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### *Map of ICU Branches in Southern Africa, 1919–1930*



### *Introduction*

David Johnson, Noor Nieftagodien and Lucien van der Walt

The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU) was the largest black trade union and political organisation in Southern Africa in the 1920s. With between 100 000 and 150 000 members in South Africa alone at its peak in 1927, it dwarfed the African National Congress (ANC) and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA).<sup>1</sup>

In the century since the ICU so dominated Southern Africa's political landscape, successive generations of historians have filtered their interpretations of its history through perspectives marked by their respective contexts. Under segregation (up to 1948), the earliest informal histories by ICU members like Clements Kadalie and sympathisers like C.L.R. James and Leonard Barnes proclaimed the ICU as the harbinger of freedom for black Southern Africans. Such optimistic accounts were soon displaced by more critical popular histories of the ICU by disillusioned members like A.W.G. Champion and H.D. Tyamzashe, moderate supporters like W.G. Ballinger and Winifred Holtby and hostile CPSA critics like Albert Nzula.

Under formal apartheid (1948–1994), academic histories succeeded their popular precursors, with scholarly interventions by *inter alia* Sheridan Johns, Eddie Webster, Jack and Ray Simons, Phil Bonner, Paul La Hausse, William Beinart and Colin Bundy, and two major monographs – Peter Wickins's *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (1978) and Helen Bradford's *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924–1930* (1987). Produced by the pioneers of the radical-revisionist South African historiography initiated in the 1970s, these histories were in sympathy with the aspirations of the ICU and its black working-class members. Popular histories by a new generation of trade unions and labour activists, like the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), also turned afresh to the ICU's dramatic story. Seeking lessons in the mistakes and failures of the ICU, however, academic and popular histories alike subordinated the ICU's contribution to the freedom struggle to those of the higher profile anti-apartheid organisations that dominated subsequent decades. Bradford's conclusion to her seminal work encapsulates how the ICU was relegated in the pantheon of liberation organisations:

Sixty years later [since the collapse of the ICU], the South African countryside is still a cesspit of poverty and misery, and neither the racist state nor capitalism have been overthrown. There is no quick and infallible route to liberation; there is no easy way forward for the millions scrabbling for survival on farms and in rural ghettos. There is but the certainty that the ANC and the Communist Party have long since surpassed the organisational and theoretical capabilities of the ICU.<sup>2</sup>

With the prestige of the ANC and the SACP at its zenith in the mid-1980s, the two organisations are thus cast as the heroes of South Africa's freedom struggle, with the ICU a charismatic but flawed supporting character in the early scenes of an unfolding drama. Similar critical interpretations also emerged from FOSATU and its allies, which emphasised industry-based unionism and strong workplace organisation, and deprecated the 'One-Big-Union' approach of the ICU.

Re-reading Bradford's words three decades after the end of apartheid, certain continuities stand out: rural Southern Africa remains 'a cesspit of poverty and misery', and capitalism is still dominant. Arguably more striking, however, are the contrasts. The racist state *has* been overthrown, superseded by the post-apartheid state. But a jarring note is struck in a second contrast, namely in Bradford's generous acclamation of the 'organisational and theoretical capabilities' of the ANC and SACP. Once the paragons of national liberation struggle, the ruling alliance is now the object of the most searching criticism, as it has mutated into a state (or state-aligned) centre of power mired in bureaucratic ineptitude, ideological confusion and endemic corruption. Moreover, post-apartheid South Africa has been increasingly blighted by mass unemployment, widespread poverty, high levels of gender-based violence and infrastructural deterioration – all of which the ANC has failed to ameliorate.

The mounting criticisms of the ruling political alliance have focused especially upon the obstacles to economic emancipation, with the role of trade unions in serving Southern Africa's working class fiercely debated. The Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) compromising alliance with the ANC has come under especially intense scrutiny, as has the declining influence of trade unions and of workers' control within the large unions. The questions this collection accordingly confronts are: How does the changed context of post-apartheid South Africa – the continuities as well as the ruptures – affect our historical understanding of the ICU, one of Southern Africa's most significant liberation movements outside the hegemonic ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance? And how does the ICU's achievement of building a radical and inclusive mass movement independent of established political parties and the state speak to our post-apartheid present?<sup>3</sup>

The contributors to this volume answer these questions in a wide variety of ways. Drawn from different disciplines (social and labour history, political studies and literary studies) and from different generations, and far from unanimous in their assessments of the ICU's history and its contemporary significance, the chapters in this collection provide a provocative range of new interpretations of the ICU.

