September 1925, 23 May 1925, 9 January 1926, 4 July 1925, 22 August 1925, 27 June 1925, 30 May 1925.

51. “The Shipping Strike”, *African World*, 12 September 1925; *African World*, 26 September 1925; J. Ngedlane to *African World*, 3 October 1925; *African World*, 13 June 1925; B. Ndobe, “Lefatse le Tsietsing”, *African World*, 8 August 1925; T. Mbeki, “The Spirit of Self-Determination”, *African World*, 4 July 1925; S. Silwana, “The Iniquities of Legislators”, *African World*, 26 September 1925.

committed to wage equality. It called for “equal pay for equal work – is it asking too much?” Attacking the creation of a South African Fascist Movement, it rejected the very idea of “one class being exploited by another”. Correspondent R.J. Ndimande attacked the refusal of a white church to admit relatives of a deceased African worker.<sup>52</sup> *African World* is proof of the commitment of ANC regional leaders to black labour. However, its closure in July 1926 not only denied black workers an ally, but also pointed to the often-unreliable nature of ANC support.

Black workers of the 1920s have left few accounts detailing their attitudes to the ANC, however, existing biographical sketches provide some insights. Johnny Gomas began work as an apprentice tailor in Kimberley during the First World War and experienced the rigours of working life. Secretary of the ICU Western Cape branch before being expelled, he joined the CPSA in January 1925 and in December 1925 was elected as secretary of the Cape CPSA. Gomas became Vice-President of the ANC(WP) in the late 1920s, influenced by its radical pro-labour stance.<sup>53</sup>

James la Guma was born into a life of poverty. He worked in a bakery from the age of eight, took part in riots by unemployed workers in 1906, and at thirteen became an apprentice leather-worker. Despite having only a few years of formal schooling, he was an avid reader, influenced by socialist literature. He worked as a contract labourer on farms, railways and mines around Luderitz, Namibia, where his class-consciousness prompted him to lead a mining strike in 1918 and, in 1920, to form an ICU branch. In 1921, he became secretary of the ICU in Port Elizabeth, then ICU National Secretary. He felt national oppression keenly. In 1927 he became the secretary of the ANC’s Cape Town branch and, in 1928, secretary of the ANC(WP). At this time, La Guma “devoted a lot of his energy” to the ANC according to a 1964 biography by his son. He joined the CPSA in 1925 and served as secretary of the leftist FNETU. Other militant black workers joined the ANC(WP). Stanley Silwana and Josiah Ngedlane (who in 1929 led an

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52. J. Nduma, “The Onlooker”, *African World*, 23 May 1925; *African World*, 10 October 1925; R.J. Ndimande to *African World*, 27 June 1925.

53. D. Musson, *Johnny Gomas: Voice of the Working Class: a Political Biography* (Buchu, Cape Town, 1989), pp 16-18, 32-33. Musson suggests Gomas chose to join the ANC due to the militancy in 1918-1920 of at least part of the ANC. E.J. Verwey (ed), *New Dictionary of South African Biography* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1995), pp 80-83.

Ndabeni CPSA branch of 100 members) were members of both the CPSA and the ANC.<sup>54</sup>

Such members provided the ANC with direct ties to labour organisations and put pressure on ANC leaders to adopt more militant policies. Thaele responded not only to the imperatives of black politics, but also to indirect pressure of workers and militants. This confronted him with a problem: how to combine black liberation with worker demands. Replying to criticism by communist W. Green (who shared a platform with Thaele during the latter's tour of Natal in 1926) that the "Africa for the Africans" slogan failed to address grievances common to all workers, Thaele agreed with much of Green's class-oriented approach, particularly as the "native of South Africa is confined to the working class", but concluded that "unfortunately, the white man, whether he be capitalist or white worker ... is at one in keeping the black down ... [Hence] the black man must think and act 'black.'"<sup>55</sup>

For a short time, Thaele openly supported the CPSA. This was due to his anti-capitalist, rather than Marxist, views. Addressing the "CPSA School" in 1929, he declared that his "sympathies were entirely with the CPSA". He was adroit at adopting their rhetoric: the remedy to Africans' "economic slavery" was "preaching of the Communist doctrines". To return the favour, the CPSA described him as "one of the most prominent" ANC intellectuals. In May 1928, the ANC Cape Town branch adopted a resolution of "full and unqualified confidence in the CPSA" and called on its leaders to explore cooperation with the CPSA. By 1929, the ANC(WP) had developed close contact with militant communists and workers. A joint ANC-CPSA rally against oppressive laws was held in Cape Town in December 1929.<sup>56</sup>

Bransby Ndobe and Elliot Tonjeni were key activists forming a bridge between the ANC and CPSA. Ndobe became organiser of ANC Herschel (Eastern Cape) in 1927 and then the provincial secretary of the

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54. [A. la Guma], "Jimmy la Guma: A Biography." Original manuscript, University of Cape Town Library, 1964 (subsequently published); Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa*, pp 43-51; CKC: 2:XL2:96/1; Verwey (ed), *New Dictionary*, p 124; Bunting, *Kotane*, p 66; Simons, *Class and Colour*, p 426.

