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Archie Crawford: Early Twentieth Century Global Labour Activist

Jonathan Hyslop, Lucien van der Welt and Wessel Visser

Archie Crawford was a Scot who played a remarkable role in the South African and international labour movements in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Crawford's career is of intrinsic interest, but also illuminates the crucial socio-political issues of the time: revolution and reform, unions and parties and imperialism and colonial revolt (1).

Enormously talented as a writer (as seen in the accompanying text), very energetic and an excellent administrator, Crawford lived a life that was paradoxical in the extreme. In his early years in South Africa as "labour's most notable maverick" (2), he despised reforms and Labourism, and rejected the segregationist, racist politics common in local unions and labour parties. In 1908, he founded the Voice of Labour, the country's first socialist weekly, and in 1913, the Strike Herald. He was involved in a series of strikes and violent demonstrations, and one of a group of labour leaders arrested under martial law in 1914, and deported. Crawford's personal life was equally turbulent during this period. His undoubted skills as an orator and writer co-existed with a sectarian streak and a caustic tongue that earned him enemies and actions for libel. He secretly became romantically involved with Mary Fitzgerald (nee Sinnott), manager of the Modern Press, and publisher of the Voice. A notable labour leader in her own right, she was from an Irish Catholic background, and married with young children. Her husband John owned the Press. He was vexed by her frequent growing absence from the family to engage in controversial public events with Crawford.

Yet at some point after being deported in 1914, and a stint as an international labour martyr, Crawford moved towards a moderate position and conciliatory style. He associated with reformist and right-wing labour leaders and organisations and became head of the first national union centre, the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) founded in 1914, which peaked at 60,000 members. He edited its mild-mannered Weekly Herald, and the erstwhile "stormy petrel" and "l'enfant terrible of the labour movement" (3) was increasingly relied upon by government and employers to settle industrial conflicts quickly and quietly. The great personal difficulties Crawford and Fitzgerald had suffered were also increasingly resolved. Mary married Archie in

1919 (retaining the surname Fitzgerald) and joined him at the 1921 International Labour Organisation (ILO) congress, where he represented South African labour. But simmering conflicts were boiling over in South Africa, into an armed white worker insurrection, the 1922 Rand Revolt. Crawford was pushed aside in the revolt: the SAIF was dashed on the rocks, falling to just 2,000 members in 1923 (4). Although Crawford appeared again at the ILO, and was still consulted by government, his day was over. He died unexpectedly of enteric fever and pleurisy in 1924, soon after returning from an ILO congress. Fitzgerald believed that an ungrateful labour movement had worked him to death and spent her remaining decades as a troubled recluse.

Crawford's story starts in Glasgow, where he was born in 1883, and served his apprenticeship as a fitter with Sharp, Stewart & Co.. A slender man of medium height, he enlisted in 1902 in the new Imperial Yeomanry to fight in the Anglo-Boer War. His regiment arrived just before the war ended and he was discharged in South Africa and chose to stay. This was a common choice among ex-soldiers, who were part of a wave of United Kingdom – and especially Scottish – immigration to southern Africa. A majority of white immigrants attracted by the booming gold mines of the Rand were British-born (5), and about one in three British immigrants was Scottish, much higher than the Scots proportion of the United Kingdom population (6). They include many professionals and skilled artisans, some rapidly achieving high management positions in the mining industry and the growing civil service (7).

Although some institutions pulled these Scots together, notably Caledonian Societies, Presbyterian churches, and 'Highlander'-style militia regiments, the formation of an ethnic community was undercut by a rapid class polarisation (8). The major expression of this process was a powerful labour movement on the Rand, which was initially based on English and Scottish immigrants. As more Afrikaners moved into the towns – and, to a lesser extent, entered the trades – they too gradually began to be attracted to the unions.

Crawford first settled in Transvaal capital, Pretoria, working at his trade in the government railway workshops. He became active in his branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE): a craft union for a range of skilled metal trades, it was an autonomous section of the British body, and active locally from 1894. If the ASE was arguably the most important of local craft unions in these years, the Transvaal Miners Association (TMA) was probably the key body moving towards industrial unionism. These rising unions were linked together through

local and regional councils, like the Witswatersrand Trades and Labour Council, set up in 1902.

Crawford became secretary of the Pretoria Trades Council, where he was part of a congenial labour circle, and active in the union-affiliated Transvaal Labour Party. He befriended another Scot, Dundee-born J T 'Jock' Bain, the most charismatic figure in the Transvaal labour movement and a man who would play a major part in his life (9). Crawfor lost his job for agitating against retrenchments on the railways, moved to Johannesburg and became, essentially, a full-time agitator and worker organiser.

In 1907, Crawford and Bain organised a dramatic march from Johannesburg to Pretoria of 300 white unemployed, to demand relief. It achieved some publicity but, plagued by organisational problems, ended acrimoniously (10). Crawford was one of two labour members elected to the Johannesburg municipality that year, with the backing of a Labour Representation Committee, having previously run unsuccessfully for a seat in the Transvaal parliament. In 1908 – by now a well-established labour activist – Crawford was part of the reception committee for James Keir Hardie on his visit to the region. When Hardie arrived at the main Johannesburg railway station, he was attacked by a jingoist mob inflamed by Hardie's criticisms of British imperialism and white South African racism. Crawford extricated the great man from the clutches of the mob and, over the next week, he helped physically defend Hardie's public meetings against violent opponents (11). Later that year, he organised a General Workers Union for workers outside the craft unions, to which he became increasingly hostile, with the Voice of Labour started as a free newspaper promoting the union.

Two major events seem to have occurred in Crawford's life around this time. He was increasingly radical and discovered syndicalism and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or 'Wobblies'). This likely contributed to his growing antipathy to craft unionism, and his involvement in the launch of a new type of union that, moreover, refused to join the craft-dominated Witswatersrand Trades Council. Secondly, his life was increasingly intertwined with that of Mary Fitzgerald, who had worked for the TMA (12), and who ran the Modern Press on Fox Street, as well as a small bookshop on the premises. She was quickly becoming a public figure in her own right, a militant leader in the pre-1914 wave of South African strikes whose picket-line heroics won her the nickname 'Pickhandle Mary'.
Although the General Workers Union failed, the Voice of Labour, took

off, evolving into an exceptionally well-produced, well-written newspaper that drew together small radical left-wing groups, correspondents from across the country and abroad, and provided a platform for anarchists, De Leonists, IWW supporters, admirers of Eugene V Debs and H M Hyndman, suffragettes and reformers. An eclectic and open paper, it became a major vehicle for syndicalist and IWW ideas and news, and circulated among influential activists. The Voice's editorials captured the festering, militant mood of the international working-class movement before the First World War (13). Fitzgerald also co-edited and managed Modern Woman in South Africa, published by the Women's Enfranchisement League, from 1909-1910 (14).

What particularly distinguished the Voice of Labour was its editorial position: outspoken opposition to white labour's racial protectionist ideas (15). Crawford and others, like Andrew B Dunbar – a fellow Scot, and a key figure in the local IWW established in 1910 – argued that colour bars and segregation were impractical, at odds with socialist principles, and that all workers should be unionised and have equal rights. Its racial politics had some effect, and anticipated similar arguments made by later groups like the syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL), founded 1915, and the Communist Party of South Africa, founded 1921. It seems clear that the IWW's advocacy of militant struggle and direct action had a real impact, as the next few years would reveal. This was, however, undercut by the Wobblies' tendency to harsh polemics against rivals, and their egalitarian racial stance antagonised many in the white labour movement.

In 1909, the four British colonies of the Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal were approaching unification as a self-governing Dominion, with a mainly white franchise. This galvanised efforts to set up a unified, union-backed South African Labour Party (SALP) to represent white workers. Crawford and Fitzgerald attended its founding, but abandoned the party as reformist and racist, and set up a rival South African Socialist Party (16). It was never a serious challenge to the SALP – in the 1910 general election, Crawford stood as a candidate in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, getting just eight votes – but it was an important forum for the far left. The SALP did win a few seats, but the new parliament was dominated by the forces of Louis Botha, who became Prime Minister, and his right-hand man Jan Smuts – both former Afrikaner generals, now staunch supporters of Britain and the mine owners, and antagonistic to labour organisation (17).

Possibly due to his party's failure, and problematic personal circumstances, Crawford left South Africa in 1ate 1910 for thirteen months on a round-the-world voyage, working his passage as a stoker and assisted by donations (18). He recorded his experiences in a scintillating series for the Voice of Labour, providing analyses of the movement abroad. In Australia, he met noted British women's suffrage activist and socialist Dora Montefiore, and was later to arrange a visit by her to South Africa (19). He visited the IWW and the Socialist Party in the United States, and attended the Jena congress of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany. One of his last stops was the Socialist Unity conference in Manchester, England, that formed the British Socialist Party (BSP).

On his return, Crawford pushed for a United Socialist Party, which would include the local IWW as its industrial wing. Back in Johannesburg, the IWW had launched strikes by municipal tramway workers. Fitzgerald had been a central leader of the confrontations that took place, including clashes with the police and, later, the disruption of the election meetings of city councillors viewed as helping suppress the strike. Though the IWW was defeated, the events showed that syndicalist methods were getting a hearing. The new party was not a success – a nasty clash between Crawford and Dunbar did not help matters – and it folded in late 1912. The Voice ceased publication in December 1912, Crawford blaming "financial difficulties" and the "almost criminal apathy of the working class (20).

In fact, the working class was becoming restive, and in late May 1913 there was a massive strike by white miners on the Rand, precipitated by a minor dispute over hours of work. Bain rapidly emerged as its charismatic central leader, but Crawford was to the fore of strike meetings and went from mine to mine calling the men out. Crawford and Fitzgerald began producing a strike paper, the Strike Herald, that took an aggressive line – including naming scabs so that they could be physically attacked. Unsurprisingly, Crawford was arrested twice on charges of inciting public violence. As the strike dragged on through June, the leadership decided to call a general strike, with a mass meeting at Johannesburg's Market Square on 4 July. This was broken up by mounted police and Royal Dragoons from the British garrison. Just as it appeared that everything was dying down, Fitzgerald appeared on the square and, under her leadership, the crowd blocked tram lines, switched off the nearby power station, and burned down the main railway station as well as the offices of The Star newspaper, viewed as the mine owners' voice. There were running battles and exchanges of gunfire into the night, and a gun fight at the exclusive Rand Club.

The next afternoon, Bain and his strike committee, including Crawford, entered negotiations with Botha and Smuts, who had arrived on the scene by car, driving through a vast hostile crowd. Crawford reportedly told the two generals that if any strikers were shot, they would pay in blood (21). Royal Dragoons did, in fact, open fire outside the Rand Club, killing about twenty people and wounding far more. Bain used this catastrophe to manoeuvre Botha and Smuts into signing an agreement for the reinstatement of employees fired during the strike, and a government commission into workers' grievances.

This was a moral victory for the strikers, but Crawford and Fitzgerald disagreed. They held a meeting where they argued that since none of the issues that caused the strike had been settled, the strike must continue. They were also prominent at the gigantic funeral procession which took place on Monday 7 July 1913, riding a cart covered with a red flag (22). Their position did not prevail (23), and they were castigated in the SALP press (24). Fitzgerald was prosecuted for leading the attack on the railway station, in which a night watchman on the property died, but the case fell apart. Crawford, however, did get onto the executive of the Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions, successor to the Witswatersrand Trades Council.

Smarting for revenge, Botha and Smuts wanted to crush militant labour, and when a confrontation on the railways in January 1914 spiralled into a general strike, the government proclaimed martial law and started mass arrests of union and SALP leaders, and 'troublemakers'. Bain and Crawford were among forty or so people arrested at the Johannesburg Trades Hall, which was surrounded by troops and police. Ten days later, nine strike leaders, including Bain and Crawford, were secretly put on a train to Durban and deported to Britain on the SS Umgeni (25). Smuts passed legislation to retrospectively enable this unprecedented action, arguing it was justified by the supposed existence of a vast "syndicalist conspiracy" (26).

Perhaps to their surprise, the deportees found themselves famous on arrival, as their cause had been taken up by important labour leaders such as Jim Larkin, Tom Mann, George Lansbury and Robert Blatchford. The Labour Party leadership of Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald was pressured to oppose the deportation. For the next seven months, the labour movement paid for the deportees' accommodation in a hotel in London's Tottenham Court Road, where they were joined by their wives – Mary Fitzgerald made her own way there, and gave birth to a son, named Archibald Crawford, in Britain.

Although now long forgotten, the deportation incident at the time competed with the Ulster crisis for headlines in the British press. A massive demonstration in Hyde Park was probably the biggest labour manifestation of the era, and the deportees travelled the country, feted everywhere (27). It was on the far reaches of such a tour that Crawford prepared the International Socialist Review article, 'Capitalism in Shetland', which accompanies this profile.

By the middle of the year, the nine were becoming an expensive embarrassment to Henderson and MacDonald. The outbreak of the First World War solved the problem. The Botha-Smuts government led South Africa into the war on Britain's side in August, a step so bitterly opposed by many Afrikaner nationalists that it gave rise to an armed Boer rebellion. Seeking SALP support, the generals let the deportees return as a gesture to the unions. By mid-November, Crawford and the others were back in South Africa.

The SAIF and SALP were already firmly in support of the war effort, but an active anti-war opposition which drew in figures like Dunbar would subsequently break away to form the International Socialist League (ISL). This body included union stalwarts, some of them former SALP leaders like English immigrant W H 'Bill' Andrews, who had been radicalised by the general strikes. The ISL set up IWW-style unions amongst black, Coloured and Indian workers, and agitated within the SAIF (28). Andrews, previously labelled a 'political opportunist' and 'labour fakir' by Crawford (29), became the ISL's full-time industrial organiser. Besides working with the ISL unions, he championed a local version of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement (30). Sent to Britain in late 1917 as a delegate to the Inter-Allied Labour and Socialist Conference, Andrews addressed the Clyde Workers Committee, a body that excited his 'particular admiration' (31).

The returned Crawford, on the other hand, was not the extremist of before. Perhaps frustrated with the limited success of his far-left projects, perhaps influenced by the reformism and power of Britain's Labour Party and General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), perhaps happier now that Mary Fitzgerald had left her husband John, he became a conservative labour leader and dropped his earlier race radicalism (32). He made a dizzying ascent into the leadership of mainstream unions and became Secretary of the SAIF, which replaced the Transvaal Federation.

The man who had once scorned the Witswatersrand Trades Council, the SALP and reformism at home and abroad became a pillar of respectable

trade unionism and involved in the SALP. Crawford and Fitzgerald supported the war effort and became allies of the ferociously pro-war SALP leader, Colonel F H P Cresswell (33). The SALP did well in the war years and early 1920s in white working-class districts and even briefly captured the Transvaal Provincial Council in 1914: in 1915, Fitzgerald was elected to the Johannesburg city council on the SALP ticket, becoming Deputy Mayor in 1921 – the first woman to hold such a post. She also founded the Women's Industrial League in 1918, a general union for women under SAIF auspices, active in Johannesburg and Pretoria (34).

Crawford, the militant of the 1913 and 1914 strikes who had denounced Bain's deal with Smuts, now pushed the labour movement towards the arbitration of disputes, actively discouraging strikes. He took advantage of employers' greater willingness to recognise and negotiate with (white) unions during the war. The SAIF was accepted by the Chamber of Mines, and the South African Mineworkers Union (SAMWU), successor to the TMA, and various craft unions won concessions in return for no-strike pledges (35). Crawford was central to the growing rapprochement between unions, capital and the state, expressed in the proliferation of arbitration and the establishment of conciliation boards. He reportedly even introduced into the SAIF constitution a section asserting that the "employer and employed have much in common" (36) – inverting the IWW Preamble, which insisted that they have "nothing in Common", and their "class struggle" could only be ended by a union-led workers' revolution (37). In 1919, he attended the Washington conference that founded the International Labour Organisation (38).

An effective bureaucrat, Crawford led the SAIF's growth into the strongest, most influential and by far the largest part of the labour movement: in 1919, it had a membership of around 47,000 in 45 unions (39) – but almost entirely white. He renounced his previous positions and moved to a white protectionist policy. Fitzgerald's Women's Industrial League (later, Union) was "the first South African group specifically devoted to organising women" workers – but was all-white (40). It was involved in a 1921 campaign to oust 'Coloured' male waiters and replace them with white waitresses (41).

When black workers threatened a general strike on the Rand in mid-1918, Crawford approached the government with an offer that the SAIF organise "labour battalions" against this "native rising" (42). It was now Crawford's turn to be denounced by the far left. The International Socialist League described his actions as an unprecedented

"level of treachery against the proletariat" (43). The ISL had long used "Crawfordism" as a term for reformist, treacherous trade unionism, and described moderate black nationalists as 'black Crawfords' (44). The Communist Party, headed in its early years by Andrews, continued the tradition. It can scarcely be doubted that some who had once been attacked by Crawford, like Andrews and Dunbar, relished the turnabout. And in 1919, when Bain led a strike at the Johannesburg power station and an attempted workers' occupation of the Johannesburg council offices, there were face-to-face confrontations between Crawford and Fitzgerald on one side, and their former comrades on the other (45).

A wall had appeared between the Crawford and Fitzgerald faction and more radical elements. The pair moved from the margins to a newfound acceptance by the establishment, and Crawford's rise to prominence was marked by membership of various government Commissions of Inquiry. It was the government of Smuts, now Prime Minister, that appointed Crawford a South Africa delegate to the 1920 ILO congress, with Mary as his adviser (46). The ILO, backed by the moderate International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), was partly intended as a bulwark against precisely the sort of labour radicalism that Crawford had once espoused.

Crawford's change of direction would cost him heavily, too. Enemies on both the right and left suggested that he was too close to the powerful, questioned his role in the ILO and, specifically, objected to Fitzgerald's attendance (47). With the end of the war, depression and a falling gold price, mining and other employers had less appetite for deals with labour. The SAIF lost affiliates, and radicals and unofficial strikes challenged the leadership, further weakening its bargaining power. As simmering conflicts boiled over in the mines, power passed increasingly to an augmented SAIF executive and unofficial action committees in which Communists, among them Andrews, and syndicalists were prominent. Crawford was pushed aside when the Rand Revolt broke out.

While its defeat hammered the radicals, it also gutted the SAIF: Crawfor was back in charge, but the Federation was now tiny. He worked hard to revive its fortunes, attending the ILO in 1922 and 1924 (48), and serving on the select committee for the Industrial Conciliation Bill introduced by Smuts, which set out the country's first proper industrial relations machinery (49). He set up an SAIF Industrial Union that recruited members from rival unions (50). In 1924, he aligned the SAIF

to the IFTU, to "work for the negotiating as against the revolutionary or direct action policy" (51). Whether his efforts would have succeeded we will never know, as he died unexpectedly that same year, and Fitzgerald retreated from public life. The SAIF was reorganised as the South African Trade Union Congress in 1925, headed by Crawford's old foe, Andrews.

There is still a soft spot in Johannesburg's heart for the legend of 'Pickhandle Mary', and a public square near the old tramway yards is named after her (52). Archie Crawford is a largely forgotten figure, but his story captures the drama and contradictions of labour politics in the world of empire and revolution.

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(43) The International, 5 July 1918.

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