### *Post-apartheid perspectives (1): From South Africa to Southern Africa*

The post-apartheid period has been characterised by a fundamental reconfiguring of South Africa's relationship with its Southern African neighbours. In the South African liberation movement's discourse of the 1980s, the frontline states were loyal comrades united in the fight against apartheid. Nelson Mandela's momentous speech

at Cape Town's Grand Parade on 11 February 1990 acknowledged South Africa's debt to its neighbours: 'we thank the world community for their great contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle. Without your support, our struggle would not have reached this advanced stage. The sacrifice of the frontline states will be remembered by South Africans forever'.<sup>4</sup>

That Mandela overestimated South African memories soon became apparent: four years later, the Minister of Home Affairs warned that the 'aliens who are pouring into South Africa' were competing for scarce resources, stealing the fruits of 'our' democracy.<sup>5</sup> Mandela's appreciation of the sacrifices made by the frontline states was echoed by Thabo Mbeki, whose ideological project of the African Renaissance embraced not only the peoples and cultures of the frontline states, but all Africans. In 1998, for example, Mbeki paid tribute to 'the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the stone buildings of Axum and the ruins of Carthage and Zimbabwe, the rock paintings of the San, the Benin bronzes and the African masks, the carvings of Makonde and the stone sculptures of the Shona'.<sup>6</sup> Mbeki's inclusive Pan Africanist rhetoric, however, always co-existed with the prioritisation of South African economic interests in the region, a tightening of immigration controls and neo-liberal economic policies, which devastated the working classes of the subcontinent. Comparative research published in the same year as Mbeki's African Renaissance speech indicated that South Africa has amongst the highest levels of anti-immigrant sentiment in the world. Driven by intense competition for jobs, escalating township and rural poverty, mass unemployment and state-sponsored South African nationalism, 'regional xenophobia' directed against migrants from neighbouring states continued to increase apace.<sup>7</sup>

Since the turn of the millennium, hostility towards non-nationals has escalated into violence at frequent intervals: in May 2008, widespread attacks on non-nationals left 62 dead and nearly 100 000 displaced; in November 2009, 2 500 Zimbabwean farm workers in the Western Cape were forcibly evicted from their homes; in May–June 2013, four Somali shopkeepers were murdered, with many more injured and killed in subsequent attacks; and in April and October 2015, attacks on Somali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi shopkeepers in Durban, Johannesburg and Makhanda (Grahamstown) met with negligible policing or state sanctioning.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, Lindiwe Zulu, the Minister of Small Business Development, observed, 'Foreign business owners in South Africa's townships cannot expect to co-exist peacefully with local business owners unless they share their trade secrets'.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, attacks have continued, with non-nationals killed, injured and displaced in Tshwane in June 2016; in Durban in March 2019; and in Johannesburg in September 2019. In June 2021, the anti-immigrant organisation, Operation Dudula, led a march through Soweto, drawing significant support, and in April 2022, striking farm workers in the Sundays River Valley in the Eastern Cape demanded the expulsion of all foreign workers recruited as cheap labour by commercial farmers. And the state continues to collude in such violence: in January 2020, Aaron Motsoaledi, the Home Affairs Minister, reiterated the sentiments of his predecessors, alleging, 'Most people are not

documented because they came here to commit a crime. They came as criminals, not as migrants.<sup>10</sup>

What this snapshot suggests is that anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly against African non-nationals, has become embedded in South African politics, reversing the international solidarity that characterised the anti-apartheid struggle. How have these developments influenced the post-apartheid historian? For the historian of the ICU specifically, one consequence has been a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the contributions of non-South African nationals to the ICU in the 1920s. This regional dimension of the ICU was barely examined under apartheid, when labour historians aligned to the independent black union movement focused primarily on South Africa. Contending with the political conflicts within the South African trade union movement and the imperatives of the *national* liberation struggle, transnational connections and processes were secondary, with the result that the crucial transnational dimension of the ICU was neglected.<sup>11</sup> From its beginnings, the ICU sought to organise across Southern Africa, with branches formed in six countries in the early 1920s, and it continued to flourish in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) from the 1930s and in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) up until the mid-1950s.<sup>12</sup>

As a response to the changed political context, as well as a corrective to the earlier national histories of the ICU, our first section accordingly foregrounds the ICU's Southern African networks, with three chapters on the connections with the neighbouring states. The section opens in South West Africa, with Lucien van der Walt's chapter, 'The ICU, the Mines and the State in South West Africa, 1920–1926: Garveyism, Revolutionary Syndicalism and Global Labour History'. Van der Walt describes how sections of the ICU were set up in South West Africa in 1920; in Southern Rhodesia and Swaziland in 1927; in Basutoland in 1928; and in Northern Rhodesia in 1931. Following the establishment of a branch in Lüderitz in December 1920 by the South African worker, Jimmy La Guma, the ICU played a key role in organising workers on the docks, in the diamond fields, and in the fishing industry. From its base in Lüderitz, the ICU grew on the back of a wave of strikes and protests, taking root amongst South African, Afro-Caribbean and Liberian immigrants, but growing to include Nama as well as black migrant workers, with a branch in Keetmanshoop in the midst of karakul farms, and sections in workers' compounds in the mining town of Elizabeth Bay and the Walvis Bay harbour.<sup>13</sup> Van der Walt's account of the South West African ICU pays close attention to its politics, activities and transnational connections, notably those with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the ICU sections in South Africa.

