



**‘Before Communism: Rethinking the Early  
Socialist Movement in South Africa’**

**Lucien van der Walt**

**(Department of Sociology,  
University of the Witwatersrand),**

**Seminar 2003/8**

**Paper to be presented at 16:00 on Friday, 9 May 2003, in  
Development Studies Seminar Room (D506)**

**\*\*\*Please do not copy, quote or cite without author’s  
permission\*\*\***

### **Introductory note:**

*This paper is drawn from the introduction to my forthcoming PhD thesis, "Anarchism and Revolutionary Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904-1921," and outlines the main arguments developed in that work. I have chosen to present it at this seminar in order to outline my main arguments, and my critique of the mainstream historiography of the left in South Africa, and in order, of course, to receive critical feedback.*

*Three main themes are developed. The first is an argument for rethinking the history of international socialism in a manner that takes far greater account of the role of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism before the rise of Communist parties in the 1920s, an argument that places particular emphasis on the role of anarchism and syndicalism in the non-Western world between the 1880s and 1920s. The second theme is a substantial and substantive critique of the received interpretations of socialist history in South Africa, a historiographical survey that demonstrates how the pre-Communist Party of South Africa left has been caricatured and marginalised in a discourse that identifies the history and achievements of the left with the evolution of the Communist Party.*

*Finally, this paper outlines the main points that are developed elsewhere in my thesis through a re-examination of the intellectual and organisational history of the left in South Africa before communism, which centre on two main propositions: that the early left was heavily influenced by anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism; and that the early left pioneered a sophisticated and principled opposition to racial divisions and inequalities in South Africa within an anarchist framework. In short, a re-examination of the history of the pre-Communist Party left raises serious questions about the reliability of the accepted accounts of the socialist history in South Africa, and suggest that this early left is better understood as a component of the "glorious period" of international anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism spanning the 1890s and 1920s, rather than as a mere prelude to a "real" history that begins with, and is borne by, Communism.*

### **Introduction: the spectre that haunted Capital**

Between the 1890s and the early 1920s, the spectre of revolution haunting the capitalist world was not that of Marxist communism. It was revolutionary syndicalism, an anti-authoritarian socialist movement rooted in the anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), who challenged Karl Marx for control of the International Workingmen's Association, the "First International," that operated between 1864 and 1877.<sup>1</sup> In this period, revolutionary syndicalism represented both a larger, and a more

---

<sup>1</sup> It was not, of course, the "first international workers association": several similar projects had existed in previous years. The term "First international" is an intellectual construct by later historians who have periodised the history of international labour organisations in relation to Marxist involvement therein. Hence, the term "First International" was applied to the International Workingmen's Association; the term "Second International" was applied to the Labour and Socialist International founded in 1889; the term "Third International" to the Communist International, founded in 1919. In this way the history of anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist internationalism in the 1880s, 1900s, and 1920s is removed from the historical record.

dynamic and militant opposition to capitalism than its revolutionary Marxist counterparts. It is partly to the recovery of this global history that this thesis is directed.

## **Before communism: rethinking the history of the revolutionary left in South Africa**

This thesis makes a number of core arguments. The premise of this thesis is that global history of the revolutionary socialist left of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries needs to be reassessed: far more weight needs to be given to the influence and histories of non-Marxist forms of revolutionary socialism, and the general conflation of Marxism with revolutionary socialism needs to be replaced with a far more nuanced analysis of the character of the revolutionary left in this period. This is not, however, an original argument. A number of country studies have shown that the influence of revolutionary Marxism in many settings, notably within the semi-industrial countries of the east and South, but also within important sectors of the industrialised countries, has been exaggerated, and that, before the Russia revolution of 1917 culminated in the seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party, the revolutionary left in general was identified with anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism. Thus even Eric Hobsbawm, doyen of British Marxist historians, commented in his uneven essay on “Bolshevism and the Anarchists,” that <sup>2</sup>

... in 1905-1914, the marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical marxism ...

This is, if anything, an understatement. Significant anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist influence extended in many countries back into the early 1890s, and lasted in some areas into the 1920s – and in some instances, even into the 1930s and 1940s- as well. This was, as Howell notes, indeed a “significant radical movement,” whose history has been “buried under subsequent defeats and political orthodoxies.”<sup>3</sup> As Hobsbawm notes, as well, with the rise of Bolshevism, anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism “entered upon a dramatic ... decline.”<sup>4</sup>

This historical backdrop is worth emphasising for two main reasons: firstly, because the history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism “has not been well-served by the academy” <sup>5</sup> and is generally not well-known; and, secondly, because the international context is of great significance to the subject of this thesis. A balanced global history of the revolutionary socialist left – and of

---

Notes from first session/ discussion (28 April 2000), input from the floor, conference on *History of the Revolutionary Workers' Movement*, St. Denis Bourse du Travail, Paris, 28-29 April 2000, organised as part of *Le Autre Futur* congress of the Confederation National du Travail (Vignolles), 24 April to 1 May 2000.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hobsbawm, 1993, “Bolshevism and the Anarchists,” in his *Revolutionaries*, Abacus, London pp. 72-3

<sup>3</sup> D. Howell [check date], “Taking Syndicalism Seriously,” *Socialist History*, number 16, p. 30

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, 1993, *op cit.*, p. 73

<sup>5</sup> R. Graham 1985, “Review Essay [on Anarchism]”, *Telos* no. 60, p. 197

anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism specifically- provides an invaluable backdrop against which the arguments of this thesis may be made.

The main aim of this thesis is to re-examine the history of the revolutionary left in South Africa in the first three decades of the twentieth-century, with specific emphasis on the left before the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in June 1921. The core argument of this thesis is that anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism constituted the core expressions of the organised revolutionary left in South Africa in the late 1900s and 1910s, and continued to exert a noticeable influence on the revolutionary left into the 1920s. Thus, the international wave of anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist activism of the 1890s-1920s broke upon the shores of South Africa in the early twentieth-century, where it influenced local revolutionaries and militants who generated some fascinating contributions to the broader anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist intellectual tradition. In the Witwatersrand region, as well as in Cape Town and Durban, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists published regular newspapers, a wide range of pamphlets and leaflets, held innumerable public meetings, and engaged in the rallies and solidarity work that were characteristic of revolutionaries of the time. In doing so, these early revolutionaries sought to build a class-conscious, revolutionary, trade union movement that united workers across racial lines in "One Big Union" that would overthrow capitalism and the State, and institute workers self-management of the means of production.

In pursuit of these radical, and advanced, goals, the early left played a pioneering role in the formation of early trade unions by workers of colour, amongst which unions it exerted a not inconsiderable influence, and also entered into relations with, and influenced, emergent Coloured and African nationalist organisations. Furthermore, although the founders, and many of the key cadres of the early left were drawn from the White working class, the organisations of which they were part recruited the first people of colour to the socialist movement in South Africa, many of whom would go on to play an important role in the CPSA and in the trade union movement of the 1920s. Notably, the ideas of the early left would live on, in distorted form, in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) which peaked at 100,000 members in 1927, mainly farm workers and tenant farmers, invoking the image of the One Big Union and the cataclysmic general strike that would liberate the ICU's rather vaguely defined constituency: "the people." In contrast, it may be noted, the influence of these early anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists groups upon the White labour movement was rather negligible, and relations with organised White labour – and White workers more generally- were rather fraught.

Underpinning both the increasingly close relationship with workers of colour, and African and Coloured nationalists, and the poor relations with White labour, was the long-standing, and increasingly voluble, commitment of the South African anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists to racial integration and the removal of racial discrimination. The discourse of the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist left, which rejected both scientific racism and the various forms of segregationist thinking that abounded in South Africa, is of great interest. Drawing on the generally anti-segregationist positions of the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist left internationally, the South Africans developed a number of interesting theoretical and political innovations which merit a

close analysis. The South African anarchist and revolutionary current waned in the 1920s with the founding of the CPSA, and the rise of more assertive forms of African nationalism, reaching its nadir in the 1980s when it could be safely claimed that anarchism has “been almost completely absent from the South African political scene.”<sup>6</sup>

The arguments presented above contrast with the generally received picture of the left in South Africa before communism in two main important ways. The standard picture of the history of socialism in South Africa is that a nominally Marxist, but in practice, rather dogmatic, and generally fairly racist, socialist movement emerged in the 1910s, and was confined to sectors of White labour in this period. This was replaced in 1921 by the CPSA which, through a process of trial and error, and not without misgivings, developing into an increasingly multi-racial and anti-racist Marxist communist movement that was characterised by increasing levels of activism and attention to racial issues. This image of the history of the radical left in South Africa is drawn in large part from the accounts of left history developed by writers associated with the CPSA, and its successor, the South African Communist Party (SACP), which was founded underground in 1953, after the CPSA dissolved in 1950. Although it reflects in large part the somewhat self-congratulatory and teleological self-image of the Party, this narrative has profoundly influenced the literature, its inaccuracies notwithstanding.

By contrast, this thesis disputes the identification of the early left with Marxism, and the tendency to periodise the early left by reference to advances in Marxist policies. The political function of this approach is to appropriate the history of the left in South Africa for Marxism in general, and the CPSA, and its successor, the SACP, in particular. The analytical effect of this approach is to excise a rich, important and complex history of non-Marxist socialism in South Africa from the historical consciousness. Further, as will be evident from the outline of the main arguments of the thesis provided earlier, the thesis rejects the approach which attributes to the CPSA the pioneering role in combating racial discrimination in South Africa, demonstrating the profoundly anti-racist theory and practice of the pre-CPSA left.

## **Socialism, anarchism and Marxism**

I will return to all of these arguments later in this introductory chapter. First, however, it is necessary to explicate some of the key definitions that will be deployed in this thesis, and to introduce the reader to the global history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism. This will be followed by a review of the literature, and a detailed exposition of the core arguments of the thesis.

Regarding the term “socialism,” it may be defined as a political ideology that advocates the socialisation of the means of production and distribution in order to achieve social justice, economic equality, and personal freedom.

Thus, socialism may, on the one hand, be understood as part of the democratic project of Western modernity that (at least formally) rejects unearned social privileges, inherited inequality, and authoritarianism in favour of individual freedoms and opportunities in a rationally constructed social order. On the other hand, however, socialism is at odds with one of the most distinctive features of

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Leatt, T. Kneifel, and K. Wurnburger (editors), 1986, *Contending Ideologies in South Africa*, David Philip/ Cape Town, Johannesburg, WMB Eerdmans/ Grand Rapids, p. 248

Western modernity, industrial capitalism, in which production is orientated towards profit making and the accumulation of further capital.

Whereas liberal authors such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill tended to identify deregulated capitalism as an arena of individual freedom and choice, socialists were anti-capitalist in orientation, attributing to capitalism the creation of social inequalities via a process of economic exploitation. In order to secure profit, the owners of the means of production remunerated wage earners (and, in some versions of socialism, small family farmers or “peasants”) at rates less than the sum of their total productive output, thereby “exploiting” this class in the production process. Concomitantly, the distribution of products via the market for money was seen as discriminating against low –income earners whose needs could not be secured by the limited purchasing power arising from exploitation; thus, a disjuncture necessarily arose between the needs of wage earners and small farmers and the effective demand they were able to muster in the market place.

Socialism is, like other modern ideologies, a rather diverse school of thought, whose proponents have differed from one another in terms of social analysis, organisational strategy, and emphasis to be placed upon the different core values of the socialist tradition. Thus, socialists have differed from one another regarding the way that “capitalism” is to be defined and analysed, the manner in which socialism was to be achieved, and the relative importance of economic equality and individual freedom.

Within the broad school of thought that is socialism, a convenient distinction may be drawn between two broad approaches, which will be referred to as “libertarian” and “political” socialism. From the libertarian socialist perspective, the nation-State was a hierarchical and undemocratic structure, constituted to serve the interests of social elites and both structurally incapable – and organisationally at odds with – a project of selfemancipatory social change. Socialist transformation required self-organisation and “direct action” by oppressed social classes outside of – and against – the levers of State power, aiming at a *stateless* socialist society based on “free federations of free producers” engaged in self-management of the economy. Thus, from the libertarian socialist perspective, the rejection of capitalism is a reflection of a broader opposition to hierarchical social structures *in general*, of which capitalist exploitation, work, and forms of distribution are only one set of examples. This, in turn, reflects a social analysis that, whilst not methodologically individualist, certainly places the concerns of the individual at the centre of the analysis, and a belief system according to which the value of any social arrangement can only be its utility in securing individual freedom.

Anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism are the foremost examples of the “libertarian” or “anti-authoritarian” socialist tendency. Anarchism is often incorrectly identified with chaos, a misconception that some self-identified anarchists have sometimes reinforced through irresponsible political actions. However, anarchism, properly speaking, is a modern political ideology that draws upon the ideals of both liberalism and early modern “utopian” forms of socialism, as well as on many elements of Marxist economic analysis, combining a commitment to the belief that individuals *should* be free to act as they see fit, provided that this does not undermine the freedom of others to do likewise, with a critique of the power relations that *prevent* this freedom from being exercised.

The “political” socialist tendency was that which advocated a “political battle against capitalism waged through ... centrally organised workers’ parties aimed at seizing and utilising State power to usher in socialism”.<sup>7</sup> In the period covered by this paper, “political” socialism was exemplified by classical Marxism, which sought to achieve these goals through revolution, and by parliamentary, or reformist, socialism, sometimes known as “social democracy,” which sought to do as much through gradual reform via the modern democratic State.

Classical Marxists participated in parliaments wherever possible, but maintained a commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in favour of a self-styled “workers’ state” or “dictatorship of the proletariat”; reformist or parliamentary socialists sought through a process of gradualist reform to transform capitalism into socialism via democratic, but capitalist, States. Relations between these two main schools of political socialism have often been fraught, as was the case with the debate between self-styled orthodox Marxists and “revisionists” within the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) – the bulwark of the “Second” International, or the Labour and Socialist International, founded in 1889 by socialist and labour parties, which lasted until the First World War in 1914<sup>8</sup> - that began in the 1890s onwards. However, it must be borne in mind that this debate, as well as later debates between Leninist communists and parliamentary socialists, and amongst Leninist communists themselves – between “Stalinists” and Trotskyists - were controversies *within* the political socialist tradition.

### **Mikhail Bakunin, 1814-1876, and the birth of revolutionary anarchism**

Anarchism emerged as a distinct political current in the First International in the latter 1860s, in large part through debates with “political” socialist approaches. Political socialism, centred on Marx, had some sway in the First International, and without a doubt dominated the “Second” International, from which anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists were largely excluded at an early stage.

There were, indeed, some precedents for anarchist thought in Enlightenment thought, such as the writings of William Godwin in England, sections of the utopian socialist movement of the early nineteenth-century, notably that represented by Charles Fourier, and in the work of the radical French artisan, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. One might even go further, and find anarchist-like ideas amongst the philosophers of the ancient Greek and ancient Chinese worlds.<sup>9</sup> But anarchism, understood as a theory of class struggle coupled with a revolutionary strategy to create a stateless, and socialist, society, emerged only in the 1860s, and in large part through debates with the political socialist tradition in the First International, notably, with the older, classical Marxist, tradition. It is through a

---

<sup>7</sup> W. Thorpe, 1989, *The Workers Themselves: revolutionary syndicalism and international labour 1913-23*, Kulwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/ Boston/ London, and the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1989, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> A succinct history of the Second International is provided by J. Joll, 1966, *The Second International, 1889-1914*, Harper Colophon Books, New York,

<sup>9</sup> A fascination with the antecedents of anarchism is a common practice in accounts of anarchist history by both anarchists and academic studies: see, for instance, P. Marshall, 1994, *Demanding the Impossible: a history of anarchism*, Fontana; M. Nettlau, [1934] 1996, *A Short History of Anarchism*, Freedom Press, London; and Rocker, [1938] 1989, *Anarcho-syndicalism*, Pluto Press, London. Unfortunately, few studies draw an adequate distinction between anarchism and pre-anarchist forms, a matter to which this thesis will return in a subsequent chapter.

consideration of the key elements of these debates that many of the core features of anarchism may be delineated.

