

Sachs, Solly (1900–1976)

Lucien van der Walt

Born Emil Solomon Sachs in Kamaai, Lithuania, Solly Sachs immigrated with his family to Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1914. Along with his brother Bernard, he joined the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League in 1919, and was a leading figure in the Reef Shop Assistants' Union, a union that lasted until 1926. In the meantime, he joined the Young Communist League of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), studied at the University of the Witwatersrand, and visited the Soviet Union in 1925. In 1926, he was elected to the executive committee of the South African Trade Union Congress, formed the previous year, followed by a position in 1927 as secretary of the Witwatersrand Middlemen Tailors' Association, and a position as secretary of the Garment Workers' Union in 1928.

It is for his role in the Garment Workers' Union that Sachs is best known. The union organized in the growing garment industry, organizing Afrikaner women, African men, and Colored and Indian workers. While Sachs tried to unite the workers, legal requirements and popular attitudes meant that the Colored and Indian members were enrolled in a "No. 2" branch, and the African men in a separate South African Clothing Workers' Union. These bodies cooperated, and the Garment Workers' Union held several strikes, including general strikes in 1931 and 1932.

Sachs sought, whenever possible, to make use of the legal system and the official industrial relations machinery. Nonetheless, he was subject to ongoing official harassment, in large part because of his CPSA connections. While expelled from the CPSA in 1931 during the purges of the “New Line” period, he remained an admirer of Stalin and a loyal supporter of official communism. In the 1943 general elections, he initiated, and stood unsuccessfully as a candidate for, an Independent Labor Party sponsored by the Garment Workers’ Union.

Retaining a focus on white workers, he subsequently joined the South African Labor Party, which was moving leftwards, becoming its treasurer in 1952. That year he was served notices in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) that forced him to resign from his union, forbade him from participating in political activity, and confined his movements to the Transvaal province. Despite mass protests by his union, the bans were maintained, and Sachs was subject to further prosecutions. In 1953, he left South Africa for exile in England, where he was active in anti-apartheid work. Married twice, he died in London in 1976.

SEE ALSO: Communist Party of South Africa, 1921–1950; South Africa, Labor Movement

References and Suggested Readings

- Alexander, P. (2000) *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Sachs, S. (1957) *Garment Workers in Action*. Johannesburg: Eagle Press.
- Verwey, E. J. (Ed.) (1995) *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, Vol. 1. Pretoria: HSRC Publishers.