In Chapter 2, Anusa Daimon's 'The Rabble-rouser: Robert Sambo's ICU Stint in Rhodesia', the discussion of the ICU's networks moves to Southern Rhodesia. Damon relates how the ICU spread north of the Limpopo in 1927, when Clements Kadalie deployed a fellow Nyasa representative, Robert Sambo, to establish a branch in Southern Rhodesia. Operating from Bulawayo, Sambo, with the assistance of another Nyasa, John Mphamba, agitated effectively from February to June 1927.

Organising urban workers, Sambo appealed to working-class solidarity, attacked the government, and demanded basic rights, sowing the seeds of a radical labour movement in Southern Rhodesia, which spread to the countryside in a second wave of ICU activity in 1928. Sambo's activities constituted the most radical challenge to colonial capitalism and the white-ruled state to date, provoking the authorities to deport him. Sambo's deportation, however, did not end the ICU's impact, as Rhodesian trade unionists such as Masotsha Ndlovu rebuilt the ICU, laying the basis for Benjamin Burombo, Reuben Siwela, Josiah Maluleke and Jasper Savanhu to form their own unions. Furthermore, those recruited into trade union politics through the ICU sustained their radical commitments, most notably ICU veteran, Charles Mzingeli, who was the leader of the Reformed ICU that dominated Salisbury politics after 1945. Damon reconstructs the history of Sambo's remarkable five-month stint in Southern Rhodesia, demonstrating how one 'undesirable foreigner' spread the ICU's liberatory message within a hostile and paranoid colonial state; how the ICU was able to re-emerge and expand in even the most repressive of contexts; and how the ICU exerted a long-term impact on the resistance cultures of Southern Rhodesia.

The third chapter by Henry Dee, 'Organising the Unorganised: ICU Internationalism and the Transnational Unionisation of Migrant Workers', extends the discussions of the ICU's Southern African networks to ICU workers from Central Africa, and assesses the remarkable stance the ICU leadership adopted in relation to the question of 'foreign' labour in South Africa. Noting that the ICU started out as a trade union led by immigrant workers, Dee argues that the ICU operated on a transnational basis because South Africa's labour force was transnational – in the 1920s, around half the 200 000 workers on the gold mines were Mozambican, and Johannesburg's domestic service industry was dominated by Central Africans. Dee foregrounds the many hardships faced by immigrant workers in the 1920s: representatives of South African labour – both white and black – pursued anti-immigrant agendas based on the dogma that migrant workers forced down wages; the government shifted from a laissez-faire to a state-controlled immigration regime; calls for the restriction of immigration and deportation of black immigrants intensified after Johannesburg's anti-immigrant riots of 1927; and the 10-year old South African state was actively promoting an exclusivist ideology of South Africanism. In such a hostile context, the ICU defended workers' rights to free movement, and demanded a minimum wage, arguing that pay was undercut by bosses not immigrants. Dee argues further that as the ICU's constituency was made up of migrants working in different industries, its 'One-Big-Union' strategy – as opposed to organising separate unions for individual industries – was entirely appropriate.

### *Post-apartheid perspectives (2): From national history to local and regional histories*

The muted response to the ICU's centenary in 2019 contrasts with the brouhaha that accompanied the centenary of the ANC's founding in 2012.<sup>14</sup> Aside from proving yet again that history is written by the victors, recent ANC historiography reveals

a second way in which post-apartheid perspectives on twentieth-century resistance history are quite different from their apartheid-era precursors.<sup>15</sup> Whereas histories written in the final decades of apartheid sought to recover the heterogeneous local histories of forgotten black peasants and workers, biographies of nationalist leaders have dominated the South African history-publishing landscape in the post-apartheid period.<sup>16</sup> The transition was occasioned by the ANC's tactical decision in the late 1980s to replace the emphasis on collective struggle with the elevation of iconic leaders. As one historian-biographer explained, 'the ANC has shifted its policy of a collective image to the tactical utilisation (with Tambo's keen participation) of Mandela as an icon of the struggle against apartheid'.<sup>17</sup> The ANC's strategic switch from attributing agency to the collective masses to elevating the individual leader in the 1980s has continued to be zealously executed, with best-selling biographies of the leading nationalists dominating the History sections of publishers' lists – Anthony Sampson's *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (1999), Elinor Sisulu's *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (2002), Luli Callinicos's *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Ngele Mountains* (2004) and Mark Gevisser's *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (2007), to name but the most obvious examples.<sup>18</sup> In all cases, the individual leader's life-story, the ANC and South Africa's collective history are (roughly) synchronous, as the nationalist biography functions metonymically for the teleological history of the nation's journey from racist state to liberal democracy. Even when criticising the ANC or its leaders, such works preclude raising doubts about the inviolable historic destiny of their chosen subject(s) or contemplating the claims of alternative traditions of resistance.

It would be easy for new histories of the ICU to embrace the post-apartheid celebration of individual struggle leaders, to provide biographically centred chapters on the ICU's equivalents of Mandela/Sisulu/Tambo – pre-eminently Clements Kadalie and A.W.G. Champion. Within the pages of this volume, there are indeed discussions of Kadalie and Champion, as well as of numerous other key members, supporters and critics of the ICU – James La Guma, Robert Sambo, Keable 'Mote', Eva Kubedi, Selby Msimang, Winifred Holtby, William Ballinger, Ethelreda Lewis, Mabel Palmer and H.D. Tyamzashe.

However, the primary emphasis, especially in this second section, is less on the individual ICU leaders, but instead on the many workers who made up the membership of the ICU – the women and men, the urban labourers in many different industries, and the farm workers, labour tenants and peasants in branches across South Africa. In this respect, the collection re-affirms the commitment of the social historians who prioritised recovering the forgotten voices of black peasants and workers. In the specific context of ICU history-writing, this commitment was evident in the re-examination of government reports on the ICU's activities, and even more so, in the extensive use of oral history as a route to recovering the memories of rank-and-file ICU members. The hundreds of interviews conducted by the University of Witwatersrand Sharecropping and Labour Tenancy Project (SLTP) between 1979 and 1987 produced unique insights into the distinctive

experiences of ICU members in the different regions of the country.<sup>19</sup> Examples abound. In Kroonstad in the Orange Free State, Lucas Nqandela recalled Kadalie at first 'insulting the whites and promising us liberation from oppression', but he then complained how at a later stage, as the ICU foundered, Kadalie 'just vanished like water vanishing under the ground'.<sup>20</sup> In Mooi River in Natal, Charles Kumalo remembered, 'The ICU fought for freedom. Those of Congress also fought for freedom but didn't talk about money. The ICU was concerned with wages [and helping evicted tenants] back onto the farms'.<sup>21</sup> And in Middelburg in the Transvaal, Rose Mthimunye reminisced about how the ICU gave black workers the confidence 'to be free to move on pavements, walking side-by-side with the whites and rubbing shoulders with them'.<sup>22</sup> In order to account for these – and the many more – different experiences of ICU members in South Africa, the seven chapters in Section B focus on ICU branches in specific towns and regions, foregrounding the variations in membership, organisational cultures, and successes and failures.

Section B opens with the first of three chapters on the ICU in the Orange Free State. Peter Limb and Chitja Twala's chapter, 'The ICU in Free State Dorps and Dorpies', argues that the histories of workers' movements in small rural towns ('dorpies') shed important light on the national events and developments of the 1920s. Foregrounding the neglected histories of early twentieth-century black politics and labour in the Orange Free State, Limb and Twala assess the political, industrial, intellectual and cultural histories of the ICU in rural towns such as Harrismith, Bethlehem, Bethulie, Parys and Winburg, noting especially their connections to the larger towns and cities. Other issues fundamental to the history of the ICU in the Orange Free State that are explored include: the tensions between the ICU's national bodies and its local branches; the different roles played by teachers, women, farm workers, urban workers and traders in ICU politics; the alternately symbiotic and contradictory relationships between political and trade union activism; and the ICU's complicated relationships with the different regional ANC bodies. Focusing on the two decades (1920s and 1930s) when ICU branches flourished in the 'dorpies' and hinterlands of the Orange Free State, Limb and Twala provide an alternative history of early twentieth-century liberation movements in the Orange Free State.

In the second of the chapters on the ICU in the Orange Free State, 'The ICU and Local Politics: Kroonstad, from the Late 1920s to the 1930s', Tshepo Moloi notes that notwithstanding the early presence of a branch of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, renamed the ANC in 1923) in the town, Kroonstad's African locations were politically quiescent before the arrival of the ICU. After Keable 'Mote' established an ICU branch in Kroonstad in 1926, however, the town's political culture was transformed. Together with Henderson Binda, Eva Kubedi and other local leaders, 'Mote mobilised the location's inhabitants, delivering fiery speeches at a number of large public gatherings and initiating political campaigns that challenged the authority of the Native Advisory Board (NAB) and Joint Council for Europeans and Natives (JCEN), most notably the campaign to boycott the paying of rates and taxes. Emphasising the crucial role played by the Women's Section of the

Kroonstad ICU branch, Moloi delineates the distinctively radical trajectory of the ICU in Kroonstad which inspired Kadalie's boast that 'the ICU have never failed in Kroonstad'. Moloi's chapter concludes with an analysis of the demise of the ICU in Kroonstad, elaborating the personal and political disagreements between 'Mote and Kadalie that ultimately undid the ICU's political achievements in Kroonstad in the late 1920s.<sup>23</sup>