Classical Marxists and nascent parliamentary socialists within the First International placed their faith within the nation-State form that was then emerging in much of the West, and which was increasingly – albeit unevenly - associated with popular enfranchisement. However, whilst the anarchists accepted much of the Marxist critique of capitalism, and, indeed, preferred democratic to absolutist States, they simultaneously rejected the tactics of using the nation-State to win reforms for the working class and the tactic of using parliament as a propaganda platform, tactics common to both classical Marxists and parliamentary socialists. They further rejected the strategies of replacing capitalist nation-State with a socialist one, either through revolution or through parliamentary victory. The State itself, from their perspective, embodied the principles of hierarchy, centralisation, and rule by elites to which the anarchists were averse, and consequently could not be used as an instrument to remove those very principles. Furthermore, with an eye on the experience of the French Revolution,<sup>10</sup> the anarchists maintained that a self-styled revolutionary “dictatorship of the proletariat” would in all likelihood be even more ruthless than contemporary capitalist regimes; with an eye on developments in Serbia, Germany and Russia, the anarchists found the notion that the nation-State could be peacefully wrested from the capitalist class equally difficult to credit.

The anarchist critique of capitalist modernity thus went far further than that of the “political” socialists, embracing both a critique of capitalist *exploitation* and a generalised rejection of social *domination*. Politically, this analysis had clear tactical and strategic implications. If capitalism had to be abolished, so too had the nation-State. This required that an insurgent and *self-organised* movement of the working class and peasants be organised which could both confront and defeat capitalism and the State, *and* supplant both with structures of self-government from amongst the oppressed classes. It was of profound importance that the movement against capitalism and the State *prefigure* the new social order that would supplant both: radically democratic and decentralised in structure, libertarian and participatory in ethos, and egalitarian in intent and practice. Thus, whilst anarchism shares with liberalism concerns about individual freedom, and a fear of State power, it parts ways with liberalism on two decisive points: it rejects capitalism as inimical to liberty, and it rejects the State as inimical to the preservation of individual freedoms.

Anarchism does not cohere around a central founding figure as does Marxism, but if a “Karl Marx of anarchism” has to be identified, he will be found in the formidable personage of Mikhail

---

<sup>10</sup> Anarchists and classical Marxists drew rather different lessons from the French Revolution of 1789. Whereas the Marxists favoured the “Jacobin” tradition, identified with the terror of the revolutionary government under Danton and Robespierre, the anarchists argued that the “real” French revolution had been the popular action and self-organisation of the poor, the *sans couettes* (the “shoeless”) with whom the anarchist identified, and whose revolution from below the anarchists argued had been drowned in blood by the terror from above. From this follow different estimations of the historical significance of the French Revolution itself: for classical Marxists, it was the archetypical - and necessarily - bourgeois revolution, from which proletarian revolutionaries might nonetheless draw inspiration and models of revolutionary action; for the anarchists, it was a lost opportunity, in which a popular uprising was destroyed by an elitist *counter*-revolution which, from 1794, replaced the aristocracy with an equally venal bourgeoisie. See, on this matter, *inter alia*, the comments of Daniel Guerin, 1989, “Anarchism and Marxism,” in D. Goodway, editor, 1989, *For Anarchism: history, theory and practice*, Routledge, London/ New York, pp.119-121.

Bakunin, the Russian émigré around which the anarchist faction of the First International cohered. Bakunin was the eldest of ten children of a minor Russian nobleman, and was born on May 18, 1814.<sup>11</sup> In 1840 Bakunin went to St. Petersburg and then to Germany, studying with the intention of securing a professorship at the University of Moscow. His increasing political radicalism, however, dashed these plans. In 1844, he was driven from Germany, arriving in Switzerland, which he had to leave for France after the Russian authorities sought his extradition. In Paris he met both Karl Marx and Proudhon, but he was expelled from France in 1847 after he denounced the Russian government on the anniversary of the 1830 Polish insurrection. In June 1848 he went to Prague, where he sought to influence the Slavic Congress and was involved in a weeklong insurrection.

Bakunin then left for Breslau, but was expelled from both Prussia and Saxony, ending up in the principality of Anhalt where he wrote in 1848 his famous *Appeal to the Slavs: by a Russian patriot, Mikhail Bakunin, member of the Slav Congress*.<sup>12</sup> In this he appealed for unity between revolutionary Slavs, Germans, Hungarians and Italians to effect the overthrow of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia and Russia to be followed by the free federation of the emancipated Slavic nations. His politics at this stage were not anarchist, but rather those of a radical pan-Slavic nationalist. In January 1849, Bakunin was involved in preparations for an insurrection in Bohemia, based in Leipzig; in May, he was a leading figure in the Dresden rising against the King of Saxony, an event that greatly enhanced an already formidable revolutionary reputation. Arrested in Chemnitz, he was turned over to the Prussian authorities, then the Austrians, and finally, the Russians, where, under a life sentence he was confined to the Fortress of Peter and Paul in 1851. In 1854, he was moved to Schlüsselburg prison, where he contracted scurvy. In 1857, his sentence was commuted to exile in Siberia where he married and then escaped dramatically via Japan and the United States, arriving in London in December 1861.

It is from this point onwards that Bakunin's transformation from pan-Slavist to revolutionary anarchist took place. He continued to be active in the Polish struggle, but was disappointed by the failure of the 1863 Polish rising. By this time, a change had become evident in Bakunin's approach to the struggle for national independence. His writings in 1862, whilst still focused on the Slavic question, now linked to the national emancipation of Slavic peoples directly to class struggle in a unambiguous manner: independence must also involve the abolition of the nobility, land redistribution, and the creation of a society of peasants and workers.<sup>13</sup> Following an unsuccessful attempt to organise a Russian legion in support of the Polish insurrection of 1863, Bakunin went to Stockholm, where he was reunited with his wife. In 1864, Bakunin was reunited with Marx, this time in London, and the elderly Proudhon in Paris, before going to Italy, where much of his subsequent activity would take place. Here Bakunin founded a secret organisation of European revolutionaries, known as the "International Brotherhood" or "Alliance of Revolutionary Socialists," in 1864, an organisation whose programme anticipated elements of anarchism. In 1867, Bakunin joined The League for Peace and

---

<sup>11</sup> The main source for this biographical background is the account by Bakunin's close friend, James Guillaume: see J. Guillaume, "A Biographical Sketch," in S. Dolgoff, editor, 1971, *Bakunin on Anarchy: selected works by the activist-founder of world anarchism*, Black Rose, George Allen and Unwin, London

<sup>12</sup> The text is included in Dolgoff, editor, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 63-68

<sup>13</sup> Guillaume, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 33-5 and, more importantly, Dolgoff, 1971, *op cit.*, editors note 9, pp. 384-387

Freedom, an international pacifist body, hoping to win its members to the Brotherhood's views. By this stage, it is quite clear, Bakunin had abandoned his pan-Slavism for revolutionary socialism, meaning that a clear distinction must be drawn between his writings before and after 1864.

In 1868, Bakunin and the Brotherhood resigned from The League, immediately reconstituting themselves as a public organisation, the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, which applied to join the First International, which had been established some years earlier, but which had only recently become prominent. From the start, the Alliance members exercised a significant influence in the First International, and founded its largest section, the Spanish. They also cooperated with the Marxists in pushing the organisation in a revolutionary, socialist, direction, but by the fourth general congress of the First International, held in Basle, Switzerland, in September 1869, tensions between political socialists and those broadly within the libertarian socialist camp had become pronounced. The First International split three years later in September 1872 when a controversial congress stage-managed by Marx, and held at the Hague, expelled Bakunin from the organisation; a second congress, held at St. Imier in Switzerland, immediately repudiated the Hague congress; and, by 1873, the International was effectively divided into a Marxist rump, based in New York, which withered soon after, but only officially dissolved in 1876, and a self-described "Anti-Authoritarian International" which functioned until 1877.

It was in this titanic clash between the tendencies represented by Marx and by Bakunin, a powerful speaker, an insightful writer, and a figure of world renown in his own lifetime, that anarchism – as an ideology, and as a movement - was born. Here one finds the genesis of the anarchist doctrine, and the roots of many of the anarchist mass movements that would shake the capitalist world over subsequent decades. Having entered the First International, notwithstanding the longstanding personal antipathy between himself and Marx, Bakunin soon emerged as spokesman for the libertarian socialist faction that evolved into the anarchist movement. His views soon developed into those of a consistent anarchist. Arguing that "every command slaps liberty in the face,"<sup>14</sup> he insisted that the exercise of freedom was only truly possible in a post-capitalist, but modern, social order that provided opportunities for self-realisation, self-expression and the development of the human personality to all of its members.

Thus, anarchists aimed, said Bakunin, "to organise society in such a manner that every individual, man or woman, should find, upon entering life, approximately equal means for the development of his or her diverse faculties and their utilization in his or her work."<sup>15</sup> This reordered society would be a form of socialism, but one based on the values of individual freedom, self-management, decentralisation, federalism, and free association, rather than one identified with state power and the rule of a "socialist" party. In place of a centralised "dictatorship of the proletariat," mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, and federal forms of organisation; in place of political homogeneity, diversity and self-expression. Bakunin expressed this vision in his dictum that "freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice and ... Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Bakunin, [1871a] 1971, "God and the State," in Dolgoff, editor, *op cit.*, p. 240

<sup>15</sup> M. Bakunin, n.d., *The Capitalist System*, Libertarian Labour Review

<sup>16</sup> M. Bakunin, n.d., *op cit.*

## From anarchism to revolutionary syndicalism

Revolutionary syndicalism was an outgrowth of the anarchist movement, a variant which developed mainly from the 1880s onwards, and which argued that the working class must emancipate itself from capitalism and the State through the formation of revolutionary labour unions that would perform a dual role. In the short-term, the revolutionary unions would organise workers as a *class-conscious* force in defence of their immediate interests. In the long-term, the revolutionary unions would provide the vehicle through which the workers will seize direct control of the means of production in a revolutionary general strike (or “lockout of the capitalist class”). In this way, the State and the capitalist system would be replaced with socialism based upon workers’ self-management through the trade unions.<sup>17</sup> With its distrust of bureaucracy, centralisation, politicians and trade union officialdom, and its emphasis upon shopfloor control of trade unions, and ultimately, the economy, revolutionary syndicalism raised fundamental questions about the meaning of democratic and socialist politics.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, the roots of the term “revolutionary syndicalism” are easily understood: “syndicalism” from the French for “unionism,” and “revolutionary” to distinguish the approach from mainstream unionism. In part because of the French, and Continental, associations of the phrase “revolutionary syndicalism,” activists in the English-speaking world often rendered the term into English, the lengthier term “revolutionary industrial unionism” enjoying some currency in Australia, New Zealand and the United States in the early twentieth-century.

Was revolutionary syndicalism merely a synonym for anarchism? In an important sense, yes, insofar as all of the key ideas of revolutionary syndicalism are derived from the anarchist movement of the 1860s and 1870s - notably in the anarchist sections of the First International, the Spanish in particular, and the work of Bakunin and the programme of the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy, all of which expounded a recognisably revolutionary syndicalist praxis - and insofar as most revolutionary syndicalist organisations identified with the libertarian wing of the First international and with the anarchist tradition in general. Even as hostile an observer as Frederick Engels noted, writing of Spain in 1873, “In the Bakuninist programme a general STRIKE is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started.”<sup>19</sup>

However, matters are somewhat more complex than this tidy categorisation would suggest, for two reasons. On the one hand, not all anarchists were revolutionary syndicalists, and, indeed, a minority of anarchists were vehemently opposed to the revolutionary syndicalist approach. Revolutionary syndicalism cannot thus be conflated with anarchism, but is better understood as an anarchist *strategy*. On the other hand, not all revolutionary syndicalists identified themselves as anarchists, some avoiding the label in order to bolster claims that syndicalism was “independent” of ideology (which was therefore open to workers of all creeds, often a necessity for establishing large and functioning unions), whilst others, largely drawn from dissenters in the Marxist movement,

---

<sup>17</sup> Thorpe, 1989, *op cit*.

<sup>18</sup> D. Howell [check date], *op cit*, pp. 35-6

<sup>19</sup> F. Engels, 1873, “The Bakuninists at Work: an account of the Spanish revolt in the summer of 1873,” available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/bakunin/index.htm>, emphasis in original

embraced revolutionary syndicalism without much cognisance of its anarchist roots, and without explicitly identifying with anarchism. To some extent, it was possible to disarticulate revolutionary syndicalism from anarchism, but only at a rhetorical level.

The latter point requires some caveats to be entered into the argument so far. Whilst political socialists have historically overwhelmingly represented the Marxist tradition, a few parliamentary, reformist socialists have defined themselves as “Marxists,” whilst the political practice of many self-declared Marxists has often been largely gradualist and reformist in character. Furthermore, Marxism cannot be *reduced* to political socialism because on several occasions, radical – but minority- Marxist currents have emerged which have distinctly libertarian features. Most notable amongst these was the “council communism” of the 1920s, which opposed trade unions, parties and the State as instruments for working-class emancipation in favour of federated workers' councils, and characterised the Soviet Union as a “red fascist” State-capitalist regime.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, whilst core differences evidently exist between the anarchist and Marxist and parliamentary socialist approaches, one needs to be very careful indeed in how one uses these terms; even the term “Marxist” is not free of possible confusion. In the interests of clarity, this thesis will therefore use the term “classical” or “orthodox” Marxism to refer to *revolutionary* Marxists, most notably those associated with figures such as Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin.

The term “libertarian Marxism” will be applied exclusively to radical, minority, Marxist currents which are broadly within the libertarian socialist tradition. These must be distinguished from the revolutionary syndicalists, who share neither the council communists antipathy to unions, nor draw on the Marxist intellectual and political tradition. Doubtless, there were revolutionary syndicalists who called themselves Marxists, just as there were anarchists who called themselves Christians, and parliamentary socialists who revelled in the name “Marxist.” Self-identification is not, however, a particularly useful basis for analytical classification. What matters to this analysis is the actual political theory and practice, and the demonstrable intellectual roots, of the ideologies professed by activists. Thus, parliamentary or gradualist socialists will be referred to as such, even if they refer to themselves as Marxists.

## **The “Glorious Period” of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, 1890s-1920s**

It was with the great clash in the First International that one finds the first real parting of the ways between the political socialists and the libertarian socialists. Before the time of the First International, no great mass movements for socialism existed anywhere in the world. Socialism existed neither as a mass movement, and was often interpenetrated with other forms of popular radicalism. Distinctions between political and libertarian socialists were equally vague. It was only in the latter years of the First International that socialism in Europe became a powerful social movement.

---

<sup>20</sup> The “ultra-left” tendencies that developed into council communism were the target of Lenin's 1920 polemic: V.I. Lenin, [1920] 1964, *“Left-wing” Communism: an infantile disorder*, progress Press, Moscow. On council communism, see R. Gombin, 1978, *The Radical Tradition: a study in modern revolutionary thought*, Methuen and Co., London, and M. Shipway, 1987, “Council Communism”, in M. Rubel and J. Crump (editors), *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Macmillan, 1987

All of the socialist movement, however, grew up in the shadow of the First International, and were shaped profoundly by the clash between Bakunin and Marx that brought the venerable and mighty organisation crashing down. Anarchists and Marxists might cooperate in future, but the great schism in the socialist camp was not healed. The different trajectories of the German and Spanish socialist movements from this time onwards exhibit the split most clearly: the German movement coalesced, for the most part, into the SDP in 1875, with the participation of Marx and Engels, and went on to dominate the Second International; the Spanish section of the First International, imitated by Bakunin's agent Giuseppe Fanelli in 1868, adopted Bakunin's anarchism from a very early stage, becoming a model for anarchists worldwide and the largest anarchist movement in western Europe.

The twin growth of mass socialist parties and large anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movements against the backdrop of an older tradition of trade union organisation was, in part, a function of the rapid growth of the working class itself in Europe, the Americas and Australasia. The first unions that can truly be regarded as revolutionary syndicalist emerged in Spain in the 1870s and Chicago in the 1880s. However, the "glorious period"<sup>21</sup> of the movement lasted from the 1890s into the 1920s, starting in France in 1895 where "the Anarchists, beginning with their famous 'raid' on the unions in the nineties had defeated the reformist Socialists and captured almost the entire French trade union movement."<sup>22</sup> The French breakthrough inaugurated the "glorious period" of revolutionary syndicalism as an organised labour movement from the 1890s into the 1920s.<sup>23</sup> Revolutionary syndicalist ideas were a prevalent, often dominant, influence on revolutionary socialist groups across the world, and quite substantial revolutionary syndicalist labour unions were established in Europe, the Americas and parts of Asia and Africa. Revolutionary syndicalists established, or came to influence, unions in countries as varied as Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United States of America, Uruguay and Venezuela,<sup>24</sup> and, as this thesis will demonstrate, in South Africa. The typical revolutionary syndicalist union was radically decentralised into self-governing branches; the typical union organiser and official, unpaid for their activism.

In some instances, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists gained control of the main trade unions and trade union federations in their countries. Argentine, Brazil, Cuba, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Uruguay represent these cases. In others, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists founded or controlled substantial minority unions, but the largest union centres eluded their grasp: examples of this situation include Canada, Chile, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, and the United States. Finally, there are those cases in which anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists played a prominent influence within trade unions, but did not succeed in fundamentally changing union

<sup>21</sup> The phrase is taken from H. Beyer-Amesen, winter 1997-1998, "Anarcho-syndicalism: a historical closed door ... or not?" *Libertarian Labour Review*, 22, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, 1936, *op cit.* p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> The phrase is taken from Harald Beyer-Amesen, "Anarcho-syndicalism: a historical closed door ... or not?" *Libertarian Labour Review*, 22 (winter 1997-1998), p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> For partial overviews of the history of revolutionary syndicalism, see Thorpe 1989, *op cit.*; van der Linden and Thorpe, editors, 1990a; P. Marshall, 1994, *Demanding the Impossible: a history of anarchism*, Fontana; M. Nettlau, [1934] 1989, *A Short History of Anarchism*, Freedom Press, London; Rocker, 1989, *op cit.*

aims and policies: examples include Ireland, where the revolutionary syndicalists James Connolly and Jim Larkin founded and led the Transport and General Workers' Union, Britain, where Tom Mann and the Industrial Syndicalist Education League were active in the Trades Union Council in the 1910s, the United States, where William Z. Foster and his Syndicalist League of North America, and its successors, played a significant role in the American Federation of Labour in the same period,<sup>25</sup> as well as Egypt, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, and Russia.

It was against this backdrop that anarchism entered East Asia in the twentieth-century. In China, anarchism emerged in 1906-7 anarchists founded the first modern labour unions in 1917, published the first Chinese labour journal, and had organised at least forty unions by 1921,<sup>26</sup> and became the main left-wing revolutionary tendency in the 1910s.<sup>27</sup> In Japan, anarchism emerged in the first decade of the century, particularly under the impetus of Kotoku Shusui and Osugi Sakae from 1905 onwards, and by the 1920s anarchists controlled two radical (but rival) union federations, one aligned to the "pure anarchists," the other to revolutionary syndicalism. In Korea, anarchism came to play an important part in the anti-colonial movement, particularly from 1919 onwards (although there was no real union movement in this overwhelmingly agrarian country).<sup>28</sup> In 1928, an Eastern Anarchist Federation with affiliates in China, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam was formed, apparently by Korean anarchists.

As Joll comments, "anarchism in association with trade unionism was to show itself ... an effective and formidable force in practical politics,"<sup>29</sup> and Hart adds "Anarchosyndicalists organised tremendous numbers of actor workers into syndicates which advocated communalised worker ownership of the factories."<sup>30</sup> Clearly, however, the as the Korean example indicates, the rise of revolutionary syndicalism also provided an impetus to the formation of anarchist movements even where the trade unions were a negligible force.

Two categories of workers were strongly represented in the revolutionary syndicalist unions: on the one hand, casual and seasonal labourers, such as construction workers, dockers, farm workers, and gas workers, were prominent; on the other hand, revolutionary syndicalism attracted many workers affected by the second industrial revolution that began in the 1890s - centred on electrification, the internal combustion engine, the emergence of new heavy industries, and Taylorism, such as mass production factory workers, miners, and railway workers.<sup>31</sup> Overall, the new movement was heavily based amongst unskilled and semi-skilled workers, but also attracted skilled tradesmen. In addition to its ability to respond to the immediate needs of these workers, revolutionary syndicalism's rapid rise from the 1890s reflected a growing disillusionment amongst workers in

---

<sup>25</sup> W.Z. Foster, 1936, *From Bryan to Stalin*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp. 63-126

<sup>26</sup> Dirlik, 1991, *op cit.*, pp. 15, 27, 170

<sup>27</sup> Dirlik, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 170

<sup>28</sup> Ha Ki-Rak, 1986, *op cit.*, pp. 19-69

<sup>29</sup> Joll, 1964, *op cit.*, p. 188

<sup>30</sup> Hart, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 8

<sup>31</sup> M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe, 1990, "The Rise and fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism," in van der Linden and Thorpe, 1990a, *op cit.*, pp. 7-12 (this article is hereafter referred to as van der Linden and Thorpe, 1990b, *op cit.*). Also see L. Peterson, 1983, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: revolutionary industrial unionism, 1900-1925," in J.E. Cronin and C. Sirianni, editors, *Work, Community and Power: the experiences of labour in Europe and America, 1900-1925*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, pp. 68-75.

political socialism and reformist unionism, a growing radicalisation of significant sectors of the working class, the increased use of the general strike by the working class, and the need for new forms of union against an increasingly centralised capitalist class.<sup>32</sup>

The Spanish case, the best-known mass anarchist movement of the twentieth-century, is rather less “exceptional” than is often suggested. In *numerical* terms, certainly the National Confederation of Labour (or CNT) of Spain, weighing in at 1,500,000 members was larger than any other revolutionary syndicalist union; however, in *relative* terms – that is, in relation to the size of the Spanish working class and the size of the organised labour movement – the CNT, which represented only half of organised Spanish labour, was rather *smaller* than such movements as the Brazilian Workers’ Confederation (COB), the House of the Workers of the World (or COM) in Mexico, the National Labour Secretariat (NAS) in the Netherlands, the Regional Workers Federation of Argentine (FORA), the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in Portugal, and the Regional Workers’ Federation of Uruguay (FORU), all which were by far the largest labour federations in their respective countries.

It is certainly true that anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism did not share classical Marxism’s antipathy towards the peasantry. If Marxism viewed peasants as a declining, and hence, reactionary, social class, the anarchist tradition maintained that peasants were no less a potentially revolutionary class than proletarians. However, the centrality of revolutionary syndicalism to anarchist history directly contradicts the common Marxist cliché that anarchism was an anti-modern movement by independent artisans and small peasants, the “petty bourgeoisie,” a view shared in many respects by authors Joll, Kedward and Woodcock.<sup>33</sup>

The largest anarchist movements in history were the revolutionary unions of the “glorious period” of revolutionary syndicalism; the majority of people enrolled into anarchist social movements were waged workers; the great strongholds of anarchist power were, in most cases, urban industrial enclaves, the bastions of anarchy in the late nineteenth- and first quarter of the twentieth-century cities such as Alexandria, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Guangzhou, Havana, Hunan, Lima, Lisbon, Madrid, Montevideo, Mexico City, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Santiago, Shanghai, and Tokyo. Greatest of all was Barcelona, the famed “fiery rose of anarchism,” the anarchist world capital, and the heart of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), the successor to

---

<sup>32</sup> Peterson, 1982, *op cit.*, pp. 51-68; Van der Linden and Thorpe, 1990b, *op cit.*, pp. 12-17

<sup>33</sup> Thus, Koplinsky, introducing a collection of writings by Marx, Engels and Lenin dealing with anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, argues that anarchism was a “petty-bourgeois socio-political trend,” representing “petty bourgeois protest” against modern industry and the modern State that safeguarded it, and cites Lenin’s characterisation of anarchism as “petty bourgeois revolutionism.” N.Y. Koplinsky, 1972, “Preface,” to K. Marx, F. Engels and V.I. Lenin, *Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, pp. 9, 22. Joll claims, without substantiation, that “the basic ideas of anarchism are all contrary to the development of large-scale industry and of mass production and consumption” and that the anarchists were convinced that “in the new society man will live in extreme simplicity and frugality and will be quite happy to do without the technical achievements of the modern age.” Kedward claims that “the backbone of anarchism” were artisans and poor peasants “threatened” by “industry and mechanisation” and Woodcock argues “much of the rank and file of the movement was made up of artisans ... of poor and primitive peasants, of those shiftless, rebellious sections of the lower classes ... of all those thrust aside by the Juggernaut of nineteenth-century industrial progress ... superseded by profound changes in the structure of society ... and in the methods of production ... among the industrial workers, the anarchists won only temporary and limited victories.” See Joll, 1964, *op cit.*, p. 277; Kedward, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 24-6; Woodcock, 1975, *op cit.*, pp. 444-5

the Spanish Regional Federation and the FTRE, which grew from an inauspicious beginning in 1911 to one and half million members by 1936. Anarchism was, in short, anything but a revolt against modernity by declining classes: it was, above all, a dynamic and modern working-class movement that sought to collectivise industrial production and replace the nation-State with an international system of self-management.

There were indeed significant anarchist peasant movements - In Korea, Mexico, Spain and the Ukraine - but, even so, rural anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism was anchored upon unions amongst waged rural labourers: this was true of attempts to organise farm workers in Patagonia, Argentina, in 1921, farm labourers in Italy, of the largely urban<sup>34</sup> Spanish CNT's' agrarian unions in Andalusia, the United States IWW's efforts amongst farm workers and lumberjacks in the mid-Western grain belt, the deep South and the Pacific Northwest, and the Canadian IWW's organising drives amongst farm workers in Alberta and lumberjacks in Ontario.<sup>35</sup> Many, but no means all,<sup>36</sup> of the anarchist leaders were, indeed, formerly independent artisans reduced to factory workers, often skilled tradesmen, and a notable proportion of its urban members proletarianised peasants,<sup>37</sup> but to characterise the anarchist movement as a whole as primarily orientated towards the class interests of small independent producers on this basis - its focus on waged proletarians notwithstanding - is a gross misapprehension of the class basis of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>38</sup>

As Joll comments, "anarchism in association with trade unionism was to show itself ... an effective and formidable force in practical politics,"<sup>39</sup> and Hart adds "Anarchosyndicalists organised tremendous numbers of actor workers into syndicates which advocated communalised worker ownership of the factories."<sup>40</sup> Clearly, however, as the Korean example indicates, the rise of revolutionary syndicalism also provided an impetus to the formation of anarchist movements even where the trade unions were a negligible force.

Furthermore, I noted earlier that anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism were often the dominant *revolutionary* socialist current in many countries in their "glorious period": if compared to

---

<sup>34</sup> M. Bookchin, 1994, "After Fifty Years: the Spanish Civil War," in his *To Remember Spain*, *op cit.*, p.46

<sup>35</sup> Anarchist labour organisers, for example, organised a series of agricultural general strikes in the Po Valley in Italy from 1906 onwards, and the farm workers, in van der Linden and Thorpe's words, formed an "important hard core of syndicalism," whilst the United States IWW refused to organise small farmers, but did succeed in organising farm labourers and lumberjacks through its Agricultural Workers' Organisation - its single most successful union - and the Brotherhood of Timber Workers. See Bookchin, 1977, *op cit.*, pp. 172-176; Foner, 1965, *op cit.*, pp. 233-257, 472-486; G. Jewell, 1975, *The History of the IWW in Canada*, IWW Chicago; Levy, 1989, *op cit.*, pp. 52-3; Mitchell, 1967, *op cit.*, p. 264; van der Linden and Thorpe, 1990, *op cit.*, p. 7. I would like to thank Jon Bekken of the *Industrial Worker* for supplying me with Jewell's article.

<sup>36</sup> Radical university-trained intellectuals also played a central role, with Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta only the best known of this trend. Other examples include Pietro Gori in Argentina, Fábio Luz and Neno Vasco in Brazil, Li Shizeng and Liu Shippei in China, Jaun Francisco Moncaleono in Colombia, Enrique Roig de San Martí n in Cuba, Elisée Reclus in France, and Plotnino Rhodakanaty and Ricardo Flores Magon in Mexico.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Bookchin, 1977, *op cit.*, pp. 69-71; Hart, 1978, *op cit.*, pp. 17, 85-7, 166-7

<sup>38</sup> The argument for the centrality of "artisans" rests, in the final analysis, upon a play on the term "artisan," which is clearly used in much of the literature on anarchism to denote *both* independent producers *and* skilled waged tradesmen, suggesting a fundamental continuity undisturbed by proletarianisation. In this way, no distinction is drawn between factory workers and small workshop owners, and the reader is left with the anomalous impression that vast modern trade unions primarily represented small proprietors.

<sup>39</sup> Joll, 1964, *op cit.*, p. 188

<sup>40</sup> Hart, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 8

classical Marxism, for example, even relatively small revolutionary syndicalist union movements often overshadowed their radical political socialist rivals in both numbers and social and political impact as components of the revolutionary left. This was, for instance, the case in Australia, China, and, arguably, Britain and the United States. Indeed, it is quite possible by the early twentieth-century to identify members of the Second International and political socialist parties who embraced revolutionary syndicalism, and rejected political socialism in theory and practice. The USI itself, for example, originated from a faction of the Italian Socialist Party, whilst the moderate Socialist Party of America found it necessary to expel revolutionary syndicalist such as William "Big Bill" Haywood from its ranks for advocating "physical force" tactics.

Thus, considered by several criteria – the absolute and relative size of the revolutionary syndicalist unions, the social and political impact of the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalists, and the size of the anarchist and revolutionary current, as opposed to that of revolutionary political socialism – the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movement indeed enjoyed its heyday from the 1880s to the 1920s. From this perspective, Joll's claim that it was only in Italy and Spain alone had "the influence of Bakunin been really deep or lasting"<sup>41</sup> must be treated with a great deal of scepticism.

In the countries of Anglo-Saxon orbit, revolutionary syndicalism was exemplified by the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW or "Wobblies"), which had sections in Australia, Britain, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, New Zealand and the United States, and, as will be discussed below, South Africa. The IWW was founded in the United States in 1905, and aimed at organising all workers into "One Big Union" in order to overthrow capitalism and the state through the revolutionary "One Big Strike".<sup>42</sup> The "Wobblies" developed into an international movement, attracting adherents and supporters in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand, as well as in Chile, Ecuador and Mexico. In the United States, Canada, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico, the IWW existed primarily as an independent minority union movement, although IWW and revolutionary syndicalist ideas also drew support from sections of the left. In the United States, this was especially true of the Socialist Labour Party of Daniel De Leon, an ostensibly Marxist grouping that developed into revolutionary syndicalists with Marxist rhetoric from 1905 onwards, but the IWW model even enjoyed a short period of influence within the rather moderate Socialist Party of America. In Australia and New Zealand, the IWW existed primarily as a current *within* the existing labour movement, a vocal and influential minority rather than an independent union organisation. In both Australia and Britain the IWW model

---

<sup>41</sup> Joll, 1966, *op cit.*, p. 18

<sup>42</sup> There is an extensive and growing literature on the IWW in the United States and in Canada. Most noteworthy are S. Salerno, 1989, *Red November, Black November: culture and community in the Industrial Workers of the World*, State University of New York Press, F. W. Thompson and P. Murfin, 1976, *The IWW: its first 70 years*, IWW, Chicago, and P. S. Foner, 1965, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-17*, International Publishers, New York. For the IWW in Australia, see V. Burgmann 1995, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: the IWW in Australia*, Cambridge University Press. The IWW in Chile and Mexico are discussed in N. Caulfield, 1995, "Wobblies and Mexican Workers in Petroleum, 1905-1924", in *International Review of Social History*, number 40, J. Hart, 1978, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860-1931*. Texas University Press, and P. DeShaze and R.J. Halstead, October 1974, *Los Wobblies Del Sur: the Industrial Workers of the World in Chile and Mexico*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, mimeo. For a not entirely accurate overview of international IWW activities, see also P. Renshaw, 1967, *The Wobblies: the story of syndicalism in the United States*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, pp. 275-293

was championed by the Socialist Labour Party and by propaganda groups calling themselves the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the IWW.

In North Africa, anarchist movements emerged in Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia by the 1880s, arose in less developed parts of Asia, such as India and the Philippines, by the 1930s. Interestingly, only in the Middle East and tropical Africa were anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism noticeable by their absence. This can largely be attributed to the late development of an organised working class in these countries. Outside of parts of southern Africa and North Africa, labour movements were latecomers to the African political scene: in most of tropical Africa trade union movements did not emerge until the late 1920s and 1930s,<sup>43</sup> precisely when the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist tide had begun to ebb; by the time the anti-colonial movements of tropical Africa emerged on a significant scale in the 1940s, anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism had disappeared as a significant force worldwide. Of great importance in this regard was the growing prestige of Bolshevik power in the Russian territories, now renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, (the Soviet Union, or USSR), an ostensibly living proof of superiority of political socialism that would last until 1989.

Leading massive labour struggles, and organising, often, as we shall see, national minorities alongside other workers in integrated unions, campaigning against war and for the rights of women and for racial equality, breaking down the barrier between colonial and metropolitan workers, the revolutionary syndicalists of the “glorious period” sent shivers down the spines of the capitalist class.

### **The curious case of the missing South African anarchists**

And yet, what of South Africa? Strikingly, astonishingly, it would seem – if one were to judge from the literature on local labour and socialist history - anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism were entirely absent. Most writers would concur with the judgement of the historian of anarchism Max Nettlau argued in 1934 that “there has been no libertarian activity worth mentioning” in South Africa.<sup>44</sup> A recent overview of different political ideologies in South Africa claims, for example, that anarchism has “been almost completely absent from the South African political scene.”<sup>45</sup>

To the extent that the words “anarchism,” “anarchy” and “syndicalism” appear in South African political autobiographies, histories, and polemics, they tend to operate more as terms of opprobrium than as useful descriptions of ideologies and social movements. The absorbing autobiography of Ronnie Kasrils, a leading member of the SACP, and its ally, the African National Congress (ANC), describes the turmoil engendered by these parties’ turn to armed struggle in 1961.<sup>46</sup> Rowley Arenstein, a relative of Kasrils, and an ANC and SACP stalwart, was among those who disagreed with the new “adventurism.” Kasrils recalls how Rowley avidly consulted “the texts of Lenin” and “produced screeds of criticisms which declared that the actions were ‘anarchistic.’” Striving to settle the

---

<sup>43</sup> I. Davies, 1966, *African Trade Unions*, Penguin, Harmondsworth; B. Freund, 1988, *The African Worker*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

<sup>44</sup> Nettlau, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 262

<sup>45</sup> Leatt, Kneifel and Wumburger, 1986, *op cit.*, p. 248

<sup>46</sup> R. Kasrils, 1993, *Armed and Dangerous: my undercover struggle against apartheid*, Heinemann.

argument, Rowley “handed me the Lenin volume and suggested I read the essay on ‘anarchism.’”<sup>47</sup> The 1936 autobiography of Gilbert Coka, an organiser in the giant Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa (ICU) in the 1920s, uses the term “anarchism” in a similar manner.<sup>48</sup> As the ICU – the largest African trade union and political movement of the first half of the twentieth-century – spiralled into collapse in the late 1920s, Coka travelled to the organisation’s Head Office at this time to try and prevent further disintegration. If he had been shocked by the maladministration and corruption of rural ICU branches, he was even unhappier with the centre: “The I.C.U. Head Office showed all [the] signs of anarchism and laxity...”<sup>49</sup>

As for the term “syndicalism,” it has largely been applied in the literature to describe the independent African trade union movements of the 1970s and early 1980s, notwithstanding the absence of any conscious or explicit “syndicalist” tendency in these unions. Seidman’s comparative study of independent industrial unionism in Brazil and South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, uses the term “syndicalism” to describe both the conservative Brazilian state-controlled unionism of the 1930s to the 1970s *and* the increasingly militant “non-racial” (but predominantly African) independent unions in South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>50</sup> She does not show what is “syndicalist” about either group of unions, and at no point defines what she means by the term; this is rather an irony, given the rich history of specifically anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist activism and insurgency in early twentieth-century Brazil.<sup>51</sup> Even if Seidman intends to use the term “syndicalism” to describe a particular union *practice*, she does so poorly, insofar as she never explicitly defines that practice, and uses the term in a manner that has neither internal consistency (using it to refer, for example, both to State-controlled unions and to independent unions) nor any consistency with the history of revolutionary syndicalism.

The standard history of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), by Baskin, describes how “syndicalists” favouring independent trade unionism, class politics, and a socialist goal opposed African nationalism and direct links with the ANC,<sup>52</sup> but does not demonstrate what was actually “syndicalist” about these unionists. Instead, he seems to be deploying the term without any understanding of the actual history and political positions of the historical revolutionary syndicalist and anarchist movements. In speaking of “syndicalism” in this manner, Baskin is, however, doing no more than adopt the parlance of the mid-1980s polemics in the anti-apartheid movement, in which

---

<sup>47</sup> Kasrils, *op cit.*, p. 44

<sup>48</sup> G. Coka, [1936] 1991, *The Autobiography of Gilbert Coka, 1910-1935*, UWC Historical and Cultural Centre, Bellville, The Mayibuye Library series, number 1

<sup>49</sup> Coka, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 45

<sup>50</sup> G. Seidman, 1994, *Manufacturing Militance: workers’ movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985*, University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, pp. 161, 199

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, J. W.F. Dulles, 1973, *Anarchists and Communists in Brazil, 1900-1935*, University of Texas Press, Austin, London, and E.A. Gordon, 1978, *Anarchism in Brazil: theory and practice, 1890-1920*, PhD thesis, Tulane University

<sup>52</sup> J. Baskin, 1991, *Striking Back: a history of COSATU*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, pp. 3, 13, 97, 101, 113-5, 117, 202-11

independent unionists critical of an alliance with the ANC were routinely dubbed “workerists,” “economists” and “syndicalists” by ANC and SACP supporters.<sup>53</sup>

If anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism were, indeed, so strikingly absent in South African history, this must be explained. It is hardly self-evident. There is every reason to suppose that these currents would have had some influence in the country. South Africa was, following the discovery of gold in 1886, one of the “focal points of capitalistic activity in the world economy,”<sup>54</sup> the local labour movement that emerged from the 1890s, and the small groups of socialists that emerged in the early 1900s, were well-known to labour papers the world over, and foreign socialist papers were distributed from at least the 1880s. South Africa became integrated into the international flows of European labour, predicated upon cheap shipping that linked Western Europe, North America and Australia. The skilled White labour force that helped open up the gold-mines was drawn heavily from Australia, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, the United States, all areas where anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, and the IWW, had some influence: in the 1890s, up to 85 percent of White workers on the mines were British-born.<sup>55</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that at some of this White labour would presumably have been influenced by revolutionary syndicalism. Furthermore, European immigration played a key role in bearing anarchist and revolutionary ideas to other semi-peripheral countries in the same period, notably Argentina, Brazil and Cuba.<sup>56</sup> Anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist currents in Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia were started by immigrant Greek, Italian and French workers and political exiles and refugees who founded newspapers, unions, and made attempts to organise amongst indigenous workers.<sup>57</sup> Even more interestingly, a strong anarchist current emerged amongst immigrant Portuguese workers and trade unionists in the port of Maputo in Mozambique, the Portuguese colony bordering on South Africa, in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>58</sup> Most of these workers came from Portugal to

---

<sup>53</sup> See, in particular, the 1986 article, “Errors of Workerism,” which appeared without a by-line in *Isizwe - the Nation: journal of the United Democratic Front*, volume 1, number 2. It was widely held at the time that Jeremy Cronin, a central ideologue in the SACP, was the article’s author; the United Democratic Front was, in any event, strongly supportive of the ANC by this time.

<sup>54</sup> Bransky, D., 1974, *The Causes of the Boer War: towards a reappraisal*, University of London, mimeo, p. 1

<sup>55</sup> E. Katz, 1994, *The White Death: silicosis on the Witwatersrand gold mines, 1886-1910*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Hart, 1978, *op cit.*; Marshall, 1994, *op cit.*

<sup>57</sup> On North Africa, see, *inter alia*, Nettleau, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 262; ‘Stiobhard,’ “Libertarians, the Left and the Middle East,” online at <http://members.tripod.com/~stiobhard/east.html>; “Stiobhard,” personal communications, 13 November 1998, 15 November 1998, in my possession; also see J. Gomez, 1986, *Anarchist Organisation: a history of the FAI*, Black Rose, Montreal; F. Lamendola, 1997, “Remembering Luigi Fabbri,” in *The Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library*, number 11, translated from *Umanita Nova*, 6-11-1988; S. Mahomed, 1994, *Appels Aux Travailleurs Algeriens*, Volonte Anarchiste: Edition Du Groupe Fresnes Antony, Paris, edited by Sylvain Boulouque; Oliver, 1983, *op cit.*, p. 15; Poole, 1981, *op cit.*, p. 42; V. Richards, 1993, “Notes for a Biography,” in Vernon Richards, (editor), *Malatesta: Life and Ideas*. Freedom Press. London. p. 229, 347; Steckloff, 1928, *op cit.*, p. 355; G. Woodcock, 1975, *Anarchism: a History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, Penguin, new edition with postscript, pp. 236-8

<sup>58</sup> J. Capela, 1981, *O Movimento Operario em Lourenco Marques, 1898-1927*, Edic es Afrontamento, Porto. I am grateful to Jeremy Grest of the University of Natal Durban for directing my attention to this source, and for translating key passages, and commenting on others. I have not seen this issue mentioned in the main texts on Mozambican labour available in English [need to add references]

Mozambique, and were consequently strongly influenced by the revolutionary tradition of the anarcho-syndicalist General Confederation of Labour, the dominant trade union centre in Portugal.<sup>59</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing, the puzzle, if anything, becomes even more difficult to solve. To pose the issue in one way: South Africa had qualitatively more White labour immigration than any other country in Africa, far more industrialisation than any other country in Africa, and thus the largest working class on the continent and a level of development comparable to that of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, as well as the most turbulent labour relations of any African country during the “glorious period” of revolutionary syndicalism, and yet seemingly had negligible anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist influence compared to African countries that were far less developed and far less polarised. To pose the issue in another way: countries with far higher levels of industrialisation, such as the Australia, Britain, and the United States, developed significant anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist currents, yet South Africa, apparently did not; countries with very similar industrialisation paths and levels of development and class and social conflict in the same period, in Latin America, developed some of the largest anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movements in the world, and yet South Africa, apparently, developed none.

### **Towards a critique of the dominant school of South African socialist history**

The puzzle becomes more profound when one considers that no possibility of a significant anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist presence in South Africa is admitted by the dominant view of the history of the socialist movement in South Africa, and of its relationship with the labour and nationalist movements in the country.

The dominant view on these matters remains the one developed by writers and activists associated with the CPSA and SACP, and widely accepted by both academic literature and activist accounts of these issues. This view was first developed from the 1940s onwards, when a number of writers, chiefly R.K. Cope, Eddie Roux, Lionel Forman, and H.J. (Jack) and Ray Simons, articulated a powerful, and extremely influential, account of the early labour and socialist history of South Africa. Developed, refined and popularised by writers such as Brian Bunting, Michael Harmel and Jeremy Cronin, this interpretation has made a deep and lasting imprint upon both academic and popular accounts of South African history, and has assumed an authoritative status rare in the generally dynamic and contested field of South African historical and political studies.

Although this body of work is not entirely homogenous – Cope, in particular, differs in several important respects from the other writers mentioned above – it is certainly sufficiently coherent to be characterised as a single “communist school” of South African socialist history. What these works share is a critique of the socialist predecessors of the CPSA and SACP, an assessment of the historical importance of the party, hostility to leftists outside of the Party, and support for African nationalist organisations such as the ANC.

Lionel Forman, Jack and Ray Simons, Brian Bunting, and Michael Harmel were key intellectuals in the post-1945 Party, and in this capacity did much to develop a particular interpretation

---

<sup>59</sup> See B. Bayerlein, and M. van der Linden, 1990, “Revolutionary Syndicalism in Portugal,” in Thorpe and van der Linden, 1990, *op cit.* p. 161

of the history of the socialist and nationalist movements in South Africa. Forman joined the Young Communist League (YCL) at the age of 15, in 1942, and the CPSA two years later. The self-described “youngest and proudest card-holder in the Party,”<sup>60</sup> a lawyer by profession, he soon proved his value to the organisation, writing for the CPSA-supporting *The Guardian* in the 1940s, an acting editor of its successor, *Advance*, after 1954, and a member of the core group that ran the paper’s subsequent incarnation as *New Age* in the late 1950s. In practice, these papers were a mouthpiece of the CPSA, and the SACP.<sup>61</sup> Ray Simons (né Alexander) was active in the CPSA in the Cape from the 1930s onwards, particularly in trade union work, and served as general-secretary for the African Food and Canning Workers’ Union until 1954, and as a member of the Central Committee of the CPSA between 1938 and 1950. Jack Simons was a lecturer in law and administration at the University of Cape Town, a member of the CPSA central committee between 1938 and 1950, and repeatedly banned in the 1950s for his political activities.<sup>62</sup> Leaving South Africa for exile in 1965, following the banning of the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1961, and the banning of Jack Simons from teaching in 1965, the couple wrote *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* in Zambia, an immensely influential history of socialist and nationalist groups in South Africa.<sup>63</sup>

Michael Harmel and Brian Bunting were also part of the core group which ran *New Age* in the 1950s, and made substantial contributions to the development of a communist school of South African socialist history. If anything, Harmel, one of the “major CPSA ideologues from the 1940s,” was a member of the CPSA central committee between 1941 and 1950, a leading activist in the 1950s, and left South Africa in 1963 for London, where he worked as an editor of the SACP journal, the *African Communist*, founded in 1959.<sup>64</sup> Politically more dogmatic than Forman, he initially opposed the publication of Forman’s *New Age* articles as a single booklet in 1959 as he felt that Forman had not taken sufficient collective direction in the formulation of his history, and, had, in any event, not given sufficient weight to the nationalist movements in his account.<sup>65</sup> The publication of *Chapters in the History of the March to Freedom* was, indeed, delayed so that amendments by other Party activists could be made to the booklet. Harmel’s major work on socialist history in South Africa appeared in 1971 under the pseudonym “A. Lerumo” on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Party. Entitled *Fifty Fighting Years: the Communist Party of South Africa, 1921-1971*, and issued by the Party’s London printing house, Inkululeko Publications, was based on a series of articles that appeared in the SACP journal, *The African Communist*, which had been founded in 1959. Although lacking adequate referencing, the book clearly draws heavily on Forman, and, even more extensively, the Simons’ work.

---

<sup>60</sup> S. Forman and A. Odendaal, 1992, “Introduction,” to S. Forman and A. Odendaal, editors, *Lionel Forman: a trumpet from the rooftops*, Zed Books, London, David Philips, Cape Town, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, p. xvi

<sup>61</sup> Forman and Odendaal, 1992, *op cit.*, p. xxii

<sup>62</sup> Biographical data on the Simons is drawn from A. Drew, editor, 1997, *South Africa’s Radical Tradition: a documentary history, volume two 1943-1964*, UCT Press, University of Cape Town, Buchu Books, Cape Town, Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, pp. 201 n. 14, 391 n. 15

<sup>63</sup> J. and R. Simons, [1969] 1983, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, International Defence and Aid Fund, London.

<sup>64</sup> Drew, 1997, *op cit.*, p. 290 n. 5

<sup>65</sup> Forman and Odendaal, 1992, *op cit.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii

Brian Bunting was the son of S.P. Bunting, a founder member of both the International Socialist League (ISL) and CPSA, was then a radical journalist, the editor of *Advance*, and a member of the CPSA central Johannesburg Committee from 1946, and later of the CPSA central committee.<sup>66</sup> He left South Africa in 1963, and was subsequently involved in editing *The African Communist*. Brian Bunting's main contribution to South African socialist historiography was his biography of Moses Kotane, who was CPSA and SACP general-secretary from 1939 until his death in 1978. In addition to *Moses Kotane: South African revolutionary*,<sup>67</sup> which appeared in 1975 from Inkululeko Publishers, Brian Bunting also wrote footnotes to the 1996 edition of Eddie Roux's biography of S.P. Bunting (see below), compiled a collection of key documents from CPSA and SACP history, entitled *South African Communists Speak*, in 1981,<sup>68</sup> and edited a collection of letters from his father to his mother, Rebecca, that appeared in 1996.<sup>69</sup> All of these works, including Brian Bunting's lengthy introductions and notes, draw heavily on the Simons' history.

The interpretation of events developed by the communist school is also echoed in the less rigorous, but perhaps equally influential, works of other SACP and ANC leaders from the 1970s onwards. Govan Mbeki, a member of the *New Age* group, and regional editor of the paper in the Eastern Cape,<sup>70</sup> advances the same arguments in his popular history, Govan Mbeki, 1992, *The Struggle For Liberation in South Africa: a short history*, which appeared in 1992.<sup>71</sup> In his introduction to Brian Bunting's *South African Communists Speak*, in 1981, veteran activist Yusuf Dadoo, then national chairperson of the exiled SACP, propounds essentially the same arguments.<sup>72</sup> More recently, Jeremy Cronin, the key SACP ideologue of the 1980s and 1990s, and, at the time of writing, an ANC parliamentarian, has been the key Party figure promulgating and popularising the interpretation of South African socialist history put forward by Roux, Forman, the Simons, Harmel and Lerumo. His most notable work in this respect is the very popular, and widely distributed, *The Red Flag in South Africa: a popular history of the Communist Party*.<sup>73</sup> He has also contributed to other collections and papers, acting as something of a *de facto* official Party historian.<sup>74</sup>

Both R.K. "Jack" Cope and Roux fit somewhat uneasily into the group of writers listed so far, in as much as neither were, at the time their major works on South African socialist history appeared, leading CPSA figures. Cope was, however, a young journalist and CPSA sympathiser whose major

<sup>66</sup> Drew, 1997, *op cit.*, p. 163 n. 70, 72

<sup>67</sup> B. Bunting, 1975, *Moses Kotane: South African revolutionary*, Inkululeko Publishers, London

<sup>68</sup> B. Bunting, editor, 1981, *South African Communist Speak: documents from the history of the South African Communist Party, 1915-1980*, London, Inkululeko

<sup>69</sup> B. Bunting, editor, 1996, *Letters to Rebecca: South African communist leader S.P. Bunting to his wife 1917-1934*, Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

<sup>70</sup> Forman and Odendaal, 1992, *op cit.*, p. xxii

<sup>71</sup> G. Mbeki, 1992, *The Struggle For Liberation in South Africa: a short history*, David Philips, Cape Town, Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, Bellville

<sup>72</sup> Y. Dadoo, 1981, "Introduction by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, National Chairman of the South African Communist Party", in Bunting, editor, 1981, *op cit.*

<sup>73</sup> South African Communist Party [J. Cronin], [1991?] n.d., *The Red Flag in South Africa: A Popular History of the Communist Party*, Jet Printers, Johannesburg

<sup>74</sup> See his articles: J. Cronin, 1990, "Rediscovering our Socialist History," *South African Labour Bulletin*, volume 15, number 3 and J. Cronin, 1991, "Origins and 'Native Republic'", in C. Bundy, (editor), *The History of the South African Communist Party*, University of Cape Town, Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies

work, *Comrade Bill: the life and times of W.H. Andrews, workers' leader*, appeared in the early 1940s, and was commissioned by the W.H Andrews Biography Fund, which raised funds from union and labour sources, in honour of the elderly W.H. "Bill" Andrews, a Party founder and stalwart who celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1945. A pioneering work on the history of labour and the left in South Africa, *Comrade Bill* appeared in an ordinary edition, a discounted "trade union edition" and a deluxe edition, and was very well-received,<sup>75</sup> distributed in labour circles not only in South Africa, but also in Bechuanaland and Southern Rhodesia.<sup>76</sup> It is a biography of a leading communist by a communist supporter, and endorses the major policies of the CPSA from its founding in 1921. It is, however, quite silent about developments in the CPSA between 1924 and 1938, when Andrews concentrated on trade union work; it also does not deal with Andrews' 1931 expulsion, and his 1938 re-entry into the central leadership of the Party as chairman.<sup>77</sup>

Eddie Roux's case differs in that he had already left the CPSA by the time he published his main historical works, *S.P. Bunting: a political biography*, which appeared in 1944,<sup>78</sup> and was reissued in 1996 with an introduction and notes by Brian Bunting, and *Time Longer Than Rope: a history of the black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa*, which was published in 1948. A botanist by training, Roux was a founder member of the YCL in 1921,<sup>79</sup> the editor of the Party newspaper *Umsebenzi* ("The Worker") between 1930 and 1935, and a member of the Communist Party's political bureau in the same period. He withdrew from the Party in 1938, bitterly disillusioned by the years of sectarianism and purges in the 1930s Party, during which his old mentor S.P. Bunting had been expelled and subject to discreditable attacks by his closest political associates.<sup>80</sup> In many ways, *S.P. Bunting: a political biography* was Roux's posthumous tribute to Bunting, an attempt to make amends for Bunting's shabby treatment by the Party,<sup>81</sup> it was not, as may be expected, well-received by Party loyalists, including Brian Bunting himself, who felt that it exaggerated the troubles within the Party in the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> And yet, Roux's works still share the key assumptions about the early history of socialism in South Africa that pepper the communist school's interpretation of the history of the left in South Africa. The material on the history of socialism presented in *S.P. Bunting: a political biography*, and incorporated into, and expanded, in *Time Longer than Rope*, do not differ in any significant way from the key assumptions and claims of the communist school, Roux's disagreements with the CPSA notwithstanding.

What then, are the core elements of the communist school's approach to the history of the left in South Africa? According to this interpretation, the real history of the socialist movement in South

<sup>75</sup> See M. Harmel, 30 September 1943, "'Comrade Bill': biography of a great worker-leader," *The Guardian*

<sup>76</sup> See anonymous, 30 March 1944, "'Comrade Bill' is Widely Read," *The Guardian*

<sup>77</sup> E. Roux, October 22 1943, "A Review: biography of W.H. Andrews," *Trek*

<sup>78</sup> E. Roux, [1944], 1993, *S.P. Bunting: a political biography*, Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, Bellville. This edition includes an introduction and notes by Brian Bunting.

<sup>79</sup> The YCL seems to have disappeared in the late 1920s, but had evidently revived by the 1940s, when Forman was active: see A. Drew, 1997, "Writing South African Communist History", *Science and Society*, volume 61, number 1, p. 111

<sup>80</sup> This period is discussed extensively in Roux's autobiography: E. and W. Roux, 1970, *Rebel Pity: the life of Eddie Roux*, Rex Collings, London, chapters VI to XII

<sup>81</sup> Roux, 1970, *op cit.*, pp. 147-8

<sup>82</sup> See B. Bunting, 1996, "Introduction," to Roux, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 14-130

Africa begins with the founding of the CPSA in July 1921, the first Communist Party in Africa. The socialist groups that existed before the CPSA were either insignificant, or hopelessly unable to deal with actual South African conditions. From this perspective, the significance of the pre-1921 groups is assessed in terms of the extent to which they make a contribution to the formation of the CPSA, and they are given weight in historical accounts accordingly. In the works of the communist school, only the ISL, which would become the main founder of the CPSA, receives much attention; the others are included in the historical narrative as salutary lessons in the errors of the pre-CPSA groups. The SDF is almost entirely absent, as is the Socialist Labour Party and the Pretoria Socialist Society; the *Voice of Labour* network, the IWW and the Industrial Socialist League (IndSL) are included as examples of dogmatic and unrealistic failure; and the impact of the early left on the White trade unions, the emergent African, Coloured and Indian unions, and the early ANC, is examined only in relation to the work of the ISL.

To the extent that the politics of the pre-1921 groups are examined in these works, the focus is on assessing the extent to which they adopted a Marxist outlook that prefigures the politics of the CPSA and SACP. The classical Marxism, or lack of Marxism, of these groups is established mainly by the extent to which they consciously or unconsciously adopt Marxist ideas. Measured in this way, the groups are either adequate or inadequate; they are either grasping towards the grail of Marxist truth, or they are not. The possibility that another, coherent, revolutionary, socialist approach could have informed and guided these groups is foreclosed; they are politically competent to the extent to which they are Marxist, and, from, 1917, Leninist; and they are worthy of analysis and given historical weight by the same criteria.

Judged in this manner by the writers of the communist school, only the ISL, of all the socialist groups before 1921, fares at all well. Founded in September 1915, the ISL occupies a central role in the standard history and the self-presentation of the CPSA and SACP. This is for three reasons. First of all, the ISL is commonly presented as a Marxist breakthrough in South African socialist history: launched and led by “revolutionary Marxists.”<sup>83</sup> It occupied its time “following the teachings of Karl Marx,”<sup>84</sup> trying to apply Marxist principles,<sup>85</sup> and acting as “tireless propagandists” for Marxist ideology,<sup>86</sup> and in this way, was markedly different from its contemporaries. Roux goes so far as to describe men like S.P. Bunting as “obsessed with Marxist doctrine” in his ISL days.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, the ISL is presented by the communist school as increasingly Leninist in orientation, and having close affinities with the Bolsheviks in Russia. For example, the ISL is lauded with, in Cope’s words, developing an anti-war analysis “closely approaching the stand of Lenin”, by Brian Bunting and Harmel for anticipating the formation of the Communist International in 1919, and more generally for developing an essentially correct interpretation of the events of the Russian Revolution that began in 1917.<sup>88</sup> For Brian Bunting, it was one of the great strengths of the ISL that “their thinking as socialists

---

<sup>83</sup> Cronin, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 6; Cronin, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 9

<sup>84</sup> Mbeki, 1992, *op cit.*, p. 27

<sup>85</sup> Forman, 1992, *op cit.*, p. 61

<sup>86</sup> Roux, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 134

<sup>87</sup> Roux, 1978, *op cit.*, p. 134

<sup>88</sup> Cope, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 205; Bunting, 1981, *op cit.*, p. 48; Lerumo, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 33-7

kept pace with the revolutionary fountainheads in Europe," these being the Communists in Russia and those who were grouping around the new Communist International.<sup>89</sup>

These achievements are attributed to a few pioneering activists in the ISL, mainly S.P. Bunting, David Ivon Jones, and Bill Andrews, who, it seems, single-handedly set the organisation on the correct path, despite the misgivings of some supporters of the group. Unlike Roux, who is quite silent on the matter, Cope, the Simons and Lerumo *explicitly* mention revolutionary syndicalist influences in the ISL but treat these as a minority faction opposed by the leadership or as a misinterpretation of classical Marxism by some of its supporters. Thus, the Simons refer disparagingly to a "syndicalist faction"; Cope speaks of opposition between "syndicalist ideas" and the ISL leadership; Harmel, writing as "Lerumo," mentions a "distorted version of Marxism" in the ISL that favoured "one big union"; and Cronin mentions syndicalists in the ISL but stresses that the "dominant trend, certainly amongst the leadership of the ISL, was Marxist."<sup>90</sup> Through such devices are the Marxist credentials of the ISL maintained, despite clear indications that all is not what it seems; indeed, the effect of these types of argument is not simply to neutralise any suggestion that the ISL was not Marxist, but also to stress the ongoing progress in the clarification of Marxist theory achieved by the ISL and its core leaders.

Besides the ISL, the other pre-1921 socialist groups, are presented unsympathetically and receive short shrift in the work of the communist school: only Cope, Forman, Harmel and the Simons discuss these groups in any detail, but even so, with great economy; they simply do not appear in the other accounts. To the extent that these groups are discussed, however, they are presented as largely irrelevant to the subsequent history of socialism. If the pre-1921 ISL is at least an apprenticeship for the CPSA, the other early groups are abject failures who cannot even turn their hands to the simplest tasks of the socialist trade, and are, thus, best forgotten.

Even the ISL, however, does not escape the two interlinked criticisms levelled at the pre-CPSA groupings and formations by the communist school. All of the pre-1921 socialists are critiqued, firstly, for failing to develop a substantial mass base, primarily because of their reluctance to ally with African nationalist groups; secondly, this failure is seen as part of a broader, alleged, accommodation to White racism in the South African society of the time. These claims are common in Cope, Forman, and Roux, who, as the most sympathetic to the early groups, argue that the best that could be said of the pre-1921 left is that it simply ignored the non-White sectors of the working class; the Simons and Cronin are the most acerbic in their critique, alleging and insinuating that the pioneer socialists endorsed a racist ideology and practice. Thus, Roux claims that ISL opposition to White supremacy was in practice confined to a minority centred on his mentor and hero, S.P. Bunting, and David Ivon Jones;<sup>91</sup> Brian Bunting and Lerumo insist that the ISL was unwilling to take African workers' specific

---

<sup>89</sup> Bunting, 1975, *op cit.*, p. 20

<sup>90</sup> The Simons admittedly mention recognisably revolutionary syndicalist themes in official ISL policy repeatedly, without naming them as such or treating them as a coherent body of thought, and distinguish between the ISL leadership and a "syndicalist faction: see the Simons, 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 191, 196, 199, 205, 209, 215, 245; For Cope, see Cope, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 206; for Cronin, see Cronin, n.d., *op cit.* p. 6; the Harmel reference is Lerumo, 1971, *op cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> See Roux, 1978, *op cit.*; Roux, 1993, *op cit.*

concerns seriously;<sup>92</sup> and the Simons go furthest, accusing the ISL of pandered to segregation and the colour bar.<sup>93</sup> The other groups, it goes without saying, fare even worse than the ISL in these accounts.

According to these writers, it was only with the formation of the CPSA that these issues become addressed. The flaws of the ISL still, to a degree, tainted the early CPSA. However, rapid progress was made towards the development of a Communist Party able to meet the challenges posed by South Africa's melange of semi-industrial capitalism and racial domination. In 1924, Roux argues, staking out a position adopted by subsequent writers, the CPSA purportedly took, for the very first time, a decision to focus on African workers. Hitherto, the CPSA focussed exclusively on white workers, who were, at the time, the most organised and vocal section of the working class. Under pressure from Roux's YCL, and his mentor, S.P. Bunting, the CPSA at last changed tack.

Then, in 1928, the CPSA adopted a new strategy for South African revolution: according to the "Native Republic" thesis, termed the "national democratic revolution" by the SACP, the immediate task of the Party was to secure the achievement of a non-racial bourgeois democracy as a stage towards a socialist state.<sup>94</sup> In political practice, this meant allying with African nationalist forces as part of a broader struggle for majority rule under capitalism, in the hope that this would lay the basis for subsequent socialist transformation. This strategy finally culminated, in the Simons words, when, on the eve of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, the "class struggle had merged with the struggle for national liberation," as the communists joined hands with the nationalists in an enduring alliance around a common vision of a non-racial, democratic (but bourgeois) South Africa.<sup>95</sup> The close relations that developed between the communists and the ANC and its allies signified this historic achievement, a working relationship that endured through the 1950s and was strengthened with the start of the armed struggle in 1961, in which the SACP played a central role.

The history of socialism in South Africa, as presented by the communist school, is steeped in a good deal of teleology. From the morass of the early left arose the ISL, whose pioneering, but imperfect work, led to the formation of the CPSA. The CPSA progressed from strength to strength, turning corners in 1924 and 1928, enduring agonising internal conflicts in the 1930s, and finally maturing in the 1940s to take its place as the firm ally and champion of African nationalism. Like the history of socialism in China, which has been reduced to the "progressive evolution of a correct socialism under the guidance of Mao Zedong or the Communist Party",<sup>96</sup> the history of socialism in

---

<sup>92</sup> See Bunting, 1975, *op cit.*, Bunting, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 11-12; Lerumo, 1971, *op cit.*, pp. 38-9.

<sup>93</sup> Simons, 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 191-2

<sup>94</sup> The precise formulation of the Native Republic thesis, as adopted by the CPSA in 1929 was "An Independent South African Native Republic as a stage towards the Workers' and Peasants' Republic, guaranteeing protection and complete equality towards all national minorities" (cited in Drew, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 21). A detailed discussion of the debates around this thesis may be found in A. Drew's 1991 PhD thesis, *Social Mobilisation and Racial Capitalism in South Africa, 1928-1960*, University of California, Los Angeles. Also very useful for the intellectual and political background to this strategy, and its subsequent forms, is P. Hudson, 1987, "The Freedom Charter and the Theory of the National Democratic Revolution", *Transformation* 1. Many of the core documents may be found in Drew, 1996, *op cit.*, part 3 and also in Bunting, 1981, *op cit.*, section two and Lerumo, 1971, appendix V

<sup>95</sup> Simons, 1983, *op cit.*, p. 609

<sup>96</sup> Dirlík, 1991, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London, p. 8

South Africa has thus been reduced to an account of the CPSA and SACP's struggle to develop the correct relationship with nationalist forces; the key moments of socialist history in South Africa are dated accordingly, 1921, 1924, 1928, 1950, 1953, and 1961: the formation of the CPSA, the CPSA policy shifts, and the ever-closer alliance of the CPSA and SACP with the ANC.

The general effect of this somewhat triumphalist approach is to foreclose analysis of socialist traditions that fall outside of the CPSA and SACP tradition, and to treat the real history of socialism in South Africa as a history of *political* socialism, and classical Marxism, and Leninism, in particular. The value of socialist traditions is thus to be judged in relation to the CPSA and SACP. From this perspective, the ISL is significant only insofar as it is the first, faltering, step in the pre-given telos of a revolutionary political socialism. As noted above, the communist school does not deny the existence of a number of revolutionary syndicalists, but these are treated as making an essentially negative contribution to the history of socialism in South Africa as a confused or dissident minority which fails to halt, fortunately, one assumes, the onward march of classical Marxism in South Africa.

### **The legacy of the “Communist School,” and broader Implications of this thesis**

Historical accounts, and popular perceptions, of socialism in South Africa, and its relationship to trade unions and the African nationalist movement, remain profoundly shaped by the core arguments developed by the school. Not only Roux,<sup>97</sup> but also the Simons, and to a lesser extent Cope and Brian Bunting, have been used as the standard reference works for most scholars who have dealt with the early labour and socialist movements in South Africa.

The definitive study of the early White labour movement on the Witwatersrand between the 1890s and 1910s is Elaine Katz's masterful, *A Labour Aristocracy: a history of White workers in the Transvaal and the general strike of 1913*, relies on the Simons' *Class and Colour in South Africa* for its interpretation of the *Voice of Labour* network and of the IWW.<sup>98</sup> Pieter van Duin's study of race and racism in the early South African labour movement relies, in turn, upon Katz, and upon the Simons as his main sources when examining the role of the early left and of radical unions such as the IWW.<sup>99</sup> Martin Legassick's well-known study, *Class and Nationalism in South African Protest: the South African Communist Party and the 'Native Republic', 1928-34*, bases its analysis (and harsh critique) of the pre-CPSA left wholly on Roux and the Simons.<sup>100</sup>

Ntsebeza's unpublished thesis, *Divisions and Unity in Struggle: the African National Congress, International Socialist League and CP, 1910-28*, uses Roux and the Simons as its primary

<sup>97</sup> Cf. M. Roth, 2000, "Eddie, Brian, Jack and Let's Phone Rusty: is this the history of the Communist Party of South Africa (1921-1950)?," *South African Historical Journal*, number 42. Roth attributes to Roux an absolutely pre-eminent influence on studies of communism in South Africa on p. 200: "Roux's work had come to be regarded in the same light as a translation of the St. James Bible; even if you did not care for the particular translation it was accepted as an accurate description of events." Also see p. 198. An examination of academic studies reveals, however, that the Simons' work, in particular, has at least an equal status to that of Roux in most accounts as a source of information and interpretation.

<sup>98</sup> E. Katz, 1976, *A Trade Union Aristocracy: a history of white workers in the Transvaal and the general strike of 1913*, Johannesburg, Institute for African Studies

<sup>99</sup> P. van Duin, 1990, "South Africa", in Marcel van der Linden and Jurgen Rojahn, editors, *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870-1914*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn, Koln

<sup>100</sup> M. Legassick, 1973, "Class and Nationalism in South African Protest: the South African Communist Party and the 'Native Republic', 1928-34", *Eastern African Studies*, XV

sources when examining the ISL and the Industrial Workers of Africa.<sup>101</sup> Peter Walshe's standard study of the early ANC mentions the ISL in a positive light, but repeats the claim that S.P. Bunting and David Ivon Jones were the real activists against White supremacy in an otherwise conservative ISL.<sup>102</sup> Allison Drew's analysis of the pre-1921 socialist movement, as presented in her two-volume documentary collection, *South Africa's Radical Tradition*, echoes the communist school in that it presents the ISL and IndSL as marginal, oblivious to the national question in South Africa, and echoes the claim that only S.P. Bunting and David Ivon Jones gave this matter much thought. Further, her selection of documents for the collection reproduces the pattern of structuring socialist history around the history of the CPSA and SACP: only six out of the nearly 300 documents in the collection stem from the pre-1921 period, and a substantial proportion of the remaining 294 deal with the CPSA and its critics.

Drew's thesis on *Social Mobilisation and Racial Capitalism, 1928-1960*, does not directly address the ISL and mentions the IndSL only in passing.<sup>103</sup> Whilst providing a striking analysis of the "Native Republic" slogan and its critics, it does, however, implicitly adopt key elements of the communist school. Drew comments of the 1928 adoption of the "Native Republic" thesis:<sup>104</sup>

... the Native Republic thesis was, historically, a significant advance in South African Communist thinking. *For the first time* Communists put South Africa's great social problems, the national and democratic questions, at the top of their political programme ...

Mason's study, *Race, Class and National Liberation: some implications of the policy dilemmas of the International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1915-1931*, follows very closely the analysis of the ISL developed by the Simons and Roux, particularly regarding the ISL and the Social Democratic Federation's approaches to the national question.<sup>105</sup> Again, S.P. Bunting and Jones are presented as dissenters on the national question within the ISL; again the ISL is presented as accommodating to White racism.

Bundy's review of South African communist biographies, including Roux's *S.P. Bunting*, is rather similar: the pre-1921 S.P. Bunting is vaguely alluded to as an "international" or "revolutionary" socialist, whilst the notion that in 1924 he led the struggle to run South African socialists towards the "emancipation of the black majority" is repeated without comment.<sup>106</sup> Roux is an authority on S.P.

---

<sup>101</sup> L. Ntsebeza, 1988, *Divisions and Unity in Struggle: the African National Congress, International Socialist League and CP, 1910-28*, B.A. Honours dissertation in Economic History, University of Cape Town

<sup>102</sup> P. Walshe, 1970, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: the African National Congress 1912-1952*, C. Hurst Company, London, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 95-6, 169

<sup>103</sup> Drew, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 100

<sup>104</sup> Drew, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 165, my emphasis. Cf. Drew, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 22: "... the Native Republic represented a significant advance in South African *socialist* thinking. For the first time *socialists* put South Africa's pressing social problems, the national, democratic and land questions, at the top of their political programme..."

<sup>105</sup> D. J. Mason, 1971, *Race, Class and National Liberation: some implications of the policy dilemmas of the International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1915-1931*, M.Sc. Dissertation, University of Bristol, pp. 8-18. Cf. Simons, 1983, *op cit.*, pp. 191-212

<sup>106</sup> C. Bundy, 1993, "Bunting and Basner," *Southern African Review of Books*, November/ December issue

Bunting who is, in Bundy's estimation, "even-handed" in "judgements and tone" and remains a "basic source" for historians of the South African left.

Lalu's study of the discourse of the early CPSA often fails to distinguish between either the organisations and, indeed, the discourses of the ISL and the CPSA: thus, a comment that the CPSA "press and the CPSA, more generally, were fashioned by the consistent belief in the pending cataclysmic collapse of capitalism in ... Europe" is substantiated by reference to an article from the ISL's *International* in 1917 – an article which appeared four years before the formation of the CPSA.<sup>107</sup> Lalu subsequently traces the ISL's alleged "humanism" to its alleged Marxism.<sup>108</sup> In what appears to be a revised version of the same article, Lalu identifies "*The International (1915-1925)*" as a newspaper of the CPSA.<sup>109</sup> For an account of shifting ISL and CPSA approaches to the issue of race up to 1925, Lalu relies heavily and uncritically upon Roux and Simons, and echoes all of the key points of the communist school's narrative of early left history in South Africa: the claim that the ISL was, bar S.P. Bunting and Jones, rather racist; the CPSA's alleged turn to the "native question" in 1924 under S.P. Bunting's tutelage; and the political advances that followed the 1928 "Black Republic" slogan. Whilst the paper investigates Roux's approach to the issue of African labour as editor of *Umsebenzi* in the 1930s, it has rather less to say about Roux's particular version of ISL and CPSA history.

Even Roth, who has some rather sharp words about the accuracy of the histories written by those authors I have termed the "communist school," fails to escape their sway. Even though Roth disagrees strongly with Cope, Roux and the Simons' assessment of the successes of the CPSA, she nonetheless uncritically accepts Roux's claim that the CPSA – and by implication, the pre-1924 left, which receives short shrift - only began to turn its attention to African workers from 1924 onwards, also citing Cronin to this effect.<sup>110</sup> This is despite Roth's own admonition against taking these authors' claims at face value, and despite her own argument that Roux's arguments are often inaccurate and self-serving. Whilst Roth's paper goes rather far in its critiques of the CPSA and SACP school of historical writing, it does not, perhaps, go far enough.

Caldwell's study of ISL discourse repeatedly cites Roux as its source for the claim that "the voices of Jones and Bunting in the cause of black workers were virtually alone in both the columns of the *International*, and in the ISL."<sup>111</sup> Caldwell also relies on Harmel and the Simons to support this view.<sup>112</sup> This claim, in fact, flies against much of the textual and other evidence mustered by Caldwell in his thesis, and, as such, says much about the continued authority wielded by the texts of the communist school. Doreen Musson's engaging 1989 biography, *Johnny Gomas: voice of the working*

---

<sup>107</sup> P. Lalu, n.d., "The 'Natives,' the Communists and the Cult of Paternalistic Humanism, 1915-1936," unpublished mimeo, p. 3, also p.3, note 5

<sup>108</sup> Lalu, n.d., *op cit.*, p. 8

<sup>109</sup> Lalu, 1993, "The Communist Party Press and the Creation of the South African Working Class, 1921-1936," paper presented at *Work, Class and Culture* symposium jointly hosted by History Workshop and the Sociology of Work Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, June 28-30, 1993, p. 2

<sup>110</sup> Roth, 2000, *op cit.*, pp. 2-5-6; see also Roth's lengthy paraphrase of Roux on pp. 192-195

<sup>111</sup> M. A. Caldwell, 1996, *Struggle in Discourse: the International's discourse against racism in the labour movement in South Africa, 1915-1919*, MA thesis, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, p. 101, also see pp. 105-6, 124

<sup>112</sup> Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 104, also pp. 106-7

class, looks at the life of the Coloured activist in the ISL, CPSA, ICU and ANC (amongst other organisations and movements).<sup>113</sup> A fascinating record of the early left, however, it maintains the position that the CPSA pioneered activism amongst African workers in 1924-5, under the impetus of S.P. Bunting and Roux, and bases this claim on the Simons.<sup>114</sup>

A further signifier of the continued, and pervasive, influence of the communist school on scholarship is the continued identification of most of the pre-1921 left, and, in particular, the ISL, with classical Marxism. For Ntsebeza, the ISL was focussed on “applying Marxism to South Africa.”<sup>115</sup> Mason speaks of the “grounding” of key ISL members in “Marxism.”<sup>116</sup> Sheridan Johns’ scholarly account of the ISL and early CPSA follows a similar model, stressing Marxist continuity between the ISL and CPSA: the ISL is treated as the first six years of South African communism in his unambiguously entitled 1965 thesis *Marxism-Leninism in a Multi-Racial Environment: the International Socialist League and the South African Communist Party, 1914-32*.<sup>117</sup> This perception is carried through in the study: the ISL is described as marked by its growing “affinity ... for the Marxist left-wing of the European socialist movement” as far back as 1915, and as led by “interpreters of Marx” as opposed to anarcho-syndicalists; it must however, be stated that Johns also recognises the influence of IWW thought on many elements of ISL policy.<sup>118</sup>

Philip Bonner’s nuanced discussion of the 1918-1920 African protest movement on the Witwatersrand, in which the ANC, the ISL and the industrial Workers of Africa, were all prominent, cites the Simons’ view that the ISL used “standard Marxist theory.”<sup>119</sup> While he suggests in his analysis that the “influence of the ISL and IWA” on the protests should not “be underestimated,” he does not dispute the Simons’ characterisation of the ISL as “Marxist.”<sup>120</sup> Frederick Johnstone has studied the first year of the Industrial Workers of Africa’s activities, using the extensive police records that were kept on the union.<sup>121</sup> Whilst describing the efforts of the ISL in forming the union as an example of early “socialist organising amongst black workers,” and the union itself as a “socialist

---

<sup>113</sup> D. Musson, 1989, *Johnny Gomas: voice of the working-class: a political biography*, Buchu Books, Cape Town.

<sup>114</sup> Musson, 1989, *op cit.*, p. 35, 40 n. 30. Ray Simons (nee Alexander) has, however, a number of interesting criticisms of the latter sections of the book, dealing with Gomas’ relation to the CPSA in its later years: R. Alexander, 1991, “Review: Johnny Gomas as I Knew Him,” *South African Labour Bulletin*, volume 15, number 5

<sup>115</sup> Ntsebeza, 1988, *op cit.*, p. 30

<sup>116</sup> Mason, 1971, *op cit.*, p. 12

<sup>117</sup> Johns study was first made available as a PhD: see S.W. Johns, 1965, *Marxism-Leninism in a Multi-Racial Environment: the International Socialist league and the South African Communist Party, 1914-32*, Harvard University. For many years the only substantial study of the early CPSA, the thesis reappeared as an abridged book with a new introduction in 1995, with the new title *Raising the Red Flag: the International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1914-32* from Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, Bellville. All references in my thesis paper are to the Mayibuye edition of Johns, unless otherwise specified, and are indicated thus: Johns 1995, *op cit.*

<sup>118</sup> Johns, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 52, 61; on the IWW influence, see, *inter alia*, p. 71

<sup>119</sup> P.L. Bonner, 1982, ‘The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917- 1920: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand’ in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, 1982, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African class formation, culture and consciousness, 1870-1930*, Longman, London and New York

<sup>120</sup> Bonner, 1982, *op cit.*, p. 298

<sup>121</sup> F.A. Johnstone, 1979, ‘The IWA on the Rand: socialist organising amongst black workers on the Rand 1917-8’, in Belinda Bozzoli, editor, *Labour, Townships and Protest: studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand*, Ravan, Braamfontein

group of African workers," he remains vague with regard to the type of socialism espoused by these activists.<sup>122</sup>

Caldwell's study of the ISL's discourse notes that former Socialist Labour Party members helped "steer the ISL towards industrial unionism" and towards the promotion of "industrial unity"<sup>123</sup> and describes De Leon in passing as a "syndicalist"<sup>124</sup> but does not examine the ideological roots of this "industrial unionism," nor adequately discuss what was entailed by the ISL's notion of "industrial democracy."<sup>125</sup> The distinction between "industrial unionism," *per se*, and the revolutionary unionist strategy of men such as De Leon remains opaque, and the centrality of anti-statism to ISL thinking is unremarked.<sup>126</sup> Whilst Caldwell provides a sophisticated discourse analysis of ISL texts, then, he does not situate these texts within the field of revolutionary syndicalist discourse, or within the discursive fields of the IWW, De Leon, and the Socialist Labour Party: instead, he speaks of "syndicalists" *within* the ISL, whilst tending to present the views of the organisation as Marxist and as associated with the ideas of the Second International.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the views developed by the communist school with regard to the early history of labour and the left in South Africa have percolated into a wide range of non-academic and activist accounts of the history of the left in South Africa. The former Communist, and later radical African nationalist, George Padmore, bases his discussion of the early left in South Africa, including the ISL, in his well-known 1956 polemic *Pan-Africanism or Communism: the coming struggle for Africa*, largely on the work of Roux.<sup>128</sup> Francis Meli, the editor of the ANC-in-exile's journal *Sechaba*, bases his discussion of the early socialist movement in South Africa, and its relationship to African nationalism in his semi-official history of the party, *South Africa Belongs to Us: a history of the ANC*, directly from Forman and on Harmel.<sup>129</sup> From the right, the same reliance on the texts of the communist school is equally apparent. F.R. "Red" Metrowich's 1967 *Africa and Communism: a study of successes, set-backs and stooge states* bases his discussion of the early history of the left in South Africa on Roux.<sup>130</sup> Nathaniel Weyl's 1970 *Traitors End: the rise and fall of the communist movement in South Africa*, is equally reliant upon Roux and Cope.<sup>131</sup> Henry R. Pike's *A History of Communism in*

<sup>122</sup> Johnstone, 1979, *op cit.*, pp. 248, 250

<sup>123</sup> Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 96, 117

<sup>124</sup> Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 99

<sup>125</sup> Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 115

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 102-3

<sup>127</sup> Caldwell, 1996, *op cit.*, pp. 97, 99 n. 3, 123 n. 16, 124, 145, 147, 149, 153

<sup>128</sup> G. Padmore, 1956, *Pan-Africanism or Communism: the coming struggle for Africa*, Dennis Dobson, London, pp. 347-8. Padmore had been active in the United States' Communist Party and served as a leading official, and expert on the African question, in the Communist International from 1929 to 1935. He broke with Communism in 1935 when the Soviet Union announced its support for the "democratic imperialisms" of France and Britain (as opposed to the "fascist imperialisms" of Italy and Germany). In 1945 he worked with W.E.B. du Bois to organise the Fifth Pan-Africanist Conference in Manchester, serving as secretary with Kwame Nkrumah. For a trenchant critique, see P. Trehwela, 1988, "George Padmore, a Critique: Pan-Africanism or communism," *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 1, number 1

<sup>129</sup> F. Meli, 1988, *South Africa Belongs to Us: a history of the ANC*, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Zimbabwe, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, James Currey, London, pp. 56-62

<sup>130</sup> F.R. Metrowich, 1967, *Africa and Communism: a study of successes, set-backs and stooge states*, Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Vereeniging, Klerksdorp, pp. 192-196

<sup>131</sup> N. Weyl, 1970, *Traitors' End: the rise and fall of the communist movement in South Africa*, Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Cape Town, pp. 41-76

*South Africa*, published in 1988 by Christian Mission International of South Africa, relies very heavily on Cope and Roux.<sup>132</sup>

### **Cracks in the mirror: recent reassessments of the communist school**

Drew has commented that the historiography of the CPSA and SACP, unlike that of many other Communist Parties, “remained, until recently, largely untouched.”<sup>133</sup> Matters, it must be said, are changing with the recent – yet, often only implicit – challenge to the communist school mounted by scholars who have drawn attention to the role played by socialists outside the CPSA and SACP in South African social struggles. Central to this challenge has been the rediscovery of South Africa’s small, but sometimes influential, Trotskyist tradition, which originated largely from amongst those expelled from the CPSA. Trotskyism as an international current has its roots in the conflicts in the ruling Bolshevik party – then renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union- after the death of Lenin in 1924. It is named for the faction led by Leon Trotsky, which was defeated in the late 1920s by that of Joseph Stalin, who subsequently expelled Trotsky from the Soviet Union and enthroned himself as Soviet dictator. The issues between the Trotskyists and the Stalinists are many, and will not detain us at this point. What is important to note is that the split was reflected in communist movements across the world, including within South Africa.

Special mention must be made here of the role of Baruch Hirson in the recovery of Trotskyist history in South Africa. Himself a Trotskyist activist from the 1940s to the 1960s, and jailed for nine years for sabotage,<sup>134</sup> Hirson played a key role in salvaging the papers of the first South African Trotskyist groups, and in pioneering studies of the history of Trotskyism in South Africa. Consistently opposed to the politics of the CPSA, Hirson strove to accurately record the history of the Trotskyists in South Africa, not in order to exculpate them – much of his writing is harshly critical - but in order to draw the lessons of their experiences and in order to provide a more balanced view of the history of the left than the narratives of the CPSA and SACP historians allowed. In his magisterial 1990 study, *Yours for The Union: class and community struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947*, based upon his 1986 PhD, in *Searchlight South Africa: a Marxist journal of southern African studies*, which he founded and edited during its existence from 1988 to 1995, in a special edition of the journal *Revolutionary History*, as well as in a number of other papers, Hirson cast new light on the “left-oppositionists” in South Africa, and their complex relations with popular struggles, trade unions, nationalist organisations, and, of course, the CPSA and SACP.<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>132</sup> H. R. Pike, 1988, *A History of Communism in South Africa*, Christian Mission International, Germiston, second edition

<sup>133</sup> Drew, 1997, *op cit.*, p. 107

<sup>134</sup> See Hirson’s autobiography: Baruch Hirson, 1995a, *Revolutions in My Life*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press. Hirson passed away on the 3 October 1999 after a long illness. I am grateful for our correspondence in the preceding years.

<sup>135</sup> B. Hirson, 1990, *Yours for the Union: class and community struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947*, University of the Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg; the key articles from *Searchlight South Africa*, which ran for 12 issues, are B. Hirson, 1988, “Death of a Revolutionary: Frank Glass/Li Fu-Jen/John Liang, 1901-1988,” *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 1, number 1; B. Hirson, 1989a, “Spark and the Red Nun,” *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 1, number 2; B. Hirson, 1989b, “A Question of Class: the writings of Kenneth A. Jordaan,” *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 1, number 2; B. Hirson, 1990, “The Black Republic Slogan – part II- the

Drew has also made an important contribution to this field, both in her thesis *Social Mobilisation and Racial Capitalism, 1928-1960*, and in her documentary collection of writings from the South African left in the first half of the twentieth-century. The former provides several in-depth and insightful analyses of the Trotskyists; the latter, important source material. Drew has also examined these issues elsewhere.<sup>136</sup> Other writers who have made useful contributions to the history of the Trotskyist tradition include Colin Bundy,<sup>137</sup> Bill Nasson,<sup>138</sup> Mark Stein,<sup>139</sup> and, less satisfactorily, Ben Fine and Dennis Davis.<sup>140</sup>

The increasing attention paid to Trotskyism has played an important role in providing a more nuanced and balanced appraisal of socialist analysis and practice in South Africa. It has also lent itself to a more critical assessment of the CPSA's changing policies, and to a rehabilitation of the role of socialist activists who have, otherwise, been expunged from the history of socialism in South Africa by the communist school.

And yet, the challenge to the communist school posed by the rediscovery of the Trotskyist tradition does not go far enough. By virtue of its subject matter, the literature on South African Trotskyism necessarily takes as its focus the post-1921 period, and thus fails to develop a thorough re-interpretation of the assessment of socialism in the first two decades of the twentieth century; in practice, the pre-1921 period remains marginal (or excoriated) in narratives of socialist history in South Africa, whilst debates within the socialist tradition remain presented as debates between variants of *political* socialism. By presenting the disputes within the socialist movement as disputes between "Stalinism" and Trotskyism (and, of course, between different variants of Trotskyism), the new literature reproduces the identification between revolutionary socialism and Marxism that pervades the communist school's approach, albeit through broadening scholarly understanding of the forms that classical Marxism has assumed in South Africa. Further, given the Trotskyist tendency to define itself in opposition to mainstream Communist Parties – a tradition quite apparent in South

---

response of the Trotskyists," *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 1, number 4; B. Hirson, 1991, "Obituary: the dualism of I.B. Tabata," *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 2, number 2; B. Hirson, 1993b, "The Trotskyist Groups in South Africa, 1932-1948," B. Hirson, 1993c, "The Trotskyists and the Trade Unions," and B. Hirson, 1993d, "Profiles of Some South African Trotskyists," all in a special supplement on "The Trotskyists of South Africa, 1932-1948" to *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 3, number 2; B. Hirson, 1995b, "A Short History of the Non-European Unity Movement: an insider's view," *Searchlight South Africa*, volume 3, number 4; the aforementioned supplement was also reprinted as a special issue of the journal *Revolutionary History*, with an additional article by I. Hunter and several original documents, and the two main articles also appeared in condensed form in a 1994 collection of papers on the history of opposition movements in South Africa: see *Revolutionary History*, 1993, "'Colour and Class': the origins of South African Trotskyism," volume 4, number 4 and I. Liebenberg, F. Lortan, B. Nel and G. van der Westhuizen, editors, 1994, *The Long March: the story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa*, HAUM, Pretoria, pp. 52-71

<sup>136</sup> A. Drew, 1991, "Events were Breaking above their Heads: socialism in South Africa, 1921-1950," *Social Dynamics*, volume 17, number 1; A. Drew, 1996, "The Theory and Practice of the Agrarian Question in South African Socialism," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, volume 23, number 2/3

<sup>137</sup> See C. Bundy, 1987, "Land and Liberation: popular rural protest and the national liberation movement in South Africa, 1920-1960," in S. Marks and S. Trapido, editors, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*, Longman, London

<sup>138</sup> B. Nasson, 1990, "The Unity Movement: its legacy in popular consciousness," *Radical History Review* number 46/7 (a special edition on "History from South Africa")

<sup>139</sup> M. Stein, 1978, "Max Gordon and African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand, 1935-1940," in E. Webster (editor), *Essays in Southern African Labour History*, Ravan, Johannesburg

<sup>140</sup> R. Fine, with D. Davis, 1990, *Beyond Apartheid: labour and liberation in South Africa*, Pluto, London

Africa – there is a tendency in the new literature to reproduce, if inadvertently, the centrality of CPSA and SACP political positions as defining moments in South African socialist history.

What remains absent is a systematic re-appraisal of the early years of South African socialism, one that both challenges the orthodoxies developed by the communist school, and situates the early radical left within the broader context of the pre-Leninist socialist world. Hirson's work has made some contributions to such a project. In a short paper presented to a "Comparative Labour and Working Class History" seminar at the University of London on *Syndicalists in South Africa, 1908-1917* Hirson argues that individuals in some of the socialist groups and trade unions in this period were syndicalists, and that "their impact was not negligible."<sup>141</sup> The paper mentions a number of individuals associated with the *Voice of Labour* network and South African IWW and Socialist Labour Party, and also mentions the influence of revolutionary syndicalism upon the ISL and Industrial Workers of Africa, but is exceedingly brief and somewhat ambiguous about the political position of the ISL; the IndSL does not get a mention.

Hirson is also co-author with Gwyn Williams of a lengthy 1995 biography, *The Delegate for Africa: David Ivon Jones, 1883-1924*, dealing with the leading ISL figure.<sup>142</sup> This book goes further than Hirson's brief paper on revolutionary syndicalism in South Africa, noting that Jones, who was a founder of both the ISL and later the CPSA, had "adopted de Leon's syndicalist views" and that these views had a considerable impact upon the ISL from the start.<sup>143</sup> However, he does little to elaborate on these points, and, indeed, asserts that De Leonite influence waned from 1917 onwards, two years after the founding of the ISL.<sup>144</sup> Other brief articles also point to the need for a re-examination of the early left, but remain too brief and sketchy to provide a thorough going re-evaluation. *Debates in South African Labour History*, a popular history booklet published by the LACOM/ SACHED educational trust in 1992, following a series of articles in the popular left wing weekly. *The New Nation*, describes the ISL as consistently opposed to racial discrimination. This contrasts sharply with the views presented by the communist school. It also refers to "the syndicalists within the ISL," and of the ISL's "syndicalist weaknesses."<sup>145</sup>

Materials produced from within the contemporary anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movement have also suggested the need to re-examine the early history of the South African left. John Philips, writing as an IWW supporter in the 1970s and early 1980s, wrote two articles stressing the importance of IWW influences in early twentieth-century South Africa. Both were, unfortunately, rather brief and drew mainly on American IWW newspapers. Alex Gordon's 1988 politics dissertation on *The Influence of Syndicalism on the South African Working Class* draws on Philips in its discussion of "syndicalism" in early twentieth-century South Africa, mainly focusing on the IWW and saying rather

---

<sup>141</sup> B. Hirson, 12 November 1993e, *Syndicalists in South Africa, 1908-1917*, paper for discussion at postgraduate seminar, on "Comparative Labour and Working class History", University of London, p. 3

<sup>142</sup> B. Hirson, with G.A. Williams, 1995, *The Delegate for Africa: David Ivon Jones, 1883-1924*, Core Publications, London

<sup>143</sup> Hirson with Williams, 1995, *op cit.*, pp.104, 156-7

<sup>144</sup> Hirson with Williams, 1995, *op cit.*, pp. 166-7

<sup>145</sup> LACOM/SACHED, 1992, *Debates in South African Labour History*, LACOM/ SACHED, pp. 3, 6

little about unions and socialist groups.<sup>146</sup> The 1997 book *African Anarchism* by the Nigerian anarcho-syndicalists Samuel Mbah and I.E. Igariwey is subtitled “the history of a movement,” but unfortunately says rather little about the early history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism in Africa, but does briefly characterise the ISL and the Industrial Workers of Africa as syndicalist.<sup>147</sup>

### **Bringing anarchism back in: the core arguments of this thesis**

There are two possible solutions to the mystery of South Africa's missing anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists. First, it might be supposed that something very peculiar, something very specific, about South Africa made it immune to anarchism and revolutionary syndicalist influences. This is precisely what is suggested by the teleological tendency of the communist school, whereby the history of the socialist movement is presented as a history of growing CPSA and SACP success in grappling with the national question, and, thus, achieving a mass base. To the extent that revolutionary syndicalists appear in this history they do so as an aberration from the main line of socialist march, mere historical failures and curiosities.

The other possible solution is simpler, but far more profound in its implications: it may simply be the case that the literature on the history of the left is simply ... wrong. This is precisely what the passing references to syndicalists in South Africa and in the ISL - alluded to above- hint. On the basis of thorough research into the history of the early left in South Africa, I am convinced that this is, indeed, the case: the literature is, on the whole, inaccurate and misleading, and has, effectively, although not necessarily intentionally, excised a rich, complex, and often inspiring, history of South African anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist history from the record. A bold argument! However, this thesis musters more than enough data to make this claim worth considering.

The standard picture of the history of socialism in South Africa, according to which a nominally Marxist (but often racist and dogmatic) socialist movement emerges in the 1910s, and is confined to small sections of White labour, only to be supplanted by an increasingly multi-racial and anti-racist Marxist communism from 1921 onwards, represented by the CPSA and later the SACP, is inaccurate on all counts. Roth has pointed out in another context that the history of communism in South Africa from 1921 onwards, as written by figures such as Bunting, Cope, Roux, and the Simons, is often unreliable, in part because it serves the political function of promoting the CPSA and its successor, the SACP, by exaggerating the successes and glossing over the failures of the Party; also, in part, because the research is often weak, uncritical, and overly reliant on CPSA and SACP sources whose veracity is left unquestioned.<sup>148</sup> My own research on the period before 1921, as well as on a number of developments in the 1920s, tends to support this assessment.

Traces of anarchist politics can be found as far back as the 1880s in South Africa, notably in the pioneering work of Henry Glasse, an English emigrant who maintained contact with London anarchists and distributed anarchist materials locally. More significantly, the revolutionary socialist left

<sup>146</sup> A. Gordon, 1988, *The Influence of Syndicalism on the South African Working Class*, University of Essex, Politics Dissertation. I would like to thank Alex Gordon for sending me this paper.

<sup>147</sup> S. Mbah and I.E. Igariwey, 1997, *African Anarchism: the history of a movement*, See Sharp Press. Tucson, Arizona

<sup>148</sup> Roth, 2000, *op cit.*, pp. 201 -209

of the first two decades of the twentieth-century was predominantly libertarian socialist in orientation. All of the main socialist formations of the pre-CPSA period that adopted homogenous political programmes were revolutionary syndicalist in theory and in practice, including the Socialist Labour Party, founded in 1910, the South African IWW, founded in the same year, the International Socialist League (ISL), founded in 1915, which published the weekly paper *The International*, and the Industrial Socialist League (IndSL), which emerged in 1918 and published the monthly *The Bolshevik*. The exceptions were the short-lived United Socialist Party founded on the Witwatersrand in 1912, and the tiny Social Democratic Party in Durban. Moreover, anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism were well represented in most of the broad and politically heterogeneous socialist groups of the period, such as the Social Democratic Federation, founded in 1904, the network around the pioneer socialist weekly, the *Voice of Labour*, founded in 1908, and the Pretoria Socialist Society, founded in 1911. The formation of the CPSA in 1921 represents, therefore, not continuity with the “Marxists” and “communist nucleus” of “true socialists” in the ISL, but a fundamental break, a rupture, a sharp political *discontinuity* marked by the eclipse of libertarian socialist perspectives by political, and increasingly authoritarian, forms of socialism.

Nevertheless, whilst the influence of revolutionary syndicalist influences within the socialist movement declined sharply in 1920 and 1921, with the formation of the CPSA, it did not disappear overnight. Even after the formation of the CPSA, sections of the Party continued to adhere to a largely revolutionary syndicalist politics. *This* particular continuity – largely unremarked upon by the communist school, with the exception of Harmel – was broken by the purges that decimated the CPSA with the adoption of the “New Line” of the Communist International in 1929. The “New Line” advocated the strict “Bolshevisation” of Communist Parties through the removal of unsuitable elements, and in South Africa resulted in the expulsion of much of the old guard Party members, including many of those who had been leading figures in the ISL, IndSL, and Social Democratic Federation. Party membership as a whole fell from a claimed 2,800 members in 1928 to a possible 150 by 1933.<sup>149</sup>

Furthermore, revolutionary syndicalism as an ideology, and revolutionary syndicalists as activists, had an important impact upon the labour movement of the 1910s. In addition to founding the first fully non-racial trade union in South Africa – the IWW in 1910, the first union that drew no colour line whatsoever in its membership- revolutionary syndicalist activists also played an important role in several other, predominantly White, trade unions. These include Bill Andrews in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Solly Sachs of the ISL in the Reef Shop Assistants Union, C.B. Tyler of the ISL in the Building Workers Industrial Union, Frank Glass of the IndSL in the Tailors’ Union, A.Z. Berman of the IndSL, treasurer of the Cape Federation of Trade Unions, and F. Lopes, also of the IndSL, president of the Tramway Workers’ Union in Cape Town.

With the exception of a number of radical, but ineffectual, changes to the Cape Federation of Trade Unions’ constitution, these activists had a limited impact upon the policies of these trade unions. Tyler, Glass, Berman and Lopes sought to transform these unions into racially integrated structures, with socialist objectives, but had limited success; like many individual radicals in larger

---

<sup>149</sup> Drew, 1996, *op cit.*, p. 23

movements, then and since, they found themselves constrained by the less militant views of the broad membership. Some, such as C. Forrester Brown of the South African Miners Union, and one-time member of the ISL, abandoned radicalism and the socialist groups for segregation and the colour bar, leaving revolutionary syndicalism to become loyal representatives of the larger unions in which they worked.

Far more success was achieved in the sphere of revolutionary syndicalist organisation amongst African, Coloured and Indian workers. If the IWW had preached worker unity across racial lines, but had little success amongst workers of colour, the ISL and IndSL played a pioneering role in organising amongst the majority of South African workers. From 1915 onwards, these two revolutionary syndicalist groups played a central role in union organising, and, in the process, recruited a layer of workers of colour to the politics of revolutionary syndicalism and to their organisations. In 1917 the ISL organised the Industrial Workers of Africa in Johannesburg, the first trade union for African workers in British-ruled Africa. The union spread to Cape Town in 1919 where it worked alongside the ICWU and later merged into the ICU. In 1917, the ISL also organised an Indian Workers Industrial Union in Durban, and, in 1918, a Clothing Workers Industrial Union in Kimberley, which had spread to Johannesburg by 1919, as well as a Horse Drivers Union in Kimberley. At around the same time, in 1918, the IndSL organised the Sweet and Jam Workers Industrial Union in Cape Town. These unions were organised as part of the revolutionary unionist project of the ISL and IndSL, and this was reflected in their formal aims and in the political education that took place within them. One may thus refer to these unions as revolutionary syndicalist unions.

From these early initiatives emerged a number of activists of colour who went on to become prominent unionists and political militants. These included T.W. Thibedi, who joined the ISL in 1917 and was active in the Industrial Workers of Africa from 1918; Johnny Gomas, who joined the Clothing Workers Industrial Union and later the ISL; and Bernard L.E. Sigamoney and R.K. Moodley of the Indian Workers Industrial Union. Through the Industrial Workers of Africa, a layer of African activists emerged who championed anti-capitalism, direct action, and union organisation within the otherwise staid and rather middle-class ANC in the Transvaal and the Cape. Foremost amongst these were Reuben Cetiwe, Hamilton Kraai, and J.D. Ngojo, leading members of the Industrial Workers of Africa.

However, the Industrial Workers of Africa influenced a far wider layer of people within the nationalist movement in the late 1910s. These included Talbot Williams of the predominantly Coloured organisation, the African Political Organisation (renamed the African Peoples Organisation in 1919, the APO), and normally more temperate ANC men such as L.T. Mvabasa and D. Letanka, managers of the ANC mouthpiece, *Abantu-Batho*, which had supported the Industrial Workers of Africa from the start. These overlaps in influence and in activist personnel were exemplified in joint ISL, Industrial Workers of Africa, and ANC actions in mid-1918 against African labour repression and wages, culminating in the abortive African general strike of 1 July 1918. Thus, the well-known “radicalisation” of the Transvaal ANC between 1918 and 1920<sup>150</sup> reflects the harsh material conditions of urban African communities in the post-war period, but assumed a political form attributable in many respects to revolutionary syndicalism. In Cape Town, too, Cetiwe and Kraai linked the ANC in

---

<sup>150</sup> Bonner, 1982, *op cit*.

Ndabeni township (now part of Langa) into the December 1919 dockworkers strike organised by the Industrial Workers of Africa and the ICWU, the industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, founded in 1919, predecessor of the ICU, amongst Africans and Coloureds.

This revolutionary syndicalist influence largely disappeared in the ANC in 1920, but continued to echo in the 1920s within the ICU. Whilst the ICU, founded in 1921 was strongly influenced by African nationalism, it also adopted a version of the IWW constitution, in which it stated as its goal that "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, instead of for the profit of a few." Its rhetoric repeatedly invoked the image of "One Big Union," and the vision of a catadysmic general strike that would redistribute land and wealth in South Africa to workers and peasants of colour. This is, in part, attributable to the influence of the Industrial Workers of Africa in the ICU, as well as to former ISL men such as Gomas and Thibedi, who were by this time members of the CPSA and officials in the ICU.

If we take this trade union work, and, in particular, the formation of revolutionary syndicalist unions amongst workers of colour, in conjunction with the existence of a range of left-wing propaganda and activist groups deeply influenced by anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, and the growth of a multi-racial layer of activists influenced by the ideas, it is possible to speak not simply of *individual* syndicalist activists, but of the existence of a significant and multi-racial revolutionary syndicalist *movement* in South Africa in the 1910s. Indeed, it can be noted that, in contrast to the picture developed by the communist school of the 1910s as a period in which radical socialists were marginal, theoretically confused, and largely confined to White layers of the working class, the period was one of significant socialist influence and accomplishment. Such influence was at least as substantial, but probably more so, than the work of the CPSA in the early and mid-1920s, which spent its early years preoccupied by a futile attempt to affiliate with the segregationist South African Labour Party.

As noted earlier, it is a central tenet of the communist school that the early radical left in South Africa – including the CPSA itself- largely ignored workers of colour before 1924, and the national question, before 1928. I argue in this thesis that this view is incorrect.

On the one hand, the revolutionary syndicalists of the second half of the 1910s actively and consciously focussed on work amongst African, Coloured and Indian workers. They did this without neglecting activism amongst White workers, and whilst still committed to the notion of inter-racial workers unity, the latter a project essentially abandoned by the CPSA after 1928. On the other hand, the South African anarchists and the revolutionary syndicalists consistently opposed racial prejudice, racist ideology, and racially discriminatory custom and law. From an early stage, the libertarians adopted a principled opposition to racial discrimination in the labour movement and in the broader society.

Over time, this principled opposition was elaborated into a social analysis of the causes of racial discrimination that rested on two main points: the ignorance and irrationality of the working class, which led it to adopt absurd prejudices; and the active and deliberate role of capitalists in fostering racial prejudice and racial discrimination as a way of dividing working people and of securing

a cheap, repressed, and coloured, labour force. This analysis was most developed in the work of the ISL, but its roots can be found in debates in the *Voice of Labour* network years earlier, and in the work of Henry Glasse, as well as in the general opposition of the international anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movement to national oppression, and racial discrimination, segregation and oppression.

Furthermore, the South African revolutionary syndicalist movement not only explicitly and systematically rejected theories and practices of racial discrimination, but also recognised the centrality of the national question to the struggle against capitalism in South Africa. Racial oppression in South Africa was the primary cause of racial discrimination and racial prejudice, and operated against the interests of both White labour, and of workers of colour. By creating a cheap, unfree, coloured labour force, racial discrimination was a direct threat to the relatively privileged conditions of the White working class; legal and customary disabilities imposed upon workers of colour were amongst the most effective mechanisms of capitalist repression and exploitation that the revolutionary working class had to confront.

The revolutionary syndicalists' ultimate solution was the formation of a single, revolutionary, "One Big Union" that would combat racial prejudice, organise revolt against racial discrimination, and spearhead the struggle for the replacement of capitalism and the State by workers' self-management and socialism. The industrial organisation of African workers, in particular, was the key to the destruction of the ruling class and the creation of a non-racial co-operative commonwealth. As steps towards this goal, the revolutionary syndicalists actively campaigned against racial prejudice, strove to open the predominantly White trade unions to all workers, regardless of race, and sought to directly organise workers of colour into radical trade unions as part of the drive for One Big Union.

In these ventures they had mixed results. The point remains, however, that it is incorrect of the communist school to maintain that the pre-CPSA groups had either actively or passively accommodated racial prejudice, to date socialist activism amongst African workers to the CPSA's decisions in 1924, or to claim that the national question was only addressed in 1928.

Nor is it true to claim that only classical Marxism, and the "Native Republic" slogan, had the potential to attract workers of colour. Nationalism in a situation of national oppression is always a powerful pole of attraction. Yet the evidence suggests that the revolutionary syndicalist movement of the 1910s in particular had the ability to win African, Coloured and Indian militants, and that the great strides made towards the establishment of a cadre of revolutionary socialist workers of colour in this period were destroyed by the formation of the CPSA in 1921. It is significant that none of these activists, with the possible exception of T.W. Thibedi, were present at the founding of the CPSA in 1921.

The new focus on party-building, rather than revolutionary unionism essentially meant that the revolutionary syndicalist unions were excluded from participation in the founding of the CPSA. Further, the early CPSA mechanically and inappropriately applied Vladimir I. Lenin's advice to the Communist Party of Great Britain to seek affiliation to the Labour Party in Britain to the South African situation, with negative consequences. The drive to affiliate to the segregationist South African Labour Party, a qualitatively different formation from its British namesake, implied concessions to the prejudice of White workers and unions, and a concomitant neglect of the concerns of workers of

colour. It implied a strategy of working predominantly within the predominantly White unions, rather than a broader struggle to form One Big Union. As S.P. Bunting noted in 1923, “our old policy of liberation to the native worker (since 1915) has been dropped,” and the Party paper had become “closed to anything that might offend white prejudice”: the executive had chosen a policy of “worship” of the White worker to the “exclusion of all others” in order not to alienate the White unionists.<sup>151</sup> The effects were simple: largely marginal in the early ICU, the CPSA found itself in the forefront of the 1922 Rand Revolt by White workers against African employment, and called for a vote for the segregationist South African Labour Party and National Party “Pact” platform in the 1924 elections.

Thus, the decision of the CPSA to focus more on work amongst African workers in 1924 was not an innovation, but a *return* to the policies of groups such as the ISL and IndSL, a revolt against the de-Africanisation of the revolutionary left in South Africa that had been the result of CPSA’s initial strategy. Put another way: the formation of the CPSA in 1921 was, from the perspective of the development of an anti-racist socialist praxis in South Africa, a step backwards, rather than the great leap forward described by the communist school.

### **Implications of the thesis for South African historiography, and for anarchist studies in general**

Thus, this thesis suggests several changes to the general understanding of the early history of the left in South Africa. The implicit conflation of revolutionary socialism in South Africa with political socialism generally, and classical Marxism, specifically, must be questioned. The tendency to date changing socialist approaches to the national question in South Africa, that is, to the country’s gaping racial divides, to changing policies in the CPSA must be replaced by an reintegration of the anti-racist politics and practices of the pre-1921 anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist left into the record in place of the crude caricatures and misrepresentations of the socialists of the 1900s and 1910s that pepper the literature.

Furthermore, analyses of the international influences upon labour and socialist and nationalist movements in South Africa must be expanded beyond the usual considerations of the impact of moderate trade unionism, of racist White Labourism, of the Soviet Union and western Marxism, of pan-Africanism and Garveyism, and of the American civil rights movement, to an adequate assessment of the impact of the movement founded by Bakunin, all those years ago. The history of socialism in South Africa in the pre-1921 is a far richer one than is suggested by most accounts; indeed, socialist groups may well have been more influential amongst workers, both White and black, in the late 1910s than they were in the early 1920s.

Finally, it should be noted that this work will contribute not only to a more profound understanding of the early socialist, labour and nationalist movements in South Africa, but, insofar as it deals centrally with groups aligned with a *libertarian* socialist approach, contribute to a fuller analysis

---

<sup>151</sup> S.P. Bunting, letter of 2 May 1923 and letter of 21 April 1923, both in Brian Bunting, editor, 1996, *Letters to Rebecca: South African communist leader S.P. Bunting to his wife 1917-1934*, Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, Bellville

of the international role played by anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism in the “glorious period,” and, in particular, their history in Africa.

The English-language literature on the history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, has been marred by its use of problematic and contradictory definitions of these ideologies. It has also tended to focus on the history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism in a very limited number of countries, principally Italy, France, Spain, the United States, and Russia. Concomitantly, it has paid inadequate attention to the numerous, and often proportionately larger anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movements in other regions, particularly, the non-Western regions. Africa has been worst affected by this tendency. Whilst, as mentioned above, there is evidence of anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist activity across north Africa in the “glorious period” of the movement, as well as Mozambique, there have been no thorough studies of the relationship between Africa and the libertarian movement to date; this proposition is, of course, equally applicable to South Africa, where the hold of the communist school has tended to prevent a close examination of the early history of the left, and to expunge libertarian socialist trends from the record.

Thus, this thesis has a supplementary aim: not simply to re-examine the history of the early left in South Africa, but to examine how the early left in South Africa may be situated within the pre-Leninist socialist world. As noted earlier, the thesis argues that anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, contrary to the views propounded by the communist school, played an important role in the early socialist, labour and nationalist movements. Over the last three decades, a series of important country studies have demonstrated the enormous influence that anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism wielded on radicals and unions outside of Europe and the United States, notably in Argentina,<sup>152</sup> Brazil,<sup>153</sup> Cuba,<sup>154</sup> China,<sup>155</sup> Korea,<sup>156</sup> Mexico,<sup>157</sup> and, to a lesser extent, Australia,<sup>158</sup> and New Zealand.<sup>159</sup> This intends to undertake the same task with reference to South Africa. In so doing, it not only aims to reinsert the libertarian socialist tradition into the history of the left in South Africa, but also reinserts to South Africa into the broader international history of anarchism

---

<sup>152</sup> R. Munck, 1987, *Argentina: from anarchism to Peronism; workers, politics and unions, 1885-1985*, Zed Books, London, New Jersey; Richard A. Yoast, 1975, *The Development Of Argentine Anarchism: A Socio-Ideological Analysis*, PhD, University of Wisconsin

<sup>153</sup> Dulles, 1973, *op cit.*; Gordon, 1978, *op cit.*

<sup>154</sup> J. Casanovas, 1994, *Labour and Colonialism in Cuba in the Second Half of the Nineteenth-Century*, PhD thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook

<sup>155</sup> Dirlík, 1991, *op cit.*; P. Zarrow, 1990, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York

<sup>156</sup> Ha Ki-Rak, 1986, *A History of [the] Korean Anarchist Movement*, Anarchist Publishing Committee, Korean Anarchist Federation, Taegu, Korea and J. Crump, 1996, “Anarchism and Nationalism in East Asia,” *Anarchist Studies*, volume 4, number 1

<sup>157</sup> See, in particular, Hart, 1978, *op cit.*; J. Hart, 1990, “Revolutionary Syndicalism in Mexico,” in Thorpe and van der Linden, 1990a, *op cit.*; also see Caulfield, 1995, *op cit.*, and N. Caulfield, 1998, “Syndicalism and the Trade Union Culture of Mexico”, paper presented at *Syndicalism: Swedish and International Historical Experiences*, Stockholm University, Sweden, March 13-4

<sup>158</sup> Burgmann, 1995, *op cit.*

<sup>159</sup> E. Olsen, 1988, *The Red Feds: revolutionary industrial unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour, 1908-14*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, New Zealand

and revolutionary syndicalism. It is thus not just a South African history; it is a contribution to the emergent global history of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism.