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## *Lynch Law and Labourers: The ICU in Umvoti, 1927-1928*

HELEN BRADFORD

'Not since the days of the native rebellion of 20 odd years ago has Greytown reached such an emotional pitch',<sup>1</sup> wrote an excited reporter of events in this Natal Midlands town on March 1st, 1928. Zabuloni Gwaza – the man who introduced the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union into Greytown – had been flung into jail on suspicion of desecrating the white cemetery. Hoping to '[lynch] the brute limb from limb',<sup>2</sup> incensed whites armed with shotguns twice stormed the prison, and grappled with the police outside the very doors of Gwaza's cell. At noon, as bells tolled, businesses closed, and both black and white poured into town, an impassioned anti-ICU meeting was attended by crowds of farmers. Shortly thereafter, hundreds of Africans successfully forestalled a raid on the Union office. But in the late afternoon, about seventy whites surged past the police guarding the office, smashed up the interior, and made a huge bonfire of all documents and furniture. Roaring off in their cars towards Umvoti's thornveld, members of the mob 'started to drive the Natives towards the Hills.'<sup>3</sup> Several black/white clashes erupted, and the ICU branch secretary was hounded down and thrashed in a mealie field. Finally at about 8 pm, as police reinforcements streamed in to patrol the district with their machine guns, eight cars packed with Greytown men pulled up outside the ICU office in the neighbouring village of Kranskop. Here they triumphantly fired all the contents, and scoured a nearby farm for the ICU secretary. Clearly, Umvoti whites had every intention of preventing rural protest from once again exploding outwards from Greytown into an armed rebellion.

As the crucible in which agrarian capitalism developed in the Natal Midlands, Umvoti had long been a region in which struggles in the countryside tended to be especially pronounced. The district itself consisted of hilly grassland, descending towards the north and north-west into dry thornveld, and rising elsewhere into well-watered highveld. As the process of white conquest proceeded, so Umvoti's prime land was appropriated from the indigenous population first by Dutch and German trekkers, then by British commercial farmers, and finally by absentee rentier land-

<sup>1</sup> *The Star* 3/3/28.

<sup>2</sup> *The Natal Mercury* 2/3/28.

<sup>3</sup> Central Archives Depot (CAD), Department of Justice (JUS), Vol 437, File 4/366/27, District Commissioner South African Police (SAP), Pietermaritzburg to Deputy Commissioner SAP Pietermaritzburg 2/3/28.

lords. For the vastly greater number of blacks, officialdom demarcated the small Umvoti reserve, consisting of precipitous thornveld so infertile that it comprised some of the worst land in Natal. In 1927, an ICU organizer was simply articulating the rancour of local Africans by claiming: 'Greytown is one portion of Umvoti county which is very rich agriculturally. All whites living in this area are comfortable. It is a place which should have been solely inhabited by blacks.'<sup>4</sup>

Yet Africans gave up neither their land nor their labour without a struggle. Although by the late nineteenth century whites had established private property rights over some 80 per cent of Umvoti, many farmers had been reluctantly forced to accept cash rather than labour rent from an incipient black peasantry on their holdings.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, despite landlords' efforts to accumulate capital by charging exorbitant rents, there were definite limits to battenning on blacks in this way. It was as 'oppressed and sque(e)zed' cash tenants that members of Bambatha's chiefdom were precipitated into rebellion in 1906 by the imposition of a poll tax.<sup>6</sup> Over seventy years later, Africans in Greytown still refer proudly to the killing of four white policemen by these Zondi men, who swept through the thornveld giving the war-cry of the Zulu royal family.