In Chapter 6, 'Trouble Brewing: The ICU, the 1925 Bloemfontein Riots and the Women Question', Nicole Ulrich demonstrates that the ICU's proletarian focus enabled a different gender politics which recognised women as workers and equal members. Examining how the Bloemfontein branch of the ICU related to black proletarian women, the chapter first outlines the significant if uneven inclusion of domestic workers in a pioneering campaign for a general minimum wage. In a reassessment of the Bloemfontein protests of 1925, Ulrich traces their trajectory from an initial altercation between women beer brewers which the ICU leaders successfully escalated into a successful stayaway (a township-based general strike), as they defended women's rights to brew traditional African beer. Ulrich proceeds to register the limitations of the ICU's efforts on behalf of African women beer brewers: the ICU leaders were unable to appreciate the full significance of the women beer brewers' vernacular forms of protest, which operated beyond the bounds of formal trade union organisation. As a result, the ICU failed to create lasting solidarities with proletarian women operating outside the formal waged economy. Notwithstanding these qualifications, the ICU's approach to women workers – inconsistent as it was, and not always realised in practice – was radical for its time, and contrasted sharply with the conservative gender norms of other liberation movements such as the ANC.

The focus in Chapter 7 shifts to the Western Transvaal, as Laurence Stewart highlights the varied character and politics of the ICU in this region. In 'The ICU in the Western Transvaal, 1926–1934: Re-imagining Ideological, Spatial and Political Realities', Stewart analyses the unique political contribution and the ideological character of the ICU in this region. The ICU was most active in this region from 1926–1934, well after the time when the ICU has been assumed to have disintegrated elsewhere in the country. First entering towns on the periphery of the Western Transvaal and Cape Province in 1926, the ICU grew rapidly after the mine workers' strike in Lichtenburg, where Kadalie and 'Mote delivered speeches to the workers, and the ICU helped to organise the 5,000 miners who went on strike. After the strike, the ICU expanded its appeal to recruit farmworkers and location residents, developing their strongest following in the Bloemhof-Schweizer-Reneke-Wolmaransstad triangle. Based upon close analyses of the oral testimonies of ICU workers, Stewart argues that in addition to achieving important material victories, the ICU's activism 'punctured' the dominant economic and political norms, in the process creating a 'new subjectivity'. Stewart identifies two elements to this process: ICU leaders generated a distinctive vocabulary of freedom, subversion and ridicule, delivering public speeches which roused their audiences' imaginations, encouraging their demands for economic and social change. Secondly, the ICU's public meetings

created a space which constituted a public sphere operating beyond the control of the state and white employers. In both these ways, dominant norms were breached, generating a new discursive and spatial consciousness in ICU members.

In Chapter 8, 'The ICU in Port Elizabeth: The Making of a Union-cum-Protest Movement, 1920–1931', Noor Nieftagodien demonstrates that the ICU was the pre-eminent organisation of the black working class in Port Elizabeth in the 1920s, eclipsing both the CPSA and the ANC. In 1920, the union had 4 000 members, a high proportion of the town's black workforce, most of whom were employed in the state-run harbours and railways. By the end of the decade, however, it had declined to a few hundred. This chapter examines the history of the ICU in Port Elizabeth. Reflecting experiences elsewhere in Southern Africa, the ICU in Port Elizabeth was a product of the intensification of working-class contestation after the First World War. One of its successes – mirroring the achievements of the ICU in Lüderitz and Cape Town – was the joint organisation of African and coloured workers, thus establishing the basis of a non-racial trade unionism in the town which endures till today. While its core membership in Port Elizabeth was drawn from industrial areas, it mostly operated in the town's black locations, mobilising on a variety of issues that transcended the traditional concerns of industrial unions. As such, it is defined as a union-cum-protest movement. The ICU's multifaceted characteristics were reflected in the organisation's eclectic ideological influences. The unique socioeconomic character of Port Elizabeth created forms of working-class politics that were peculiar to the town and which confounded the national leadership, which in turn generated conflicts amplifying the organisational frailties of the ICU. Rather than offering a 'rise and fall' narrative, Nieftagodien argues that an historical account of the movement in Port Elizabeth offers a useful lens through which to engage with the early efforts of the black working class to produce distinctive ideologies, politics and organisational forms.

The final chapter focuses on the complex but hitherto neglected history of the ICU on the Witwatersrand in the second half of the 1920s, making available a previously unpublished paper by Phil Bonner (1945–2017), one of the pioneers of South Africa's labour and social history – "Home Truths" and the Political Discourse of the ICU.<sup>24</sup> Bonner provides an economical sweep of existing scholarship on the ICU, arguing that the crucial role of its discourse – the language of the ICU – has received relatively little attention. Bonner addressed this gap by demonstrating how central mass meetings, extravagant rhetoric and the ICU press were pivotal to ICU activities and in attracting state surveillance and repression. Mining the rich seam of information that documents ICU meetings and ICU speeches in the form of police reports, Bonner locates his study in the Witwatersrand of the late 1920s, arguing that ICU leaders in Johannesburg, Benoni, Germiston and Roodepoort successfully articulated outrage at the innumerable indignities to which the black populace was subjected, and sought to insult and offend those responsible for their plight. Public oratory was used by ICU speakers to rouse passions, to voice outrage, to stir indignation, to inspire confidence, to register a flat collective refusal, to kindle

hope and to imagine a better future. Language itself, excessive or otherwise, was one of the chief political weapons in the arsenal of the ICU; the spoken word, Bonner concludes, was the ICU's most potent resource.