55. Letter of W. Green and editor's reply, *African World*, 1 August 1925; NAD: JUS, SAP 35th Report on "Communism in South Africa", 15 June 1926.

56. *African World*, 23 May 1925; *SA Worker*, 25 May 1928, 21 July 1929. In 1930, Thaele changed direction and actively opposed the communists. *Cape Argus*, 7, 12 February 1930; [A. la Guma], "Jimmy la Guma", p 68.

ANC(WP). Tonjeni was the provincial assistant-secretary of the ANC in 1929. The Department of Native Affairs claimed that their “teachings gave rise to the general disrespect of authority”. Ndobe worked as a domestic in Cape Town for some years after 1922. As ANC(WP) Secretary, he “attracted the attention of the authorities by his fiery speeches”. Tonjeni, who also worked in Cape Town, joined the CPSA and ICU. He left the CPSA in 1929, but still contributed articles to *Umsebenzi*. Cetyiwe was still active in the ANC(WP) and, together with Ndobe and Wilson Tsekwe, was charged by the police with inciting racial hostility after a meeting of the ANC in June 1929.<sup>57</sup>

These working-class radicals helped to mobilise rural labourers under the banner of Congress. In 1927, the ANC(WP) began mass organising in areas populated by farm labourers. A Huguenot branch already existed in Paarl and a new branch was formed at Worcester in 1929. It soon claimed 800 members, mainly workers. A builder, Adam Paul, was its secretary. Branches were established in other Boland towns and ANC(WP) membership reached 2 000 by May 1929, many of these members being farm labourers facing declining wages, or workers in rural towns facing unemployment.<sup>58</sup>

These branches took up issues such as wages and unemployment. Whilst centred around rural towns, rather than tightly controlled white farms, they addressed the “tot” system, a major grievance of farm workers. Branches paid great attention to passes, which inconvenienced all black workers. Both African and coloured male workers were enrolled, as well as many women. These initiatives cemented ties with workers. The ability of the Worcester branch to recruit workers rapidly, suggests that there was nothing inherent in ANC policies preventing it from establishing close labour ties. Other black groups in rural towns, such as Vigilance Associations, agitated for franchise or trading rights, but hardly concerned themselves with the largely voteless migrant

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57. NAD: NA 87/326(3), “Native Agitator Bransby Ndobe”; CKC: 14A:2:XT14:56/2; Skota, *African Yearly Register*, pp 234, 137; *Umsebenzi*, 6 June 1929, 4 July 1929, 11 July 1929, 5 September 1929, 28 November 1929, 8 January 1930, 19 February 1930. Tonjeni came from an “educated, yet disaffected family”. W. Beinart, “Conflict in Qumbu: Rural Consciousness, Ethnicity and Violence in the Colonial Transkei”, in Beinart & Bundy, *Hidden Struggles*, pp 106-137.

58. Hofmeyr, “Agricultural Crisis”, pp 80-87; W. Hofmeyr, “Rural Popular Organisation and its Problems: Struggles in the Western Cape 1929-1930”, *Africa Perspective*, 22, 1983, pp 26-49.

labourers.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, when the ANC became more active, it drew some rural workers into politics, however briefly or incompletely.

As a result of their audacious challenge to the regimented industrial relations system, these branches faced increased repression. In 1929, Kennon Thaele, ANC(WP) Secretary, was charged under the Native Unrest Act with inciting violence. He had told a crowd of 200 people in Cape Town to follow the example of Ethiopia's military defeat of Italy.<sup>60</sup> The State withdrew the case, but repression escalated from 1930 to 1931, contributing to branch decline. Conditions in the Western Cape in the late 1920s – economic immiseration, radicalisation of ANC leaders and CPSA Africanisation – favoured a strengthening of ANC ties with workers. The situation in the Eastern Cape was somewhat different.

### **The Eastern Cape: “Mice Have Their Own Conference Because They Are Being Killed by Cats”**

The history of ANC-labour relations in the Eastern Cape in the 1920s is more complex than suggested by historians. The Cradock-based Cape African Congress (CAC), with its leaders concerned by growing proletarianisation and radicalisation, steadfastly clung to a moderate policy. CAC President Reverend Elijah Mdolomba told a State committee in 1927 that the number of rich Africans in his region had declined. Many Africans now left their “lands and go to the mines for employment”. After the 1926 split, the CAC faced rivalry not only from Thaele's ANC(WP), but also from the Cape Native Voters' Convention, the ICU and, after its formation in November 1930, the Independent ANC led by Tonjeni. The ICU incorporated black labour demands such as abolition of job colour bars and higher wages in their policies, making it difficult for the ANC to pose as the singular representative of black workers. However, the ICU and the Cape Native Voters' Convention soon established working relations with the ANC. Many leaders of the Cape Native Voters' Convention became involved in the ANC, including Bennett Ncwana, Frank Pendla, Richard Godlo and Mdolomba.<sup>61</sup>

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59. Hofmeyr, “Agricultural Crisis”, p 86; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p 159; *Worcester Standard & Advertiser*, 12 October 1929; S. Redding, “Peasants & the Creation of an African Middle Class in Umtata, 1880-1950”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 1993, pp 513-539.

