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# Radical Encounters: Christianity, Garveyism and Revolutionary Syndicalism in the ICU, 1919-1939

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Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU)

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### RADICAL ENCOUNTERS: CHRISTIANITY, GARVEYISM AND REVOLUTIONARY SYNDICALISM IN THE INDUSTRIAL & COMMERCIAL WORKERS UNION OF AFRICA, 1919-1939

Presented by: Lucien van der Walt



Founded 1919 in Cape Town, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) exploded across southern Africa. The first mass black / Coloured movement – with 200,000 members across Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe – it overshadowed bodies like the African National Congress (ANC), Communist Party of SA and the Southern Rhodesia Bantu Voters' Association. The ICU dominated African politics for years, drew tens of thousands including women into politics, helped forge a popular counter-public, mobilised in communities and rural areas, and promised land and freedom through a general strike.

This paper focuses on the ICU's complex, syncretic politics, especially Christian, Garveyite and revolutionary syndicalist influences. Syndicalism – developing from Bakunin's anarchism – advocated a bottom-up, inclusive radical unionism, building consciousness and popular power until workers could occupy and self-manage workplaces, abolish the state and establish libertarian socialism. It was, the paper argues, an essential source of key ICU themes: class struggle, internationalism, One Big Union, autonomy from parties, and the emancipatory general strike. But syndicalism was only part of the ICU's contradictory, unstable politics which – poorly translated into strategy, or workers' control – contributed to its dramatic downfall. While the ICU lasted into the 1950s, its lessons and legacy remain.

SPEAKER: Professor Lucien van der Walt, sociologist and labour educator, Rhodes University, South Africa. His books include *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1880-1940* (2010/2014, ed. with Steven Hirsch), *Negro e Vermelho: Anarquismo, Sindicalismo Revolucionário e Pessoas de Cor na África Meridional nas Décadas de 1880 a 1920* (2014), *Politics at a Distance from the State: Radical and African Perspectives* (2018/2022, ed. with Kirk Helliker) and *Labour Struggles in Southern Africa, 1919-1939: New Perspectives on the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU)* (2023, ed. with David Johnson & Noor Nieftagodien). He is the current NALSU director.

