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THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ICU — A CASE OF SELF DESTRUCTION?

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Author's Note: I do not now think of the I.C.U. as a failure so much as a movement appropriate to a time characterised by rural impoverishment without major industrialisation. Indeed leaders like Champion, using populist strategies, scored some very real successes within the limits of what was possible — the Anti People-Dipping Campaign being a classic of its kind. Ultimately, however, they were co-ordinating a constituency of 'losers' and so were doomed to failure.

The early 1920s were years of great ferment among black communities in South Africa. Wartime industrialisation, post-war inflation, increased pressure on rural subsistence, and accelerated labour migration together disrupted African society and brought a new surge of popular action aimed at accommodating and channelling the dislocations of change. Millenarian movements sprang up in the eastern Cape, predicting airborne liberation by black Americans, and captured the imagination of thousands of Transkeians. A rash of strikes spread through industrial centres, and reached their climax in 1920, when seventy thousand African mine-workers downed tools on the Witwatersrand demanding higher pay. And new resistance was kindled among farm workers throughout the country in response to the tightening restrictions with which they were now being faced. Most important of all, and bridging this entire spectrum of reaction was the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa. Founded in Cape Town early in 1919, the ICU spread in the mid-twenties throughout South Africa until by 1927 it could boast a membership of one hundred thousand — the largest trade union ever to have taken root in the continent of Africa.

If the 1920s opened in an atmosphere of expectancy, they closed on an entirely different note. Dislocations undoubtedly persisted, but the hope of profiting from them had all but gone. In the Transkei and Ciskei, the millenium never materialised, and its prophecy brought

only suffering to nearly three hundred Israelites shot down at Bulhoek in 1921. On the Witwatersrand mine workers achieved nothing except being driven back down their mines at bayonet point by government troops. And in the rural areas conditions steadily deteriorated as a new wave of evictions got underway in the mid-twenties. As for the ICU, it proved the greatest disappointment of all. Despite a huge membership, its formal achievements were negligible. Labour conditions registered little improvement; wages remained more or less stationary; and a whole new range of discriminatory legislation was placed on the statute books. By the end of the decade, in reaction to failure, the Union began to crumble, and by 1931 it was more or less a spent force. The question this brief essay concerns itself with is why an era of such promise faded and why a movement of such potential withered away.

At a superficial level, the ultimate disintegration of the ICU can be traced to financial instability, personal conflicts, weakness of central organisation, and so on. In a sense though, this does not explain a great deal. Had these been so serious, then the ICU would never have got underway in the first place, or at any rate would not have been able to function successfully for eight years. Considerably more important were underlying weaknesses of analysis and strategy. The *strategic objectives* of the ICU it should be emphasised were clear enough: they wanted a fundamental redistribution of economic and political power. Less clear in their minds was how this should be achieved. In particular what the ICU leaders seem to have lacked was any systematic theory of how economy and society functioned in South Africa, and this in turn prevented them from evolving any adequate strategy to promote change. As a result, for the best part of a decade, they mistook protest for pressure and numbers for strength, ignoring all the while that there had to be some way for pressure to be brought to bear for it to have any effect.

The career of Clements Kadalie, General Secretary of the Union, illustrates many of these shortcomings. Though reputedly an able organiser Kadalie spent most of his time touring round the country and giving speeches. Industrial organisation was neglected; sectionalisation by industry ignored; and scarcely any effort towards union recognition was attempted. Instead Kadalie pinned his hopes on implausible political solutions. On occasions, as will be seen, this might have had a limited justification. On others, as with his flirtation with Hertzog, it was manifestly absurd. Hertzog at this time had just allied his Nationalists to the South African Labour Party, and hoped

by associating himself with Kadalie to gain the Cape African vote in the coming election. The Smuts Government was admittedly in bad odour in African circles for the Bulhoek massacre and other similar incidents, but there were little grounds for expecting that a party whose labour wing had coined the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa' would behave much better. Still more damning is that Kadalie took absolutely no precautions to ensure that they should do. No concessions were extracted, and Kadalie seems neither to have sought nor gained any assurance on even the question of recognition. One can only conclude that Kadalie was taken in by Hertzog's honeyed words; that tiring of stalemate he fell into the trap of mistaking dialogue for progress and of assuming that any movement at all must be better than none.

In his pursuit of such pipe-dreams Kadalie resembled certain of his rural followers, who expected supernatural deliverance on purchase of an ICU card. The same facet of his personality was exhibited still more vividly in his expectations of international trade unionism. Within limits some sort of connection with world trade unionism would have been beneficial. It would have extended expertise and resources to the ICU, together with the psychological reassurance that it was not entirely alone. As the 1920s wore on however, Kadalie began to see this more as a substitute for local action than a supplement to it. In a way not altogether unfamiliar today he seems to have despaired of internal action and to have relied increasingly on pressure from outside. Recognition from international trade union organisations was applied for and affiliation to the British Trade Union Congress was sought, with the idea in each case of using their leverage to extract concessions from government and white unions at home. By 1927 when Kadalie left to set up links with Europe, this had become the pivot of ICU strategy, and the mainstay of all their hopes.

Even so, when Kadalie set sail for Europe in June 1927 the ICU appeared on the crest of a wave. Membership was soaring, branches were springing up everywhere and the organisation was fast becoming the symbol of black resistance throughout the Union. Appearances however were highly deceptive. Rather than attracting industrial workers during this period, ICU expansion was made up predominantly of labour tenants working on white farms, who were on the point of facing the rigours of new labour legislation. This notoriously unorganisable group soon proved themselves the achilles heel of the ICU. Scattered across thousands of square miles of countryside they were virtually impossible to protect, and quickly

soaked up their own financial contributions and others' in legal actions against unlawful eviction. Even then these were no more than drops in an ocean. In a situation where thousands were being evicted and where mere membership of the ICU was an invitation to victimisation, the problem was too enormous to be handled. As a result the euphoria of 1927 gave way to the recriminations of 1928. Membership slumped, finances were shattered and the organisation went into sharp decline.

A similar crisis of expectations was precipitated among the Union's urban membership. Here again the problem was one of attracting membership in an apparently random fashion, and in such a way as to preclude effective industrial organisation of action. This aspect of ICU activity had been evident almost from its inception, but it was exaggerated in 1926 by the expulsion of communists from its ranks. They at least had been prepared to use the strike weapon, if often only for premature political ends. With their departure however, the very idea of striking fell into disuse. The penalties of neglect were not long in making themselves felt. When a flurry of strikes hit Durban and Johannesburg in 1927, the organisation was neither willing or able to lend support. Instead, at the insistence of Ethelreda Lewis they counselled restraint and return to work. The impact of ICU inaction proved enormous. Confidence was undermined among many workers, and the Union's credibility lost. Coinciding with its rural decline, moreover, it put new strains on the organisation which it was unable to sustain. Regional rivalries and personal tensions which had been papered over in time of growth broke open with fresh acrimony when it entered decline, and by 1930 the ICU had effectively fallen apart.

It is sometimes argued that it was Kadalie's absence in Europe in 1927, together with his decision to import the British trade unionist, Ballinger, on his return, that tilted the ICU into crisis and decline. In practice, as has been shown, the malaise went deeper than that. Although Kadalie's absence in 1927 may have deprived the organisation of firm leadership at a critical time, and although Ballinger's attempts at reorganisation may have intensified feuding within the ICU, the real problems were the long-standing ones of a lack of analysis and strategy. To say this however merely begs the broader question of why no sounder analysis or strategy developed, and for an answer to this it is necessary to look more explicitly at the character of the leadership and the constraints of the situation in which they operated. In a sense the ICU's leaders are not entirely to be blamed for their organisation's collapse. For a long time the pitfalls of loose

thinking were obscured by the spectacular gains that were achieved from projecting precisely this sort of diffuse appeal. With the African National Congress confining itself largely to elite concerns, it sufficed for the ICU simply to voice mass grievances for it to become the principle vehicle of African discontent. The inherent dangers of this approach scarcely need elaboration; what mattered was not so much numbers as their relationship and ratio to the object under attack. And when that object was broadly political, the scattered following of the ICU could have little success until organised on some more effective basis to confront the state.

Even here the leadership has some defence. They could and did claim that political and economic issues were inseparable; that in the face of measures like the Pass Laws and the Industrial Conciliation Act, both had to be confronted at the same time. The obvious weakness of this line of argument was that it confused the diagnosis with the cure. Political and economic issues might be intertwined, but since the only available power base was the organised working class it was this that had to be used. The word 'organised' is of some importance here. Agricultural labourers, as we have seen, were virtually unorganisable; so too, it can be argued were those in the reserves. Clamped into a system of tribal control and insulated administratively from outside, the ICU could never easily have achieved penetration there — whatever the merits of organising migrant labour at its rural end. Nor in fact did they really try. All this left, therefore, was the urban working class; and it is in their failure to organise this group that the ICU can chiefly be criticised.

The ICU's comparative neglect of urban workers was in some measure a reflection of its leadership calibre. While they may have been correct in adopting a political strategy, they were mistaken in pursuing it prematurely, and in not developing a trade union strategy as a platform for their political goals. The reason for this negligence can be traced to their elite or petit-bourgeois background. Whereas in European trade unionism, trade union leadership had developed organically from the working class, in the ICU movement had been created and a leadership imposed more or less from the outside. From the outset, therefore, the movement was characterised by the cult of the personality, and by contradictory bourgeois aims. Both Champion, the ICU's Natal leader, and Kadalie bear this stamp. Each relied more on charisma than on organisation, and each saw the standing of the Union as being synonymous with his own. This was damaging, not only because it substituted populism for trade unionism, but

because it also gave rise to a series of personal vendettas which ultimately split the organisation apart. In the case of Champion because he believed one had to be a man of property to be a man of standing, and because he saw the stature of the Union as a reflection of his own, he felt no qualms about mingling official union finances with those of his own. While this was not necessarily disastrous from the narrow financial view it was from a broader political one. Regional conflicts became personalised, and political opponents could and did level accusations of corruption for more general political ends. Once decline and financial stringency set in, disintegration almost automatically ensued.

Leadership deficiencies were therefore critical. But some nagging questions still remain. Why did a more adequate leadership never develop? Or did the ICU in fact get the leadership it deserved? Was the situation appropriate for trade unionism, or was it impossible for effective organisation and leadership to emerge? Certainly a case can be made for this last argument. Unlike today for instance only a fraction of the black working population was absorbed in the industrial working force, which left a reservoir of untapped labour in theory available to undercut union demands. Unlike today the large majority of African workers were *effectively* migratory in the sense that they could supplement urban wages with rural subsidies, and hence were not totally committed to their industrial milieu. Unlike today there were only a handful of large-scale industries to serve as bases for authentic industrial unions. Unlike today, in short, it can be argued no viable alternative to populism existed, and no other breed of leader could have emerged.

But this again seems to paint the picture too blackly. In 1921, for instance, the black and coloured work force in urban areas numbered 837 000, a growing proportion of which was becoming stabilised. For much of the following decade, moreover, economic growth was sufficiently steady to mop up the excess of labour supply and largely erase the threat of competition from any reserve army of unemployed. Lastly, among black labour generally there had developed a sense of worker consciousness, of which the post-war strikes were but the more visible form. The potential for some sort of trade unionism, therefore, clearly existed. Whether it was enough to sustain much more than the ICU, is of course, a different matter. In the opinion of this writer it was, though the implications of greater success may have been politically ambiguous; others will disagree even with that. For the moment it seems it must remain an open question.

To conclude, what was the legacy of the ICU? Obviously to the extent that it disintegrated it was one of failure. But that failure was not as complete as is often assumed. Local leaders and linkages did not simply vanish, but remained ready to be taken up when new organisations emerged. Similarly, worker consciousness, though battered, was also hardened and prepared for action of a more disciplined form. In a sense the very memory of the ICU was to prove instructive, an encouragement and a warning to all who followed on.

FOOTNOTES

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