60. CAD: Chief of Supreme Court (CSC) 1/1/157 ref. 23, Record of Proceedings, Kenneth Thaele.

61. SC10-27, 305-6; Switzer, *Power and Resistance*, p 251. From 1930-1933, the independent ANC vigorously campaigned in the Midlands, opposed by CAC leader James Calata, who warned against communism spreading to “the



Other ANC bodies adopted a more militant stance. ANC contacts with black unions in Port Elizabeth and East London have been mentioned. The isolated Herschel district in the far north of the Eastern Cape was ripe for “agitators.” W.M. Macmillan’s survey of Herschel found that in 1924 high inflation and land dispossession were “fast sweeping the natives out of their Reserves to become a landless proletariat”.<sup>62</sup> The lack of an industrial proletariat in Herschel inclined black political leaders to emphasise land and taxation, rather than industrial issues. This area was contested terrain between different people claiming to speak on behalf of the ANC and on behalf of black workers.

James Thaele, in a bid to extend the influence of his ANC(WP), made a bid for the allegiance of local people. He told a crowd in Sterkspruit in March 1928 that they were all under the ANC’s “supervision.” He warned that the State planned to ban meetings of ten or more Africans. Congress, he stated, was working with the ICU to take up such issues. Thaele was careful to work within realistic limits. In a letter to the Herschel Magistrate, he wrote that “the policy of Congress is to assist the government”. Thaele also made radical demands. In April 1928, accompanied by Minnie Bhola, the Cape ANC women’s leader, he called for the local Superintendent of Natives to be removed from office for disregarding Africans’ rights. Bhola also took up labour issues. Addressing a Sterkspruit meeting in Xhosa, she condemned the State policy of denying blacks work on the railways and the fact that African women had to work for white women for £1 a month – “only enough to pay our dog tax”. Pointing to shootings of Africans in Bulhoek, Cape Town and Herschel, she called on all Africans, women and men, to “stand shoulder to shoulder against the Europeans”, to “amalgamate” and “fight”.<sup>63</sup>

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ignorant masses”. Calata claimed “we shut the leftist out of any office”, yet acknowledged Tonjeni’s meetings “were attended by all the people”. See: Calata, “The Present Economic Situation”, *Midland News*, 9 October 1931; CKC: 2:XC3:94, interview with G. Carter; M. Tetelman, “We Can: Black Politics in Cradock, South Africa, 1948-1985.” PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1997, pp 45-51; M. Goedhals, “African Nationalism & Indigenous Christianity: A Study in the Life of James Calata (1895-1983)”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33, 2003, pp 63-82.

62. W.M. Macmillan, *Complex South Africa* (Faber, London, 1930), pp 39, 109-121, 144-152, 177-182; W.H. Macmillan, “‘Export’ of Native Labour”, *Cape Times*, April 1926.

63. CAD: 2/SPT N/1/9/2, “Native Unrest, Prof. Thaele”: Police reports on ANC meetings, 10 March, 21 April 1928; Thaele – Magistrate Herschel, 5 November 1928; NAD – Thaele, 13 September 1928. In August 1928,

The ANC branch in Sterkspruit took up local grievances. In July 1929, it held a mass meeting (5 000 people attended, according to the branch, but 200 according to police) that passed a motion of no confidence in the Transkeian General Council (Bunga) and State officials who, it alleged, were “creating [race] hostility and hatred”. The branch sent a letter to the Prime Minister, signed by Secretary Templin Jabane, as well as other officials, protesting against unjust local taxes on widows and married men. After obscure references to the Bible and history, the petitioners employed alliteration to stress that discriminatory legislation was sowing the seeds of “disaffection, discontentment, discord, disunion, disruption and disintegration”. The continuation of the “iniquitous [colour] bar in the political and economic and industrial machinery of the land” was “an offence to the sense of manhood and nationhood” of Africans and was creating agitators. The language of this discourse suggests strong use of tradition and irony: the reference to racial hostility probably refers to provisions of the 1927 Native Administration Act, and Government continually referred to many contemporary black leaders as “agitators”. Jabane, *pace* Danton, accepted the term: “Let us agitate, agitate and agitate now and again, and rest not until this stigma has been entirely blotted out”. Jabane worked with Thaele and another little-known regional ANC figure, Theodore Mvalo, to oppose the extension of white farms at the expense of Africans. Such protests emphasised the issues of land and taxes, but these matters were also highly relevant to local working peoples, many of whom were only partly proletarianised and clung to land holdings.<sup>64</sup>

Jabane and Thaele challenged white hegemony in highly individualistic, ambiguous language that nevertheless gained them a measure of support among rural-based working people. Both leaders emphasised independent action. Jabane told a Sterkspruit gathering of 500 in October 1928 that if they could unite, the State would grant Africans a form of self-rule. At a meeting at N dofela in February 1929,

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Thaele led a delegation of local ANC figures to the Native Affairs Department to present grievances about the non-election of headmen, land allocation and municipal maladministration.