For numerous whites, Bambatha's rebellion served as a bloody reminder that rackrenting was not the solution to capital accumulation. Nor, however, was the use of local black labour in agricultural production. Frustrated by the refusal of reserve dwellers to work on their farms, and exasperated by the recalcitrance of labour tenants in the performance of their contracts, capitalising white landowners took the path already pioneered by Natal's sugar farmers. Between the 1880s and the 1910s, many of them turned to cheap, vulnerable, indentured Indian workers. This in turn facilitated a permanent and profitable shift in the source from which the bulk of agricultural revenue was derived. The well-watered middleveld was all that a wattle farmer could desire, and while Africans were 'unable to stand such work as wattle stripping . . . the coolie is perfectly adapted.'<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately for the viability of commercial wattle plantations, the importation of indentured Indian labour was forbidden from 1911. Combined with the fact that rising land values and shrinking holdings meant that ground was increasingly valued for cultivation,<sup>8</sup> this precipitated a renewed attempt to proletarianise local blacks. Cash rent tenants – who comprised a massive one third of Umvoti's black farm population in 1916 – were slowly ground down into labour tenants.<sup>9</sup> Africans in the nearby thornveld reserves – already so desperately congested that 'faction fights' were often spurred on by land-hunger – provided some 40 per cent of Umvoti's farm labour requirements by 1916, at a wage of about 1 shilling a day.<sup>10</sup> Finally, existing labour tenants were the victims of a concerted 'squeeze'. Although

<sup>4</sup> *The Workers' Herald* 6/4/27.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Natal Native Commission 1881-1882, Subcommission on Umvoti*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion* (Oxford, 1970), 201.

<sup>7</sup> S. Ford, *Talks with Natal Farmers* (Pietermaritzburg, 1909), 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Evidence to the Native Land Commission*, U.G. 22-'16, 545.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 544-547.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 548.

landlords appear to have abandoned the struggle for the labour of homestead heads – indeed, they now preferred to enlist these elders as allies who contracted out household labour – they intensified demands on young men, women and children. Moreover, while the cash wages of youths were held at a meagre 6-10 shillings a month, the homestead's land was relentlessly reduced in quantity and quality.

Reflecting incipient class differentiation amongst white farmers, this assault on labour tenants took two major forms. Wattle companies and wealthier landlords tended to base large pools of black labour on separate Weenen or Umvoti thornveld farms like 'Lonsdale', which consisted 'principally of steep hilly and stony land', 'absolutely unsuitable for ordinary farming'.<sup>11</sup> Even in the six months they were not contracted to their landlord, African men living in such agricultural disaster areas often had to work, either in the towns or as farm labourers paying off advances of food. Yet these 'labour farms' had their advantages, particularly in allowing the development of a community life amongst the hundreds of blacks they accommodated. Moreover, thanks to the lesser interference by whites in the management of these sweetveld holdings, considerable breathing space was provided for stock accumulation and other practices rooted in pre-capitalist days.<sup>12</sup>

Tenants living and working on the same farm as less substantial landlords tended to be present in far smaller numbers (perhaps 4-6 homesteads per holding), to be under much tighter control, and to be considerably worse off materially. Whereas twenty years previously a homestead could obtain some 90 acres of land and the right to run an unlimited number of stock,<sup>13</sup> by the 1920s arable plots had been reduced to a meagre 1-2 acres, and cattle restricted to ten head per household. Furthermore, most homesteads were totally incapable of reproducing themselves independently. Oxen to plough their own plots were borrowed from farmers, while food for daily subsistence as well as cattle for bridewealth were regularly obtained by putting in extra months for landlords. As the ex-tenant Jacob Dhlomo expressed it, in their six 'contract' months men worked each month for 'Nothing! Only ten shillings', while in their six 'free' months they worked for lobola and 'for mealie bags'.<sup>14</sup> Moses Majola similarly stressed the extent to which labour extraction was bound up with the rhythm of production on these sub-subsistence plots. The food they produced, he said, 'would be enough for one year, and then another year it wouldn't, and then we had to borrow food from the farmer . . . and therefore we couldn't be paid, we had to work for those bags which we took . . . so all the money which your son was supposed to get was taken.'<sup>15</sup>

It was hardly surprising that smaller agriculturalists of this period preferred to pay in mealie bags rather than cash. From the outbreak of World War I, bank managers' eulogies about Umvoti farmers were replaced by diatribes that most holdings were

<sup>11</sup> CAD, Department of Native Affairs (NTS), 3238, 736/307, J. Heraughty and H. Marlin to Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), 9/8/37.

<sup>12</sup> University of the Witwatersrand (UW), African Studies Institute (ASI), Oral History Project (OHP), interview with M. Majola by Vusi Nkumane (VN) and Helen Bradford (HB), Mooi River, 30/11/81; *Land Commission*, 244.

<sup>13</sup> *Evidence to Native Affairs Commission 1906-07*, 34-35, 530.

<sup>14</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dhlomo by VN and HB, Greytown, 2/7/80.

<sup>15</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with M. Majola.

heavily bonded, while the bulk of farmers were hugely indebted and patently unprogressive.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1920s, it was widely recognised that the 250 per cent increase in land prices over the past decade was totally out of proportion to the productive value of farms.<sup>17</sup> Banking capital, ever quick to discern a poor investment, accelerated the downward spiral by aiming 'at having all weak advances eliminated without delay'.<sup>18</sup> Between 1919 and 1926, advances by the Standard Bank declined precipitously from £150,146 to £39,967, while overdrafts secured by farm property shrank from £17,000 to zero.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, wealthier farmers' efforts to balance on their urban leg were being badly impaired, as was underlined by the liquidation of both the Umvoti Trading Company and the local co-operative wattle extract concern. The vital wattle industry had in fact been in the doldrums for over a decade and the district was badly overstocked with virtually unsaleable scrub cattle. Umvoti's agrarian capital was not only sinking beneath the weight of land speculators and rapacious bankers, but was also being destroyed by having to compete on an unstable, highly competitive world market.

The extent to which white farmers as well as black tenants were being 'squeezed' by these conditions is illustrated by the fate of Daniel Havemann. By the 1910s, Daniel together with his numerous sons was making a good living on the farm Umvotipoort claimed by his German Voortrekker father sixty years previously. 'Daniel was a rich white man', recalled Jumaima Dladla, whose brothers worked on the Rand during the teens to pay off cash rent to Havemann. 'He had lots of cattle and sheep . . . Thousands . . . There were Indians as well . . . Daniel had a big shop. He was a rich man.'<sup>20</sup> Indeed he was: in 1923 he was estimated to be worth £12,000. Yet the post-war slump and rising land values were steadily taking their toll. By 1920, at least three of his sons had left to farm in Zululand. Five years later, one Umtovi-based son, A. Havemann, was declared insolvent, having given up trying to pay his creditors from wattle bark proceeds. Despairing of securing repayment from A. Havemann's only assets of stock, wagons and furniture, the Standard Bank turned the screws on Daniel, who had guaranteed the liabilities of his numerous debt-ridden children to the tune of thousands of pounds. By now heavily indebted and mortgaged up to the hilt, Daniel was in 1926 forced to surrender two farms, including the ancestral Umvotipoort.<sup>21</sup>

While Daniel may have been exceptionally unlucky in having so many children come of age in this period, A. Havemann's career was one with which many younger sons of Umvoti farmers could identify. If they owned land, it was generally so over-

<sup>16</sup> Standard Bank Archives Johannesburg (SBA), 1/1/220, Inspection Reports on Greytown branch 1914-1928. See in particular Inspection Report on Greytown branch 14/12/26.

<sup>17</sup> It was precisely for this reason that the giant British-owned Forestal Land, Timber and Railways Company and its subsidiary the Natal Tanning Extract Company bought wattle land in northern Natal and the eastern Transvaal rather than in Umvoti during the boom.

<sup>18</sup> SBA, 1/1/220, Joint General Manager Standard Bank to Manager Greytown branch 17/7/25.

<sup>19</sup> SBA, 1/1/220, Inspection Report on Greytown branch 31/10/19, and Inspection Report on Greytown branch, 14/12/26.

<sup>20</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dladla by VN and HB, Greytown, 3/7/80.