### *Post-apartheid perspectives (3): Factions and legacies*

The final section explores the factions within the ICU, as well as its influences, legacies and historiography. The best of the ICU historians writing during the apartheid era were keenly aware of the ICU's contending factions. Bradford, for example, lists several: 'traditionalists with their radical beliefs about land; ... *abaphakathi* familiar with separatist Christianity and Garveyism; ... white intellectuals propagating socialism; [and] landlords adhering to economic liberalism'.<sup>25</sup> The ICU's short-lived achievement was to effect a working unity between these disparate factions. How they did so – and why the ICU's broad front ultimately collapsed – is a question with a direct purchase upon a post-apartheid political culture dominated by factional antipathies, sulphurous rhetoric and shifting alliances, not only within the ruling party, but also in trade unions and civic organisations.

Section C opens with a chapter discussing the relationship between the ICU and the ANC by focusing on the career of Selby Msimang, founding member of the SANNC in 1912, and president of the ICU in 1920. Sibongiseni Mkhize's chapter, 'Leadership Contestations and Worker Mobilisation in the Early Years of the Twentieth Century: Selby Msimang and the ICU, 1919–1921', examines Msimang's involvement in the ICU during his years of activism in Bloemfontein in 1919–21. Msimang's mobilisation of municipal workers in Bloemfontein under his own Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICWU) raised his stature and elevated worker struggles to the national level, attracting the attention of Clements Kadalie, who had led the ICU from its beginnings in 1919. Their brief association fostered the merger of the ICU, the ICWU, the Industrial Workers of Africa, and other emerging unions under the banner of the ICU in Bloemfontein in 1920, with Msimang its president from 1920 to 1921. Despite this early ascendancy, Msimang failed to sustain this position, as his critical attitude towards strikes and boycotts brought him into conflict with his fellow trade unionists. He was also confounded by the challenge of negotiating with charismatic figures like Kadalie, who were impatient with the cautious and pragmatic approach favoured by ANC leaders like Msimang. Though often overlooked, the history of Msimang's work for the ICU therefore both highlights the divisions that beset the ICU from the start and demonstrates the limitations of reading its history exclusively through the deeds of towering figures like Kadalie and Champion.

In Chapter 11, 'The Communist Party of South Africa and the ICU, 1923–1931', Tom Lodge notes how the relationship between the CPSA and the ICU evolved in two distinct phases. First, between 1923 and 1926, the CPSA was encouraged to ally with the ICU, both by the Comintern and by South African CPSA leaders, who recognised the need to influence black African workers. CPSA leaders accordingly

began to proclaim the importance of African rights in their programmatic statements. Increasing number of CPSA members joined the ICU at this stage, with several black and coloured communists becoming key ICU organisers at both the national level and in rural branches. At the end of 1926, joint membership of the ICU and CPSA was prohibited, effectively precipitating the expulsion of the communists from the ICU, a dramatic event conventionally interpreted as the immediate prelude to a rightward turn of the ICU and its descent into organisational chaos. Lodge demonstrates *contra* that there was a significant second phase of ICU/communist relations during which the CPSA sustained its support in branches where individual Party members had been the animating personalities. Indeed, in different local settings, the CPSA mobilised mass support, enabling it to act to as an effective agent of black political mobilisation. Local communists emerged at the helm of (often rather successful) rebellions against taxes and other new kinds of restrictions affecting urban residents, including efforts to subject women to pass regulations. In these mobilisations, communists would appeal to their neighbours and followers as householders, protectors of the family, Christians and members of a subjected race – deploying the same language they had used as ICU organisers. Lodge thus demonstrates that the history of interactions between the CPSA and ICU after 1926 were in fact substantially more complex than has hitherto been acknowledged, and further, that the focus on splits at the national level has contributed to an under-estimation of the ICU's resilience in local branches.

Elizabeth van Heyningen in Chapter 12, 'Illusion and Disillusion: White Women and the ICU', traces the histories of several influential white women who promoted and assisted the organisation. Continuing the historical analyses of women in the ICU by Moloi (in Chapter 5) and Ulrich (in Chapter 6), Van Heyningen focuses upon Winifred Holtby, Mabel Palmer and Ethelreda Lewis, distinguishing at the outset their respective political orientations, with Holtby and Palmer identified as socialists and internationalists (not 'liberals'), and Lewis as a romantic conservative. The chapter considers their voluminous writings, ranging from published works such as Holtby's novel *Mandoa*, *Mandoa* (1933), Lewis's novel *Wild Deer* (1932) and Palmer's academic and journalistic essays, to their many unpublished letters and diary entries. In tracing each woman's relationship with the ICU – and their relationships with each other – Van Heyningen analyses how they brought (or did not bring) a feminist sensibility to bear upon their political advocacy and activism on behalf of the ICU; how they influenced both general policies and specific strategic decisions adopted by the ICU (often behind-the-scenes and hence hitherto under-appreciated); and how their views on black politics and trade unionism evolved in the course of their dealings with the ICU. By focusing upon the histories of these three women and the ICU, Van Heyningen sheds light upon broader debates about the relationships between feminism and racism, and between imperialism and modernity.

In the final chapter, 'The Romance and the Tragedy of the ICU', David Johnson argues that the historical accounts of the ICU to date have been framed by the alternating

genres of the anti-colonial romance and the didactic tragedy. In an analysis of the historiography of the ICU, Johnson first discusses the early ICU histories framed as anti-colonial romances by Clements Kadalie (1923–1928), Ernest Gitsham and James F. Trembath (1926), G.M. Godden (1928) and Leonard Barnes (1930). The discussion proceeds to consider the histories framed as liberal tragedy by A.W.G. Champion (1928), Winifred Holtby (1927–1934) and W.G. Ballinger (1929–1934); pauses briefly to examine the history of the ICU framed as farce by H. D. Tyamzashe (1941); and then continues to the histories framed as communist tragedy by Albert Nzula (1935), Edward Roux (1948), and Jack and Ray Simons (1969). The survey of the historiography of the ICU concludes with a brief consideration of the two major monographs on the ICU by Peter Wickins (1978) and Helen Bradford (1987), contending that both reproduce the deep structure of the anti-colonial romance. Demonstrating the limitations of reading the history of the ICU in terms of the genres of romance or tragedy, the balance of the chapter proposes an alternative generic frame for narrating the history of the ICU derived from C.L.R. James's suggestive insights into anti-colonial historiography.

### *Conclusion*

In May 2013, Blade Nzimande, General Secretary of the SACP and ANC government minister, addressed over a thousand workers at a rally hosted by the ANC- and COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mine Workers. On the defensive after the killing of 34 miners by the South African Police at Marikana on 16 August 2012 and threatened by the rapid rise of the new Associated Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), Nzimande excavated a century-old insult to impugn the rival union. AMCU, he told his audience, was guilty of 'Kadalism', an offence he defined as the attempt to 'divide the workers and liberation movement'<sup>26</sup>

Nzimande thus joined a long roll-call of public figures to have vituperated the ICU, beginning in the 1920s with racist politicians, white mine, factory and farm owners, and conservative ANC leaders. Unpacking fully Nzimande's insult in 2013 would require several paragraphs; instead, let us end with a mischievous question. In post-apartheid South Africa, how are we to interpret an attack upon a long-defunct liberation organisation (like the ICU) by a leading representative of the ruling alliance that is itself in deep crisis? There is little doubt that such attacks made in the 1980s – when the ANC, SACP and COSATU enjoyed unparalleled moral authority – might have been devastating. But do such insults, charges and accusations carry the same weight after the Marikana massacre, which took place under the regime of Jacob Zuma, the SACP and COSATU's favoured candidate during the power struggle with Thabo Mbeki? With this open question, we invite our readers to turn the page and re-assess the ICU.

## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 The ANC's membership never rose above 4, 000 until the 1940s (see P. Landau, "Johannesburg in Flames": The 1918 Shilling Campaign, *Abantu-Batho*, and Early African Nationalism in South Africa, in P. Limb, ed., *The People's Paper: A Centenary History of 'Abantu-Batho'* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), 277), and the CPSA claimed 1 750 members in 1928, rising to a peak of 3 000 in 1929, before plunging to about 100 in April 1931 (see A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 132). In global terms, the ICU compared favourably with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had about 300 000 members (see R.T. Vinson, *The Americans are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 9).
- 2 H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924–1930* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 278.
- 3 By far the most substantial post-apartheid reassessment of the ICU to date is Sylvia Neame's *The Congress Movement: The Unfolding of the Congress Alliance, 1912–1961. Vols 1–3* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2015). As the title of Neame's three-volume work indicates, however, the ICU's significance remains subordinated to that of the Congress Alliance.
- 4 N. Mandela, 'Address to rally in Cape Town on his release from prison', 11 February 1990, [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&itemID=NMS016](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&itemID=NMS016)
- 5 Quoted in A. Klotz, 'Borders and the roots of xenophobia in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 68, 2 (2016), 192 (2016), 192.
- 6 T. Mbeki, *Africa: The Time has Come* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1998), 299.
- 7 See the published research of the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP), notably, J. Crush, ed., *Beyond Control: Immigration and Human Rights in a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town: IDASA, 1998); and D. McDonald et al., *Challenging Xenophobia: Myths and Realities about Cross-Border Migration in South Africa* (Cape Town: IDASA, 1998).
- 8 For a sample of the abundant scholarship on anti-foreigner violence in post-apartheid South Africa, see: F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (London: Zed, 2006); M. Neocosmos, *From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners': Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa, Citizenship and Nationalism, Identity and Politics* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2010), L.L. Landau et al. (eds), *Exorcising the Demons Within: Xenophobia, Violence and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011); and H.L. Madigimisha et al., ed., *Crisis, Identity and Migration in Post-colonial Southern Africa* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).
- 9 Quoted in J. Steinberg, 'Xenophobia and collective violence in South Africa: A note of scepticism about the scapegoat', *African Studies Review*, 61, 3 (2018), 131.
- 10 Quoted in 'They Have Robbed Me of My Life': *Xenophobic Violence Against Non-Nationals in South Africa* (Human Rights Watch, September 2020), 44. Human Rights Watch also point out that the main opposition parties have joined the ANC's anti-immigrant chorus.
- 11 On the mutations in South and Southern African labour history, see P. Bonner, J. Hyslop and L. van der Walt, 'Rethinking Worlds of Labour. Southern African Labour History in International Context', *African Studies*, 66, 2–3 (2007), 137–68.
- 12 When referring to these former colonies of Southern Africa – Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi), Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South West Africa (Namibia), Swaziland (Eswatini) – we observe henceforth the convention of using the nomenclature of the 1920s.
- 13 The convention adopted has been to reproduce without endorsing Southern African racial identities like 'black', 'African', 'Native', 'Indian', and 'Coloured'/'coloured' because they were integral to the social and political world of the 1920s.
- 14 The most substantial academic commemoration of the ICU's centenary was the hosting of several panels on the ICU at the Southern African History Society Conference at Rhodes University, Makhandla, 24–27 June 2019. This collection has drawn heavily upon those contributions in attempting to take stock of the ICU and its legacies.
- 15 Historical accounts of the ANC published in the build-up to its centenary included: P. Limb, *The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa Before 1940* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010); S. Booysen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power: People, Party, Policy* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011); A. Butler, *The Idea of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012); S. Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2012); A. Lissoni, J. Soske, N. Erlank, N. Nieftegodien and O. Badsha, eds, *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012); and the Special Issue of the *South African Historical Journal*, 'The ANC at 100', 64, 3 (2012).
- 16 For a discussion of this transition, see D. Johnson, 'Anti-Apartheid People's Histories and Post-Apartheid Nationalist Biographies', in A. Choudry and S. Vally, eds, *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 88–103.
- 17 L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Ngele Mountains* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2015 [2004]), 596.
- 18 Biographies of non-ANC leaders have of course also been published, notably Benjamin Pogrand's *How Can Man Die Better: The Life of Robert Sobukwe* (2006) and Xolela Mangcu's *Biko: A Life* (2012). But the reluctance (or refusal) to look beyond Mandela and the ANC continues – witness, for example, the recent C. Bundy and W. Beinart, eds, *Reassessing Mandela* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), and P. Landau, *Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2022).
- 19 Also of crucial importance are Sylvia Neame's oral interviews, which several chapters in this volume utilise (University of Witwatersrand Sylvia Neame Papers A 2729).
- 20 Wits Institute of Advanced Social Research (hereafter IASR) Share Cropping and Labour Tenancy Oral History Project 1979–1987 (hereafter SLTP) AG 2738, Interview No. 65, Lucas Nqandela, 25 August 1982.

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- 21 Wits IASR SLTP AG 2738, Interview No. 227, Charles Kumalo, 25 November 1981.
- 22 Wits IASR SLTP AG 2738, Interview No. 2, Esther Sibanyoni and Rose Mthimunya, 4 September 1979.
- 23 In addition to his achievements in Kroonstad, the Basutoland-born 'Mote established seven ICU branches in Basutoland in the late 1920s, thus substantially extending the Union's regional influence.
- 24 Unpublished at the time of Phil Bonner's death on 24 September 2017, the main text was written, but the references incomplete. The editors are very grateful to Henry Dee for searching down all the references and editing the paper into this final publishable form.
- 25 Bradford, *A Taste*, 143. For discussions of the ICU's eclectic mix of ideologies and discourses – Christianity, Garveyism, Communism, liberalism, and vernacular knowledges – see D. Johnson, *Dreaming of Freedom in South Africa. Literature between Critique and Utopia* (Edinburgh/ Cape Town: Edinburgh University Press/ UCT Press, 2020), 41–70; and extending to the influences of syndicalism and anarchism on the ICU, see L. Van der Walt, "One Great Union of Skilled and Unskilled Workers, South of the Zambezi": Garveyism, Liberalism and Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, 1919–1949' (Vienna: European Social Science History Conference, 23–26 April 2014).
- 26 Quoted in R. Tabane, 'AMCU: a Group of Vigilantes and Liars, Say Alliance Bosses', *Mail & Guardian*, 13 May 2013. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-17-00-amcus-no-union-its-just-vigilantes-and-liars-say-alliance-bosses/> [accessed 15 May 2017].