64. CAD: 2/SPT 16 N1/9/3, “Native Unrest: ANC”: Native Commissioner Herschel – SNA, 30 January 1929; Native Commissioner – CNC Kingwilliamstown, 17 August 1929; NA 213/293, SNA – B. Sisusa, ANC Sterkspruit, 6 September 1929; Sisusa – Assistant Native Commissioner Sterkspruit, 7 August 1929; ANC Sterkspruit – P.M., 20 July 1929. Jabane had been arrested in Herschel in March 1928 on what he saw as trumped-up theft charges. See CAD: 2/SPT N/1/9/2, police record of his speech, 10 March 1928.

he stated that Africans should deal with problems themselves. At an ANC meeting of 600 at Sterkspruit in April 1929, Jabane and Thaele stated that the ANC would resolve grievances such as cattle dipping and prohibitions on gathering wood by means of the courts. They admonished the audience for failing to haul stones to build a local ANC hall; Thaele insulted them by calling them “Bushmen and Hottentots”. He inconsistently mixed class and nationalist metaphors. Afrikaner-leader J.B.M. Hertzog was “the [best] man; ... destined to commercially develop South Africa”. Thaele supported Hertzog’s proposal to substitute the black franchise with “autonomy”, viewing (as did some other ANC leaders) such thinly veiled segregation as territorial “independence”. This admixture of opportunism, nationalism and concern for industrial growth, related to Thaele’s Garveyist ideas.<sup>65</sup>

Theodore Mvalo had similarly contradictory ideas. Expelled from the ANC in 1924, he was later reinstated. He often campaigned as an ANC leader, but at times this was a masquerade. In 1925, G.G. Tantsi of the Transkeian Congress complained about Mvalo’s activities in Mqanduli, alleging that, without authority, the latter had solicited money in Congress’ name. In the late 1920s, Mvalo was active in Herschel. At a meeting in July 1929, he and Jabane addressed a wide range of issues, such as land settlement, education, poll-taxes, trading and religion. At a meeting of 100 people in August 1929, he pledged to rectify their tax grievances by fighting the government: “It is for this purpose that I have been sent here by the Native Congress ... to carry on the work ... commenced by Mvabaza, Thaele and others. Mice have their own conference because they are being killed by cats. Why should we not have one?”<sup>66</sup>

Other local Garveyites, such as “Dr. Wellington,” opposed the ANC. In 1928, at a meeting of 400 to 500 Africans on the border of the

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65. CAD: 2/SPT 16, N1/9/3: Police report on “Native Meeting Held at Sterkspruit”, 27 October 1928; Native Corporal O. Sigenu – Native Commissioner Herschel, 22 February 1929; SAP Sterkspruit – Magistrate Herschel, 13 May 1929; “Native Meeting Held at Sterkspruit”, 27 April 1929.

66. CKC: 2:DA14:30/65: T.D. Mveli Skota, “ANC Secretary General’s Report”, 1925; CAD: Chief Magistrate Transkei (hereafter CMT), 3/1471 42/C: Tantsi – Chief Magistrate Transkeian Territories (hereafter CMTT), 22 April 1925; CMTT – Tantsi, April 1925; CAD: 2/SPT 16 N1/9/3: N.C. Herschel – CNC Kingwilliamstown, 17 August 1929; “Meeting Held by ... Agitator T. Mvalo”, 12 August 1929; flyer signed Jabane, ANC Sterkspruit, 7 July 1929; CAD: 1/KNT 40/12: District Commandant – Magistrate Queenstown, 27 August 1930.

Herschel and Lady Grey districts, Wellington stated that he wanted to “do away with the European Government” and keep “Africa for the Africans”. He wanted “nothing to do” with the ANC or ICU because they cooperated with whites; hence, they were allowed to operate freely. An ANC supporter in the crowd challenged this claim. In 1929, the Sterkspruit ANC queried the reasons for Wellington’s bannings, though it is not clear whether this was out of any sympathy for him. CAC President Mdolomba attacked Wellington, though a writer to *Umteteli wa Bantu* in 1928 noted that Mahabane and Thaele had spoken on the same platform as Wellington.<sup>67</sup>

Hitherto historians have largely ignored the ANC in the Transkei in the 1920s. Walshe merely suggests that it “appears to have languished”.<sup>68</sup> However, in May 1924, after formal application by representatives, the ANC’s annual convention formally recognised Transkei as a “province” under the ANC constitution. Govan Mbeki recalled that from 1923 to 1924, he attended ANC “meetings and concerts ... among peasants” at Nqamakwe. His interest in politics “was first aroused around 1925”, when an American Methodist Episcopal minister “held concerts in his church to raise funds for the ANC”. From 1925 to 1930, the Transkeian African Congress (ANC-TT), based in Tsomo and Cofimvaba, actively engaged the State in a vigorous correspondence to gain official recognition for its role. It bombarded State officials with petitions for relief of grievances reflecting the needs of rural working peoples.<sup>69</sup>

The ANC-TT was no political powerhouse, but it raised a wide range of popular demands. In early 1924, it took up cases of Africans sentenced by the courts. ANC-TT Assistant General-Secretary John James Gcingca urged clemency for “old man” Haza Bono, a worker sentenced to prison for contempt of court, a charge which Gcingca

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67. CAD: 2/SPT 16, N1/9/2, “Native Unrest, Butler Hansford Wellington”: Report by Native Constable Sigenu, 15 August 1928; Chief Clerk ANC Sterkspruit – Assistant Native Commissioner Herschel, 18 July 1929; “Tandinyaniso” [pseud.], “Concerning Herschel” translated from *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 21 April 1928. W. Beinart, “Amafelandawonye (the die-hards): Popular Protest and Women’s Movements in Herschel District in the 1920s”, in Beinart & Bundy, *Hidden Struggles*, pp 222-269.

68. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp 224, 226.

69. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: “Transkei Native Territories”, leaflet signed by R. Sol. Sidzumo and H.R. Ngcayiya, SANNC, 28 May 1924 and J.J.P. Gcingca – Magistrate Nqamakwe, 28 June 1930; Mbeki, *Struggle for Liberation*, pp x-xvi, 127. Cofimvaba was later to produce radical ANC leaders such as Albertina Sisulu, Chris Hani and Nomboniso Gasa.

disputed, arguing that Bono had promised to pay his fine quarterly when he received his pay. ANC-TT members attended the court with Bono and claimed that court officials had not even called his name. Gcingca also called for a pardon for farm tenant Ngonyama Makapela, sentenced for ploughing offences. James Ngojo in Johannesburg joined in, accusing magistrates of being “against native progress”. These audacious demands aroused the ire of Government. The Idutywa Magistrate warned the ANC that it “had no right to interfere” in court affairs.<sup>70</sup>

The ANC-TT explored all avenues of peaceful petitioning. In August 1925, it sent a delegation to try to interview the Prime Minister, then visiting Butterworth. In December 1926, it resolved to seek redress of a lack of land for Africans. Gcingca, now General Secretary, wrote several letters to the Prime Minister. In one letter he sought to make mining in the region conditional upon acceptability of mining projects by two-thirds of the ANC, and to have all local mine revenue paid into a fund for the benefit of Africans. The ANC, he asserted, was the “only mouthpiece” of Africans. This was an audacious attempt to wrest legitimacy from Government, though Gcingca stressed that the State could retain the right to expropriate land for Africans. In a second letter, he articulated popular scepticism about the Bunga, “a futile debating society”. The solution, he suggested, was to leave “Native Affairs” to the ANC. He proposed “direct self-control” for all Africans in South Africa, whereby all Bills introduced would be put to the “Blackman’s African National Parliament” that could “become a most powerful and influential [vehicle of] public opinion”. Gcingca called for people “to be taught to think internationally” – reflecting possible Garveyist or Gumede influence. He envisaged a future where “for the first time in history people will hear great subjects discussed on an international platform and the narrow national influence of the local Parliament and ... local press will gradually be neutralise[d]”. In a third letter, he protested early issuing of writs against African tax defaulters. This impacted on workers: “people going to work” were refused passes before paying taxes. A fourth letter attacked local headmen who did not reside in the districts they represented. A fifth objected to discriminatory employment practices. Whites were employed exclusively as dipping supervisors and road overseers despite the presence of “suitable” Africans. A sixth letter

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70. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: Gcingca – Magistrate Tsomo, 27 February 1924, 22 April 1924; J.K. Kockett, Acting Magistrate Idutywa – ANC, 30 April 1924; J.D. Ngojo – F.J. Kockett [c. April 1925]; Magistrate Idutywa – CMTT, 11 April 1925; Magistrate Tsomo – Magistrate Idutywa, 20 March 1925; Gcingca – CMTT, 14 April 1924.

complained about local magistrates' long terms of office, a practice he claimed encouraged favouritism. Instead of paying heed to African needs, magistrates went to "cricket matches and the like leaving the people hovering without satisfaction". The ANC-TT regularly repeated such grievances in the course of the next few years.

The ANC-TT drew up a list of twenty-eight grievances, many of which impinged upon the lives of African working people. Congress looked back nostalgically on a time when "people used to go to work in the fields and where they were ... honestly employed and paid according to the amount of work each man had done". In contrast to this "Golden Age", the current unsatisfactory system of labour migration involved child labour and exploitative recruitment. The ANC-TT called for the abolishment of the Native Recruiting Corporation. Showing some familiarity with working lives, it enumerated discriminatory employment practices and local wage rates. Another ANC-TT petition attacked the lack of local knowledge by stock and sheep inspectors, invariably white. It called instead for the employment of solely Africans in these jobs. Congress called for more work opportunities for African interpreters and for Africans to be employed to eradicate noxious weeds. It drew attention to the economic plight of African women, whose frequent arrests for tax defaulting meant that they could not afford to maintain families; this was "nothing else but slavery". On the other hand, employment of white women as court clerks denied such jobs to black males and forced them to leave the Transkei in search of work. Such work should, claimed the ANC-TT in rather sexist fashion, be "for males only". It complained that due to the dominance of mission schools, African teachers often were forced to conform to Western religious standards or face dismissal.<sup>71</sup> In many of these petitions, the issue of the employment of Africans was raised. In calling for more jobs for Africans, Congress was championing the interests of African workers, even though it said little about their wage rates or their right to organise independently.

In 1927, ANC-TT Acting General Secretary, Abner Cetywayo Madalane, based in Cofimvaba, lobbied Government over popular grievances. He wrote to the Prime Minister pointing to the lack of popular legitimacy of an unelected Bunga, whose councillors were "entirely against the Congress" and "never troubled themselves to consult the people concerning grievances". In writing directly to the

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71. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: Gcingca – P.M., enclosing 28 petitions [c. December 1926].

Prime Minister, Madalane rejected official attempts to divert ANC protests into local channels, arguing that a leader should rule “for rich and poor”. In October 1927, the ANC-TT instructed Madalane to write to the Tsomo Magistrate to complain about the early collection of quitrents and rates, and the issuing of writs against African defaulters. Here the ANC was responding to popular demands raised at a “headmen and peoples meeting” in June 1927.<sup>72</sup>

As well as general political grievances, the ANC-TT tackled the issue of labour exploitation. In May 1927, it carried resolutions against the entire labour recruitment system. Madalane wrote to the Secretary of Justice, urging that the Native Recruiting Corporation should “be abandoned altogether” as it was “nothing but slavery and injustice”. He cited cases of African youths, recruited in rural areas for mine labour, but forced to return home after being found unfit and then sued for cash advances by labour recruiters, with local magistrates ruling against the workers. In addition, some recruited labourers deserted when sent to workplaces not stipulated in their contracts, where they were “bitterly treated”. Madalane cited a case in which two Queenstown youths, supposedly recruited for work in Swaziland, but sent to Natal, subsequently absconded due to harsh treatment, were arrested, sent to gaol in Cofimvaba, and thence to forced labour in Natal. According to him, the only way “to avoid this system of slavery”, provide “Justice” and enable “better control and management of the Natives”, was the abolition of the Recruiting Corporation.<sup>73</sup>

Madalane repeated complaints made in 1926 by Gcingca against discriminatory labour practices. Dipping supervisors and road overseers were all whites with high wages, whereas Africans were deemed only “suitable for the [heavy] work”. The whole district of St. Marks suffered from a lack of justice, he argued. “Poor litigants” had to travel many miles to attend civil cases and often lost cases when witnesses, tired of waiting, departed for work. The ANC demanded that the people had to elect local headmen. It protested against the increasing number of shootings of Africans by forest guards and alluded to the sexual harassment of African women by the police.<sup>74</sup>

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72. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: A.C. Madalane, ANC Cofimvaba, – Magistrate Tsomo, 15 October 1927; Magistrate Tsomo – CMTT, 20 October 1927.

73. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: A.C. Madalane, ANC Cofimvaba, – S.J., 20 May 1927.

74. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: A.C. Madalane, ANC Cofimvaba, – S.J., 20 May 1927.

Following popular complaints in Tsomo, Willowvale and Nqamakwe, the ANC-TT resolved in November 1927 to protest against high local taxes. Madalane first wrote to the Chief Magistrate, complaining that bureaucratic delays were preventing “poor people” from paying taxes on time. The Chief Magistrate rejected the ANC’s claim of representing the people – a common governmental approach to Congress across the country – arguing that individuals must make personal representations. Madalane then wrote to the Secretary for Native Affairs, protesting against the issuing of writs against Africans for failing to pay hut taxes, rents, road and dipping rates. He called for “your aggrieved, sorrowful Native subjects” to be given more time to pay these onerous taxes.<sup>75</sup>

These protests, taken together, constitute a comprehensive indictment of the whole system of “native administration” and labour relations in the Transkei. They suggest that the ANC was in touch with, and well aware of, the harsh lives led by ordinary Africans. The recourse to “justice” by local ANC leaders suggests that they retained some faith in liberal values, though this may also have been tactical. These protests combined elements of resistance to proletarianisation with attempts to ameliorate the plight of rural toilers. Many rural workers retained close ties with the land and the emphasis on land in many Congress protests reflected popular demands. The reference to control over labour suggests that Madalane had less interest in any independent organisation of labour than in its regulation by fair means. One also could question just how far Congress was prepared to go beyond rhetorical protest.

In 1928, the ANC-TT claimed Congress had left its previous inaction behind and embarked on serious reorganisation. A meeting at Chief David Sikweza’s kraal at Nqamakwe in February 1928, was aimed at “representing the whole public national problems”. Gcingca, Madalane, Meshack Bobi Mgidlana, Enoch Malunga, Daniel Nonkeneza, German Madotyeni and William Sabata attended, among others. They discussed “the sunset in the Transkeian Territories ANC” and somewhat pretentiously linked “prosperity and corresponding improvement in the standard of living of the population” with “restoration of the National Congress”. Gcingca reported that, despite ANC loyalty to State and Empire, the police assisted by thugs and local headmen had broken up the meeting. This “cold bloodshed ... without any reason” led him to

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75. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: Madalane, ANC Cofimvaba, – CMTT, 8 November 1927; CMTT – ANC Cofimvaba, 12 November 1927; Madalane – SNA Pretoria, [3?] December 1927.



question the government's legitimacy: "Our Congress [believes] we have been putting too much confidence" in the Minister of Justice and Empire.<sup>76</sup>

Invariably the State rejected the ANC's own claims of legitimacy among Africans. The Chief Magistrate in Umtata told Gcingca that in his opinion the ANC-TT "does not represent any large section of the people". He accused it of submitting grievances that "bristle with exaggeration". The Tsomo Magistrate told the ANC in Cofimvaba that their complaints about local government maladministration and taxes "do not concern your organisation". The Secretary of Native Affairs ruled that grievances should be taken up by individuals only through "recognised channels". It viewed the ANC as "the society which has in the past given considerable trouble by interfering in judicial and administrative matters". Gcingca, however, received official recognition as ANC-TT Provincial President by the national ANC convention in March 1929.<sup>77</sup>

The extent of popular support for the ANC-TT remains unclear. It managed to call meetings of quite large numbers of Africans to articulate their grievances and maintain branch structures in different places such as Tsomo and Cofimvaba. Its tactics consisted largely of protest letters and delegations. Organisation of radical proletarian forms of protest was limited in rural areas. Nevertheless, the ANC in the Transkei strongly opposed harsh labour exploitation and sympathised with victims of the recruitment system. It strove to represent the demands of all Africans, including black workers.

ANC members in the Cape were a remarkable group. They challenged State legitimacy and championed – if inconsistently and at times in magniloquent language – the rights of black workers. Such involvement indicates that it is invalid to characterise Congress as totally removed from workers. Nothing challenges orthodox opinions about the ANC more than Hofmeyr's claim that "outside Cape Town itself, the

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76. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: Gcingca, Gen. Sec. ANC-TT – Minister of Justice, 20 February 1928.

77. CAD: CMT 3/1471 42/C: W.T. Welsh, CMTT Umtata – Gcingca, 27 January 1927, 4 February 1927, rejecting 6 petitions; CMTT – Magistrate Tsomo, 24 October 1927; Magistrate Tsomo – ANC Cofimvaba, 17 October 1927, 27 October 1927; SNA – CMTT, 24 January 1927, 20 October 1927; Gcingca – J.B.M. Hertzog, PM, 15 April 1930.

organisation itself was almost entirely working class in character. There simply was no African petty bourgeoisie in the rural areas.”<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The sort of evidence adduced above, is replicable in one way or another for all other provinces and all other decades of ANC history. It shows both weakness and strength in local ANC commitment to workers. Organisational divisions and inefficiencies would have made the ANC appear, in the eyes of those workers aware of its policies, less able to deliver tangible relief from either race or class repression. Ideologies of ANC leaders set real limits to their understanding of and commitment to workers, although more radical ideologies facilitated this. Local ANC leaders were not driven purely by ideology. At times they responded practically to crises impacting on workers. Different discourses were made mutually understandable through the mediation of individuals who took the trouble to make connections in people’s minds between class and national oppression. Grassroots branches expressed concern about workers’ conditions, even though their discourses were often couched in *national*, and not class terms – and even when their protests were largely ineffective in the face of a powerful and intractable racist state.

The ANC today carries within it analogous complexities and divisions the better understanding of which, far from supporting African nationalist hagiography, helps to explain ANC contemporary power and appeal, as well as its enduring problems. It elucidates how these problems may partly be located in regional and local history, and the interaction of ideological, class, national and regional forces. In the 1920s, the weak ANC machine failed to build substantially upon the labour contacts it had tentatively established in radical days of 1918 to 1920. It lacked either a coherent programme to appeal continually to black workers, or the resources to mount constant actions in their support. Neither, however, could its political rivals, the ICU and CPSA, establish extensive, permanent bonds with black labour. By the end of the decade, the ICU was in terminal decline, and the CPSA literally under bombardment in Durban, starting to reel from internecine ideological disputes. By contrast, the less spectacular ANC maintained its slim structures and marched forward past the rotting ruins of the ICU.

Many historians view the ANC as comprising of a strictly urban, middle-class elite, but by showing the more persistent nature of ANC ties

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78. Hofmeyr, “Rural Popular Organisation”.

with working peoples and calling attention to the broader nature of its structures and support, I prove that a closer analysis is necessary. If this article has presented more of this hidden history, then much more needs to be uncovered from oral sources. In particular, regional variations in militancy suggest a still more complex organisation. Due to the greater local concentration of workers and the more labour-oriented approaches of their leadership, some branches had more contact with labour than others. Various leaders certainly took the “capitalist road”, but even they felt obliged, by their continued ANC involvement, to condemn the most ruthless cases of exploitation rhetorically.

The ANC operated in a complex milieu. In the 1920s, the issues of class struggle and national liberation became more entwined. An irregular sort of dialogue was opened between the ANC and ICU, as well as the ANC and CPSA, from which strategic questions about the nature of an ANC-labour alliance were formulated and tested. Intensified exploitation, combined with a denial of rights, threw together disparate social strata in a national coalition rarely explicit, but always implicit. A government report of the early thirties noted “growth of a Native nationalism” that “must be kept clearly in view when [considering] questions affecting” Africans’ socio-economic position.<sup>79</sup> When external or internal influences coincided and subjective or objective conditions were ripe, alliances emerged out of common suffering, but these were short-lived, due to organisational weaknesses and ideological differences. However, such alliances were later to underpin the major political formations of post-war black politics.

Historians have chosen to view cases of ANC contact with labour as mere radical interludes in an otherwise moderate history. However, when the history of all levels of the organisation is considered, the nature of the relationship between Congress and workers assumes broader and more long-term dimensions. The constant levelling process imposed by white society on different black strata encouraged their political unity. The very nature of South African society necessitated some kind of symbiotic relationship between the ANC and workers. The small size of both imposed parameters on the nature of their contact, but with weak black unions, a tiny CPSA, the ICU’s demise, and few permanent African nationalist rivals, it was really only the ANC that continued to stand between labour and a repressive government. It was this position vis-à-vis workers that offered the likelihood that eventually events would push Congress into a closer relationship. The CPSA was alert to this

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79. *Report of the Native Economic Commission, 1930-1932*, p 100.

probability when it grudgingly perceived in 1924 that “the exploiting class ... know that however moderate the aims and servile the language used by [ANC] leaders ... the march of events and the economic environment ... will ... drive them increasingly to recognise” the class nature of their struggle.<sup>80</sup>

The ANC took an often principled, if contradictory, stance towards labour in the 1920s. Congress protested, if spasmodically and often ineffectively, against attacks of the State and employers on workers. At other times, it distanced itself from workers, who responded with ambivalent attitudes to Congress. The ANC never condoned attacks on black workers. It did little to positively alienate them and sought to redress the worst features of their exploitation. The evidence outlined, suggests that ANC leaders regarded workers as part of their constituency, primarily as Africans, secondarily as workers. In the 1930s, the ultra-moderate policies of Seme (elected ANC President in 1930) drove a wedge in this symbiotic relationship. However, the provinces and branches kept the image of an ANC interested in and capable of representing all Africans, including workers, before the people. Once established at a local level, this image was hard to shift. The ANC was being internalised, becoming a household term of endearment, embedded in both rural and urban African political (and to a lesser extent) social culture. There was some justification then, for the claim by *African World* in 1925 that “*I-Kongilesi Lilizwi ezindi ezindlwini* (Congress’ Name is Household).”<sup>81</sup>

### Abstract

There are virtually no comprehensive provincial ANC histories. Historians hesitant to engage with the history of a new ruling political movement, should take political and regional history more seriously and rigorously. This article examines the complex history of politics and labour in general, and the ANC and black workers in particular, in the Cape in the 1920s. ANC leaders in the Cape regarded workers as part of their constituency, primarily in national, and not class terms. The history of this relationship shows both weakness and strength in local ANC commitment to workers. Leaders' ideologies set real limits to their understanding of, and commitment to workers, but they also responded practically to crises impacting on workers. Branches kept the image of

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80. “The Useful People”, *The International*, 22 August 1924.

81. “Umbhaleli Wezinto Ngezinto”, *The African World*, 1 August 1925.

an ANC interested in and capable of representing all Africans, including workers, before the people. The ANC was becoming a household term of endearment, embedded in rural and urban African political culture. There was some justification then, for the claim in 1925 that “*I-Kongilesi Lilizwi ezindi ezindlwini* (Congress' Name is Household).”

### **Opsomming**

**“*I-Kongilesi Lilizwi ezindi ezindlwini*  
(Congress se Naam is Alombekend)”:**

#### **Politiek en Klas in die Kaapprovinsie gedurende die 1920's**

Daar bestaan feitlik geen omvattende provinsiale geskiedenis van die ANC nie. Historici wat huiwer om die geskiedenis van 'n nuwe regerende party aan te pak, behoort die politieke en streeksgeskiedenis daarvan meer ernstig en nougeset te bestudeer. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die ingewikkelde geskiedenis van politiek en arbeid oor die algemeen, maar meer spesifiek ook van die ANC en swart werkers in die Kaap gedurende die 1920's. ANC-leiers in die Kaap het werkers as deel van hulle steunbasis beskou, veral in nasionale, maar nie klasterme nie. Die geskiedenis van hierdie verhouding wys op beide die swakhede en sterk punte in plaaslike ANC-takke se verbintenis tot werkers. Leiers se onderskeie ideologiese oortuigings het hulle begrip vir, en verbintenis tot werkers beperk, maar hulle het tog ook prakties opgetree wanneer werkers deur krisis geraak is. Takke het die beeld van die ANC as organisasie wat alle Afrikane, insluitend werkers, wil en kan verteenwoordig, aan die publiek voorgehou. Die ANC was vinnig besig om 'n geliefde huishoudelike naam te word met fundamente in beide die landelike en stedelike Afrika-politieke kultuur. Die verklaring: “*I-Kongilesi Lilizwi ezindi ezindlwini* (Congress se Naam is Alombekend)”, wat in 1925 gepubliseer is, blyk dus geregtig te wees.

#### **Key words**

1920s; African nationalism; African National Congress; ANC; Eastern Cape; Transkei; Western Cape; workers.

#### **Sleutelwoorde**

1920's; Afrika nasionalisme; African National Congress; ANC; Oos-Kaap; Transkei; Wes-Kaap; werkers.