<sup>21</sup> SBA, 1/1/220, Inspection Reports on Greytown branch 1920-1926.

burdened with debt that their interest payments threatened the very viability of their enterprises. If they did not -- thereby forming part of the 20 per cent of Umvoti agriculturalists who leased their land or farmed on the shares -- it was very difficult to obtain credit. In both cases, it was extremely hard to survive the tortuously slow turnover period of capital invested in wattle, which should ideally be stripped only after seven years. It was also impossible to afford the good stock and well managed plantations that were the only hope of minimal profits in these years, or to afford the migrant labourers and labour farms that were the only solution to farming wattle on a worthwhile scale. Small wonder that the devastating 1920-1922 depression precipitated a crop of insolvencies amongst insubstantial farmers like Jas. Martens, and that in the post-war years a growing number of Umvoti whites were on the verge of being shaken off the land.<sup>22</sup>

In the context of this very real threat of proletarianisation, the farmers' marginally easier access to Land Bank loans after the advent of the National Party and Labour Party coalition government in 1924 made little material difference. By contrast, the rising price of wool in the later 1920s noticeably changed their jaundiced attitude to sheep farming. Far and away the most important development, however, was the world boom in wattle bark. In 1926, for the first time in a decade, stick bark reached a payable level. In 1927, soaring bark prices meant that every acre under mature wattle was worth some £30, double its value only a couple of years previously. In one fell swoop, wattle cultivation was momentarily transformed from an industry surviving only due to the demand for mine props, into one which was more profitable than any other branch of farming in South Africa, and which provided more foreign exchange than sugar.<sup>23</sup>

Some 300 white Umvoti farmers feverishly seized this opportunity to recoup their losses. Between 1923 and 1930, the number of woolled sheep in the district rose by about 90 per cent, and as neighbouring Estcourt farmers wryly observed, 'the yearly wool cheque puts new heart into Bank Managers if it does nothing else.'<sup>24</sup> Even more heartening to the latter was the transformation of hillsides into wattle plantations. According to the elated President of the Umvoti Agricultural Society, land under cultivation in the district increased by 75 per cent between 1927 and 1928. At a more conservative estimate, it rose by about one third between 1926 and 1930, almost entirely due to the planting of some 30,000 acres with wattle. Since the increase in sheep alone required more than this amount of land to be devoted to additional grazing, and since the average Umvoti farm was only about 1,500 acres large, there clearly occurred in this period a massive restructuring of relationships on the land.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, Inspection Reports 1914-1928.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, Inspection Reports 1925-1928; *The Farmers' Weekly* 3/10/28; *The Farmers' Weekly* 28/11/28; *The Star* 27/3/29; 'The Wattle Growing and Tanning Extract Industries' in *The South African Journal of Industries*, September 1924; N. Hurwitz, *Agriculture in Natal 1860-1950* (Oxford, 1957), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Weenen County (Estcourt) Farmers' Association Minutes, Estcourt, Presidential Report 17/11/26; *Agricultural Census No. 6, 1923*, U.G. 25-'25, 35; *Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930*, U.G. 12-'32, 48.

<sup>25</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 7/12/28; *Agricultural Census No. 9, 1926*, U.G. 24-'28, 106; *Agricultural Census No. 12, 1929*, U.G. 35-'30, 39; *Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930*, 17.

Above all, this involved evictions. As Natal's Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) succinctly if ungrammatically expressed it, farmers' widespread tendency 'to put more and more land under . . . wattle and other slowing maturing crops and to embark on extensive ranching operations renders the presence of labour tenants superfluous; indeed every acres of land they occupy is of more value to the farmer than their labour.'<sup>26</sup> Corporate capital flooded into the district, buying up wattle land and ejecting all resident blacks. Simultaneously, some companies and wealthier landlords either sold their labour farms or evicted all tenants in order to use these holdings exclusively for their own stock. Finally, both large and small farmers rid themselves of all superfluous Africans based on their own estates — which in particular meant those paying cash rent or owning larger herds of cattle. If they did not leave quickly enough, whites seized their stock and sued them in court. Moreover, hardly had these homesteads been thrown off the farm before their land — and even family graves — was put to the plough or put out to graze. In the late 1920s in Umvoti, as had happened elsewhere during the process of primitive accumulation, 'sheep ate men', trees replaced tenants, and human beings were completely subordinated to the pursuit of profit.<sup>27</sup>

If evictions were one side of the coin in the development of capitalist agriculture, the increased use of wage labour was the other. While smaller maize and wattle growers drew heavily on the neighbouring reserves and on the 'free' time of tenants on labour farms, corporate capital and large planters recruited more tightly controlled '30 day ticket' labour from Pondoland and Basutoland. This in itself fostered the recognition that wattle labour was 'in brief industrial labour',<sup>28</sup> as did key features in the labour process. For one thing, relatively large numbers of workers were brought together: a 1,000 acre plantation could easily employ 40 labourers all the year round. For another, wealthier farmers were investing in equipment ranging from tractors to turbines.<sup>29</sup> In addition, by the 1920s most farmers were succeeding where their fathers had failed. Through piece wages and the task system, they were slowly but surely imposing an industrial rhythm and their own time discipline on African workers.

It was precisely because the task system cruelly intensified labour that local Africans had long resisted it. Wattle work, for instance, included the physically tiring labour of ploughing land, thinning plantations, felling trees, stripping them of bark, and hauling lumber. When capitalizing farmers tasked this work — forcing black men to strip 800 lbs. of bark a day was quite normal — the labour was transformed into a contest between them and their workers' bodies. Indeed, even white officialdom recognized that the tasks were way beyond the strength of youths; that women loathed the heavy labour involved in thinning plantations; and that labourers

<sup>26</sup> CAD, NTS 3235, 700/307, CNC to SNA 4/2/30.

<sup>27</sup> *The Natal Mercury* 29/10/27; Correspondence in CAD, NTS 3235, 700/307; *The Star* 7/6/27.

<sup>28</sup> CAD, NTS 8588, 2/362, CNC to SNA 15/4/25. For the use of migrant labour, see Umvoti Agricultural Society Minutes, Greytown, a.g.m. 2/12/28; CAD, JUS 440, 1/82/28, Annual report for Umvoti, 1928; CAD, JUS 429, 1/667/27, Annual report for Umvoti, 1927.

<sup>29</sup> This had been happening for years: see Ford, *Talks*.

whose main diet was mealie meal were being physically broken by the primitive conditions in the industry.<sup>30</sup>

Undeniably, the wattle boom aggravated the existing appalling conditions by both intensifying labour and increasing demands on the remaining tenant homesteads. Firstly, men had to plough hundreds of acres in an extremely short period of time. 'I drove a tractor', recalled Jacob Dhlomo of his pressurised existence ploughing and planting maize and wattle in this period. 'The fields we ploughed were very large. On that farm, I really suffered. I felt that I was a real farm labourer.'<sup>31</sup> Secondly, farmers apparently compelled homesteads to supply more female labour. While the number of regular male labourers increased by 10 per cent between 1925 and 1930, the number of regular females increased by 68 per cent, and while women had long been forced to weed and reap maize, they now may well have been weeding plantations and helping their menfolk complete their stripping tasks.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, because farmers were frantically trying to cash in on the boom, they demanded that labourers strip not only trees left for years during the slump, but also immature trees in overgrown, bag-worm infested plantations. Furthermore, they insisted that workers strip way past summer, despite the fact that the trees became increasingly 'bark-bound' as the winter approached. Since stripping such trees simultaneously increases the work load and dramatically decreases the yield, for many tasked labourers this meant that at the end of a day more exhausting than usual, their pay was either docked completely or cut by about half.<sup>33</sup>

In all these various ways, then, agrarian developments of the later 1920s expressed in a concentrated form trends which themselves were fairly recent in origin. These included a massive shift of the black population from the farms to the congested reserve,<sup>34</sup> and the crushing of wealthier, stock-owning homesteads. They also included the transformation of labour tenancy into a capitalist relation; the increased use of wage labour, and the greater control of capital over the labour process. In short, as white farmers struggled for their own survival by responding to the wattle and sheep booms, so the proletarianisation of rural blacks was accelerated.

The way in which farm labourers responded to this was shaped by their own traditions and experiences. Significantly, their lives and aspirations were still deeply structured by institutions and values rooted in precolonial days. Even tenants who had lived on white holdings for decades continued to perceive themselves as members of chiefdoms, and land-hunger was still a fundamental feature of black rural consciousness. Indeed, at least amongst the Cunu in the thornveld, farm

<sup>30</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Depot (PAD), Correspondence of magistrate of New Hanover, N1/5/6, Annual Report of the Native Commissioner for the district of New Hanover for the year 1930; *The Natal Farmer* 14/5/26; *The Natal Witness* 21/5/27; UW, Church of the Province of South Africa Archives (CPSA), Evidence to the Native Economic Commission, Box 6, evidence by Dr. G. Park Ross, 1/4/31.

<sup>31</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with Dhlomo.

<sup>32</sup> *Agricultural Census No. 8, 1925*, U.G. 13-'27, 167; *Agricultural Census No. 13*, 95. For involvement of women and children in wattle farming generally, see *The Natal Farmer* 14/5/26; T. Sim, *Tree Planting in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1927), 197, 203.

<sup>33</sup> Sim, *Tree Planting*, 197, 203; SBA, Inspection Report of Greytown branch 28/2/30; *The Greytown Gazette* 1/3/29.

<sup>34</sup> Between 1916 and 1936, the population in the reserve almost doubled, while that on the farms decreased from two-thirds to one half of the total African population in the district.



workers defined land according to which section of their chiefdom it belonged to. 'Although the farms belonged to whites, the "phantom districts" into which the farms were incorporated "belonged" to the labourers.'<sup>35</sup>

Yet the struggles of rural blacks were also infused with beliefs derived from their incorporation into a dominant capitalist society ruled by white racists. Ironically, it was the very success of cash rent tenants in delaying their incorporation into farm labour – combined with the inability of a peasantry to establish itself outside the mission reserves – that accelerated their absorption into urban labour. From at least the 1880s, blacks' experiences in the towns fed into the demands they made of farmers for higher wages. Similarly, their exposure to Christianity nurtured a challenge to white cultural hegemony through separatist churches.<sup>36</sup> And their incorporation into a world far wider than the confines of a chiefdom increased the attraction of pan-Zulu or proto-nationalist ideologies. It was precisely the Greytown ICU's ability to articulate these various strands in rural consciousness – capitalist and noncapitalist, precolonial and colonial, ethnic and nationalist – that facilitated its enormous success in Umvoti.

### *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union in Greytown*

The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union originated in 1919 as a trade union for black dock workers. During the mid-1920s, branches mushroomed in South African country towns and the ICU burgeoned into a mass protest movement. Attracted by its militant demands and its legal services, Africans on farms and in the reserves flocked to join. By 1927, they formed the bulk of the estimated 100,000 strong membership and rural branches were often infused with the aspirations of their local following.

This was particularly so in Greytown. Zabuloni Gwaza, the 35 year old branch secretary who arrived there in April 1927, was from the first fully prepared to exploit the crisis situation that awaited him. Born in Kranskop, he was *au fait* with both pressing local concerns and popular traditions. Together with his assistant Ignatius Makanya, he proclaimed a radical nationalist message with overt political content: 'that a fire had been set burning which would have the desired effect of driving the white from the country, which really belongs to the native, and thus ridding the natives of the burdens and hardships imposed by white control.'<sup>37</sup> The class content of these burdens was well calculated to appeal to the resident labourers who formed over half of Umvoti's black population: they 'preached the doctrine of taking away farms and freeing the tenants from their obligations to supply labour.'<sup>38</sup> Moreover, they spoke both literally and figuratively in the language of Zulu nationalism.

<sup>35</sup> J. Clegg, 'Ukubuyisa Isidumbu – "Bringing back the body"' in P. Bonner (ed.), *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, Vol 2, (Johannesburg, 1981), 186-187. For Cunu labourers applying this concept in Umvoti, see CAD, NTS 290, 322/53, Proceedings of inquiry into conduct of Chief Mkwanyana, 22/2/32.

<sup>36</sup> These had been operating in Umvoti from at least the early twentieth century: see Marks, *Rebellion*, 357.

<sup>37</sup> *The Cape Times* 11/5/27.

<sup>38</sup> *The Natal Farmer* 20/5/27.

Explaining why the ICU called for Africans to join separatist rather than white churches, Jacob Dhlomo stated simply: 'They wanted us to be Zulu-like.'<sup>39</sup>

In this quest for 'Zulu-ness', Gwaza sought to assimilate to the Union's message older traditions, particularly those of primary resistance. ICU meetings in the reserve and on the farms were excellent occasions for such meshing of political radicalism and popular culture. Thus in mid-1927, having first smashed a wreath on the graves of the white policemen killed in 1906, Gwaza attended a wedding on a thornveld farm in the heart of Bambatha's country. Standing within the headman's cattle byre, he and Makanya spoke as ICU organisers about legally enforced ejectments to the surrounding circle of men. Before further conforming to popular norms by repairing to drink beer, Gwaza used his graveyard exploits to instil defiance: 'you white farmers servants better tell your masters . . . I have broken the glass on the Europeans' grave . . .'<sup>40</sup>

Whether or not they obeyed this injunction, white farmers' servants joyfully welcomed an organisation which forcefully articulated their hopes, while simultaneously appealing to the symbols of Zulu nationalism. Furthermore, the Union's ability to reverse the devastating changes they faced seemed confirmed by its Greytown legal victories, as well as by its powerful national presence under the leadership of Clements Kadalie. So as evictions soared and farm work intensified, exultant Africans flocked to support the 'I SEE YOU'. One of the first meetings on Greytown's race track drew 4,000-5,000 people, and within weeks the roads every Sunday were crowded with blacks streaming to the gatherings. By June 1927, organisers claimed to have sold an astounding 10,000 red tickets to a population that included less than 1,000 urban blacks. At its peak in early 1928, Umvoti membership allegedly reached 16,000: over 80 per cent of the entire adult African population of the district.<sup>41</sup>

Such huge figures were attained only because hundreds of ordinary blacks, including migrants returning from the cities, became self-appointed propagandists. In so doing, they chose – and changed – those elements of the Union's message most relevant to themselves. Despair over the destruction of the old order was being converted into hope in the imminence of the new, and in the process the Union's tidings took on distinctly millenarian overtones. Some claimed that Africans who joined the ICU would get 8 shillings a day – the minimum wage for whites advocated by the Labour Party, and subsequently urged for blacks by many Union leaders. Others 'rejoiced when they heard about the ICU. They thought they would get more cattle and more land.'<sup>42</sup> And yet others believed that the 'I SEE YOU' would put an end to white farms, to labour tenancy, and thereby to national oppression itself. As Jumaima Dladla expressed it, 'What I heard was that when labour tenancy was abolished the country would belong to the Africans.'<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with Dhlomo.

<sup>40</sup> PAD, Kranskop Criminal Records, Rex. vs. Z. Gwaza 15/11/27.

<sup>41</sup> *The Natal Afrikaner* 24/4/27; *The Star* 7/6/27; PAD, Correspondence of the Umvoti magistrate, Vol 2/3/2, Umvoti magistrate to CNC 25/8/28.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with L. Ngubane by VN and HB, Greytown, 3/7/80.

<sup>43</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dladla.

While there were already signs in the neighbouring districts of Weenen and Estcourt that direct action was being taken to abolish labour tenancy, the first stoppages in Umvoti occurred only in early May. This was precisely the time at which tenants were reaping their bumper crops. For the first time in years, even in the thorns, harvests seemed large enough to cover their subsistence needs. Freed of the spectre of starvation, tenants who had worked off their six months had no need to bond themselves to farmers for mealie bags. Moreover, not only was the ICU providing the ideological cohesion necessary to transform reluctance to work into resistance, but this was also the high point of rural blacks' social year. Thus as about 90 per cent of Umvoti farmers moved into the period of peak demand for seasonal labour, so they were confronted by 'absolute refusal to work'.<sup>44</sup>

Although this was a form of action typical of tenants, many of the stoppages in this period also reflected the degree to which agrarian capitalism had developed. The ICU's wage demands had enormous resonance amongst Umvoti's poverty-stricken, increasingly proletarianised workforce. Indeed, there is every indication that Gwaza paid little if any attention to the issue of pay, and that it was farm workers themselves who made this element of the national ICU's ideology their own.<sup>45</sup> Undoubtedly, the attraction of '8s. a day' was accentuated by its linking of payment to *time* — and implicitly to an eight-hour day — rather than to physically exhausting tasks. May after all was the month in which wattle labourers were being forced into ever more arduous work for ever decreasing wages, and in which farmers' extraordinarily good maize crop boded ill for the physical wellbeing of tasked workers. It was also the month of final tax demands, which by devouring some 20 per cent of the average homestead's annual income sharply focused attention on the need for higher wages. When in addition wage demands began erupting in nearby towns, the scene was set for what the Umvoti Member of Parliament termed paralysis of work on the farms. On the 19th May, this alarmed South African Party M.P. announced: 'The farmers in my district have only a limited time in which to strip wattle bark. The natives are demanding this 1s. an hour, and the wattle growers cannot pay such an unreasonable demand . . . the crops are ready to be reaped, but the natives refuse to do so unless they receive 8s. a day.'<sup>46</sup> They were still so refusing by mid-June: clearly the stoppages simmered on for weeks, spreading by contagion from farm to farm.

To what extent did the strikes attest to the development of class solidarity amongst a workforce fragmented into 'contract' tenant youths, 'free' tenant youths, tenant women and children, hired hands from nearby reserves, and recruited workers from Pondoland and Basutoland? So scanty is the evidence that it is impossible to determine the role of migrant workers, and permissible only to state that large numbers of labour tenants participated in the stoppages. In itself, this indicates the situational

<sup>44</sup> *The Rand Daily Mail* 10/5/27. For the bumper harvests, see CAD, JUS 429, 1/667/27, Annual report for Umvoti, 1927.

<sup>45</sup> I have come across no press reports indicating that Gwaza spoke about wages, and his subsequent founding of the Northern Trade Native Union (sic) indicates that he was interested in the ending not the reform of wage labour. Numerous informants vigorously deny that the local ICU spoke of wages, though Dhlomo believes they spoke about whites underpaying blacks.

<sup>47</sup> *Hansard*, 19/5/27, W. Deane, Cols 3888, 3923.

nature of what is often assumed to be a barrier to their collective action — their possession of plots of land. When combined with a widespread belief that the ICU was about to return farms to their rightful owners, the fact that tenants related to farmers not only as proletarians but also as peasants actually enhanced their militancy. For one thing, their bumper harvests increased their ability and inclination to resist demands on their labour-power. For another, they sorely resented being paid less for more work than hired hands, and desperately needed higher wages to compensate for the ‘squeezing’ suffered over the years. Furthermore, in living together semi-permanently as homesteads on farms, the bonds of community reinforced those of class. Tenants often shared political and cultural traditions; they generally co-ordinated the management of their own productive processes; they frequently worked together in groups related by blood and marriage, and they invariably shared a common opposition to the ‘forced labour’ to which they were subjected. The cohesiveness to which such common values and practices contributed was particularly evident on labour farms — where in fact participation in ICU-related protest appears to have been especially pronounced.<sup>47</sup>

It is probable too that land-hunger and objection to labour dues fuelled even the wage strikes. This was certainly true of stoppages in Estcourt and Weenen, where one outraged farmer claimed his labour farm tenants were ‘on strike for a minimum of 8/- a day and in addition claim his farm as their destined property.’<sup>48</sup> Moreover, presenting the stoppages as purely wage affairs was closely related to ideological developments within the white body politic, especially to blackening the Labour Party. Certainly when the CNC rushed to Greytown with police to counter the stoppages, he made little or no reference to wages. Instead, he ordered chiefs to instruct their people that farmers would *not* be dispossessed of their holdings, and that tenants would *not* be freed of their labour obligations.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, many were fighting against proletarianisation itself as much as for higher wages. Indeed, tenants’ very claims for an incredibly high 700-2,000 per cent increase suggests that they were rejecting their situation *in toto*.

For all this, the importance of the strikes should not be overestimated. