

Sigamoney, Bernard L. E. (1888–1963)

Lucien van der Walt

Born in Durban in 1888 to Indian immigrants, and a member of the educated Indian elite, Sigamoney was raised a Christian and worked as headmaster at Estcourt Indian High School, then as a teacher at St. Aidans' Boys' School in the 1910s. A keen sportsman, he was elected vice-president of the Durban and District Indian Cricket Union in 1910, and served on the South African Colored Cricket Board from 1913.

Sigamoney is notable mainly for his role in the revolutionary syndicalist movement in the 1910s. During World War I, he became increasingly involved in politics, addressing public meetings on the growing food shortages in Durban, and coming into contact with the local section of the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League. The International Socialist League launched a revolutionary syndicalist Indian Workers' Industrial Union in Durban, along the lines of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), in March 1917, and Sigamoney soon joined. Within a few months he was the key figure in the union, which organized a wide range of workers. Sigamoney also joined the International Socialist League, and became Durban's most prominent Indian unionist and socialist.

In 1918, the authorities investigated Sigamoney for his alleged role in the African railway workers' strike that broke out in July, but he was cleared. He was an active supporter of the independent Tobacco Workers' Union formed

by Indian workers: the International Socialist League aided the union with financial support and organizers. In October 1920, the union launched a dramatic strike at a factory owned by the Imperial Cigar Manufacturing and Trading Company, demanding better conditions and higher pay and protesting overwork. Sigamoney was one of several syndicalists who sought to radicalize the strike and secure solidarity from other unions, but with limited success. He was subsequently involved with the 1921 strike of Indian furniture workers.

Unlike many local syndicalists, Sigamoney did not join the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), formed in 1921. Instead, he left radical politics, going to Britain in December 1922 to study as an Anglican pastor, and returning to work for St. Anthony's Indian Mission in Johannesburg in 1927. His remaining years were focused on work in the church and in promoting Indian sport. He served as president of the South African Indian Cricket Union, and as manager of the South African Indian cricket team. Sigamoney died in 1963.

SEE ALSO: Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); South Africa, Labor Movement

References and Suggested Readings

- Desai, A., Padayachee, V., Reddy, K., & Vahed, G. (2002) *Blacks in Whites: A Century of Cricket Struggles in KwaZulu-Natal*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Mantzaris, E. A. (1995) *Labour Struggles in South Africa: The Forgotten Pages, 1903–1921*. Namibia: Collective Resources Publications.
- Van der Walt, L. (2006) *Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904–1921: Rethinking the History of Labour and the Left*. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.