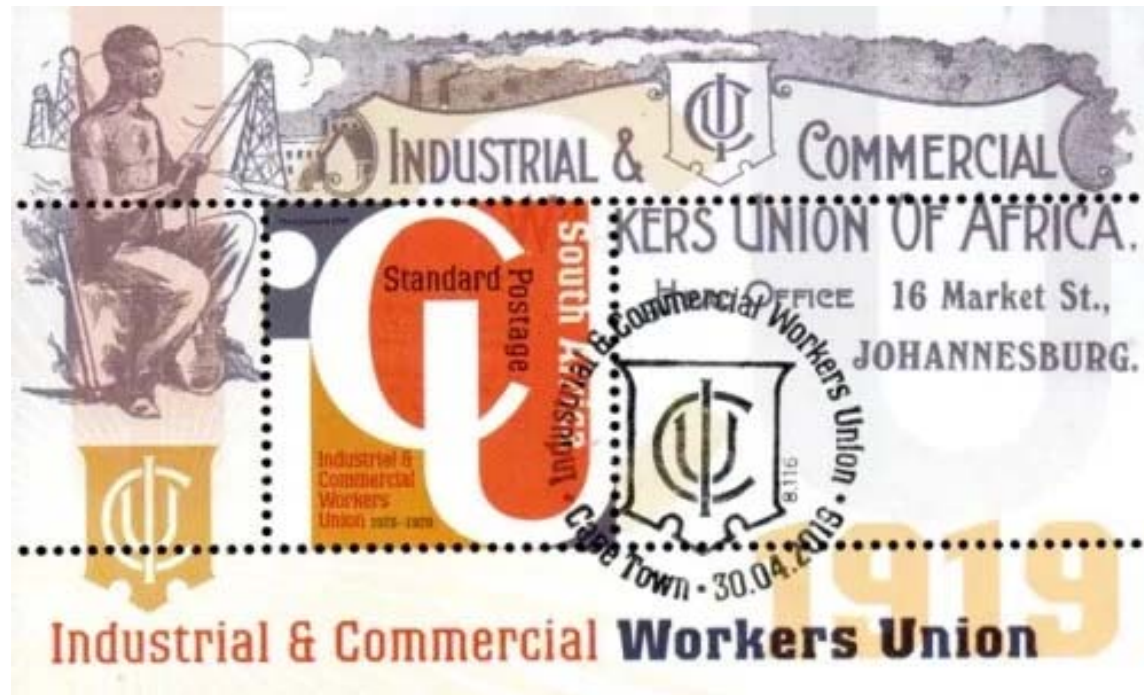


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# 1. Introduction

**ICU = Industrial & Commercial workers Union of Africa**

- Founded 1919, Cape Town
- Spreads across 6 countries, lasts into the 1950s
- Biggest black/ Coloured-based resistance (and union) movement of the era



Commemorative stamp for ICU centenary, South African Post Office, 2019

## **This seminar will discuss:**

- The context in which the ICU emerged
- The size as well as regional dimension of the ICU
- The importance of the ICU
- The politics of the ICU esp. “revolutionary syndicalism”
- What happened to the ICU?

## 2. Context: Capitalist revolution and empire

**Before 1880s, most of what becomes SA is:**

- Isolated from world economy
- Fragmented
- Rural
- Non-capitalist
- Class-divided & quasi-feudal  
inc. Afrikaner republics, black African states

## Gold, steam and *mielies*: the capitalist revolution

- 1880s: massive foreign investment in Witwatersrand mines
- Rise of world's biggest gold industry
  - Witwatersrand produces 40% of world's gold (1913)
- Mines soon centralised in 5 big “houses”  
e.g. Wernher, Beit & Eckstein (“Corner House”)
- “Houses” coordinated in Chamber of Mines

## *Rise of gold fosters:*

- Unprecedented urbanisation:
  - e.g. Cape Town: 45,000 (1875) to 170,000 (1904)
  - e.g. Johannesburg: 3,000 (1886) to 250,000 (1913)
  - = biggest, richest (ever) city in Africa south of equator
- Rise of (locally owned) capitalist farming in interior
  - = feeding the cities
- Some secondary industry e.g. cables, paint, metals
- Electrification, railway and harbour expansion

## Blood, iron and the British Empire

- Wave of British conquests from 1880s
  - e.g. Pedi and Zulu empires (both 1879)
  - e.g. Afrikaner republics (1880-1881, 1899-1902)
  - e.g. end of Eastern Cape “frontier wars”(1877-1879)
- “Union of SA” established in 1910
  - 1909 Act of (British) parliament
  - Type of colony: self-governing “Dominion” (like Australia)
  - A racist state (franchise, laws, all-white parliament etc.)



New SA state establishes own banks, corporations

e.g. PIC (1911), Land Bank (1913)

e.g. SAR&H (Transnet) (1916), ESKOM (1923)

Like mining, these are highly centralised, monopolistic

From 1920s, SA state actively promotes

- Basic industrial relations welfare
- Promoting industry (protection, loans, cheap labour etc) through import-substitution

## SA dominates southern Africa

- Major investor e.g. Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- Eswatini, Lesotho, parts of Mozambique: SA's "labour reserves"
- Namibia ruled by SA
- Efforts made to formally "incorporate" Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Zimbabwe as additional provinces

## 3. Context: the divided working-class

### **SA example (the patterns in neighbouring colonies vary):**

A highly centralised capitalism **and** state rest upon a vast, growing working-class

The growing urban workforce (1913, Witwatersrand):

- 195,000 black Africans on gold mines
- 43,000 in other jobs e.g. railways, warehouses
- 22,000 white workers on mines
- 15,000 in other jobs

The huge rural workforce (1920, national):

- 1 in 4 people in SA live in cities  
i.e. 1,733,000 urban, out of 6,928,000 total

## This growing working-class is fractured

- (mainly Afrikaner) unskilled “poor whites” vs (mainly immigrant, “English”) white artisans
- (mainly SA, black) township dwellers vs (hostel) rural “migrants”
- Large-scale use of labour from southern African region
  - e.g. 49% black mine workforce are non-SA (1920)
  - e.g. black “Nyasa” (Malawian) clerks on mines

## Basis of economy is cheap black labour

- Racist laws e.g. pass system, exclusions in labour laws, coercive contracts
- Racist practices: unequal wages etc
- “Migrant’ labour system incl. from other countries
- Job colour bar
- “Maximum average system” (wage ceiling)
- Farms

## 4. Born in a storm: the ICU

### **This growing working-class is militant**

White workers form 1<sup>st</sup> unions in region

- SA (1881)
- Mozambique (1901)
- Zimbabwe (1913)
- Namibia (1914)

(Some) racially mixed unions in Cape, Mozambique

Black African-based unions start 1917, with Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA)

## **Massive strike wave across southern Africa, 1916-1924 (all races)**

Angola: mass strike 1923

Mozambique: mass strikes 1917, 1920 and 1925-1926

Namibia: 1919-1920

South Africa

- 205 strikes from 1916-1922
- 1920: 46,000 black miners strike
- 1922: Rand Revolt – white workers' armed revolt

Zimbabwe: 1919, 1921

ICU: founded in Cape Town:

- Initial base: Coloured workers, esp. on docks
- One of wave of new black, Coloured unions from 1917

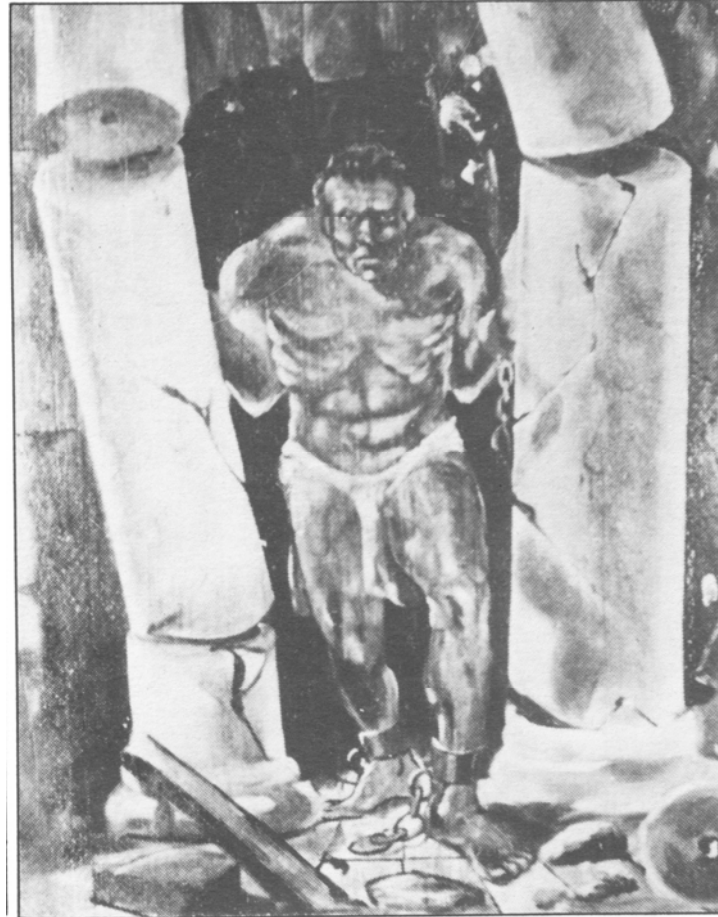
1919: December docks strike, with :

- ICU + (mainly black African) IWA
- Backing by (mainly) white unions e.g. NURHAS on railways

1920: Bloemfontein congress of black, Coloured unions

- IWA and others merge under ICU banner
- ICU declares aim of “**one great union south of Zambezi**”





**Portrait of Sampson, breaking the chains and bringing down the  
sinful: Johannesburg HQ of the ICU**



## Spread of ICU in South Africa

- Before 1925: mainly in Cape province
- From 1925: massive growth in interior, mainly black
- Sections in most big cities
- ICU “*veld* fire” in smaller towns, *dorps*, white-owned farms  
e.g. more ICU members King Williams Town than Bloemfontein,  
Durban (1925)
- Some presence in “native reserves”  
(including some chiefs)



**Mass meeting, ICU, South Africa, July 1929**



## Spread of ICU across southern Africa

- 1920: Namibia (South West Africa)
- 1927: Swaziland, Zimbabwe
- 1928: Lesotho
- 1931: Zambia

## In 1927, ICU in SA (alone) claims 100,000 members

- *Actual* figure over 200,000
  - (mainly white) SA Trade Union Congress: 35,000 (1927)
  - Communist Party of SA (1929): 3,000
  - ANC (before 1940s): 4,000
- Marcus Garvey's UNIA: 300,000 enrolled (worldwide)

## The rise of the ICU reflects

- The growth and centralisation of the black and Coloured working-class
  - Big employers e.g. government docks, diamond fields
  - Segregated neighbourhoods, hostels
- Massive changes on white-farms:
  - tenants are pushed into wage labour, or evicted
- A broader mood of militancy and hope
- An ability to connect up to workplace **and** township issues
- An ability to connect politics to a wide range of oppressed groups e.g. black women

## Some of its significance:

- Biggest black / Coloured revolt in region before 1940s
- Biggest union movement for decades
- Pioneered mass black/ Coloured “non-racial” unionism
- Massive, unmatched rural base esp. SA, Zimbabwe
- Regional form:
  - six countries, common issues
  - “globalisation from below”
  - Minimum wage for region (Henry Dee)
- Radical: anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist

## 4. Looking at the politics of the ICU

ICU politics were an unstable mixture, drawing on different sources

### Often contradictory

e.g. international working-class unity vs black, cross-class solidarity

- “One Big Union” across race, borders, trying to ally with white unions

**VS**

- “Africa for the Africans,” “the black man triumphs over the white man”

e.g. revolution vs moderation

- “If other workers were freed by revolution they in South Africa must also adopt that course”

**VS**

- Communists are “political murderers” – ICU will “constitutionally overthrow capitalism”

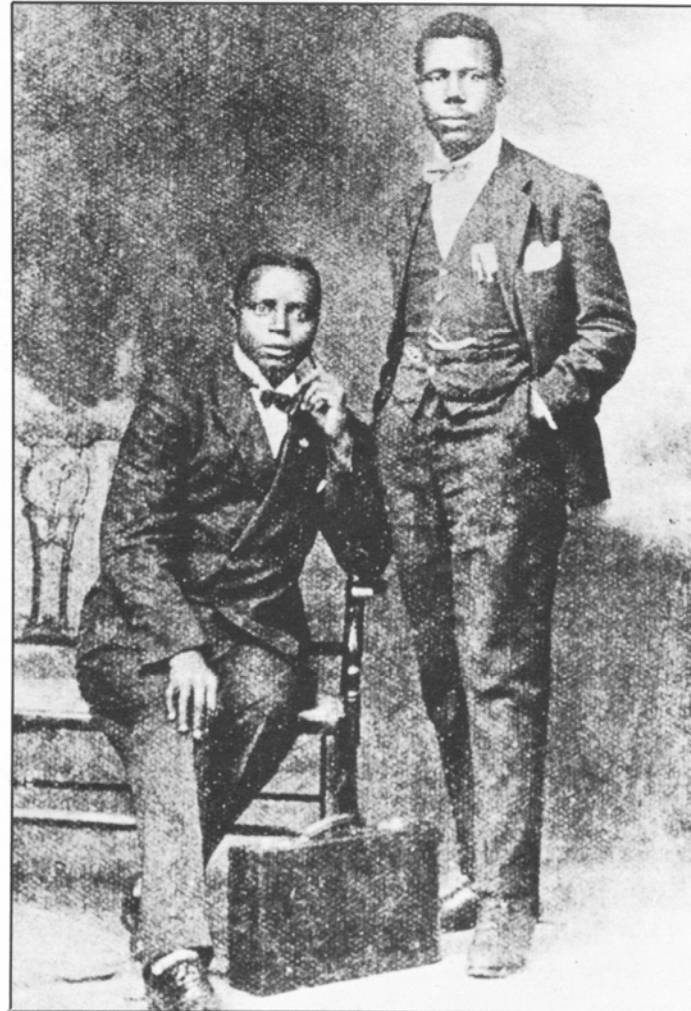
e.g. repeated anti-party stance vs unusual alliances

- “...this Organisation resolves unreservedly to dissociate itself from any political body whatever”

**VS**

- Campaigning for the National Party, aid from D.F. Malan and J.B.M. Hertzog in 1924 elections
- Changed over time, by place, speaker





**Clements Kadalie and A.W.G. Champion of the ICU in South Africa**

Unsurprisingly, the ICU was also a mish-mash:

- Mass rallies & promising an emancipatory general strike
- Daily activity centred on court cases, lobbying
- Land purchase and business schemes
- Rumours and hopes
  - e.g. that Christmas Day 1927, ICU will take over white-owned farms

To understand the ICU's politics, it is useful to suggest:

- ICU politics were more than the sum of their parts
  - Reworked, blended themes: not passive
  - Adapted ideas to contexts, local idioms, concerns
  - Instability was a *defining* feature
- ICU politics were “syncretic”
  - Merged and changed originally discrete traditions
  - Created something new, unique

## There were numerous influences: I will look at just 3

### **Christianity:** ICU used Christian themes and universalism

- “Christ, when he lived on earth, challenged the existing order, and as the greatest agitator known to mankind, he became the victim of the rulers of the Jews”
- “... the real object” of the ICU call for workers to run industry, “is an attempt to put into modern language the teachings of Christ, namely ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’ ... by ‘Doing unto others as ye would they should do unto you’”

Many ICU members and leaders were Christians

## Garveyism:

ICU sections drew on Garvey's messianic pan-Africanist movement: "Africa for the Africans"

- "Africa shall be restored to us even if it be by blood"
- "... a new and powerful race of people is to come shortly out of the sea, and an end will then be made of all tyranny and wrong"
- "*Ama Melika ayeza*" ("the Americans are coming")

There was some overlap between parts of the UNIA and ICU in 1920s Namibia, SA and Zimbabwe

Garveyism directly influenced ICU business schemes

## **Revolutionary syndicalism:**

- Comes from Bakuninist anarchism, not Marxism
- Widespread (globally) into the early 1930s
- SA influences include IWA, early left, parts of early Communist Party of SA

## **Core ideas**

- Political parties are dishonest, divisive, futile, bourgeois
- The state, including elections, represents the ruling class

- Build democratic, inclusive mass unions, across borders:
  - Accumulate power to resist, based on direct action, **not** courts, parties, elections
  - Build popular consciousness, education (political & technical)
  - Develop organisational structures, democratic experience
  - Fight on **all** issues affecting working-class
  - Seize means of production through a general strike
  - Run economy through unions, not state

## Revolutionary syndicalism: a direct influence on ICU

- “...we will give you a damned good lesson, by putting a stop to all your railways, mines and harbours and domestic services; then you may do without us”
- The One Big Union would “assist in abolishing the Capitalist Class, who were in reality only a small body but owned practically everything”
- “...our ... definite objective is complete control of industry to those who work industries and the land to those who work the land”



- The ICU is an "an industrial organisation" that aims at "industrial and political democracy by and through the emancipation ... of the African worker," a "co-operative commonwealth," "nothing more and nothing less..." (*The Truth About the ICU*, 1927)
- "... between the two classes, a struggle must always obtain about the division of the products of human labour, until the workers through their industrial organisations take from the capitalist class the means of production, to be owned and controlled by the workers for the benefit of all ..." (1925 ICU constitution)

## Syndicalist influences **help** explain the ICU's:

- Anti-capitalism and distance from parties
- “One Big Union” vision
- Expansive view of unionism
- Transnational operations
- Vision of emancipatory general strike
- Aspirations for taking over farms (and factories)

## 5. Why were ICU links to syndicalism ignored in many studies?

### Early commentary on ICU stressed these influences:

- "... the natives ... have adopted as their model in forming a union one of the most extreme and revolutionary types of union that exists in the world ... the syndicalist union ... more political than industrial"

(Harry Sampson, SA Labour Party, 1928, in parliament)

- The ICU demonstrated "pronounced anarcho-syndicalist tendencies"

(Albert Nzula, Communist Party of SA, 1934, in the *Negro Worker*)

## Syndicalist influence largely ignored in studies from 1960s

### Why?

1. A heavy focus on the (empty) question of whether ICU was a “movement,” “party” or “union”

**BUT** ICU was simply a mass union, that was highly political

2. The effort to present ICU as a **nationalist** movement

**BUT** it was much more complicated

### 3. The global decline of syndicalism:

- Unfamiliar to many later scholars/ caricatured in debates
- Led to tendency to conflate the radical left with Marxism
- And to conflation of left influences on ICU with CPSA influence
- Also assumed that early CPSA was solidly Marxist-Leninist

### 3. Over-reliance on Communist Party-linked interpretations of ICU

e.g. Andrews, Roux, Simons.

- These date ICU leftism to *entry* of party into ICU (1924)
- They claim ICU became “right-wing” *after* expelling party (1926)

## BUT

- Left incl. syndicalist influences on ICU *precede* 1924
- SA had a large syndicalist milieu *before* the Communist Party of SA of 1921 (including the IWA)
- Many CPSA founders had a syndicalist background, & “syndicalist concepts remained within the Communist Party for many years after its foundation”  
(Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, official history of party)
- ICU’s politics barely changed after the communists were expelled

## 6. Four conclusions

### 1. We cannot read ICU story off the story of the ICU in SA

The ICU started to collapse in SA in late 1920s

**BUT**

- It grew in Zimbabwe into 1930s, and was revived in 1940s
- It first emerged in Zambia 1931





**The ICU in Zimbabwe: Solomon Maviyane and Charles Mzingeli,  
1952**



## 2. The ICU cannot be understood *without* syndicalism

## 3. The ICU was *not* a syndicalist union

It was one of a number of politically syncretic movements that drew on syndicalism, or anarchism.

- The first *Zapatismo* (Mexico, 1910s +)
- The Ghadar Party (India, Kenya, USA, 1910s+)
- The original *Sandinistas* (Nicaragua, 1920s +)

## 4. Diversity is not always strength

The ICU's politics mitigated against clear strategy including for a general strike

The ICU leaned instead into promises, charisma

The ICU reliance on rallies led to limited workers' control

This opened door to

- corruption, splits
- many rumours and millenarianism
- disillusion as high hopes were dashed

## Sources:

- All sources for quotes from ICU available on request from [l.vanderwalt@ru.ac.za](mailto:l.vanderwalt@ru.ac.za)
- The paper on which this talk was based will appear in a forthcoming book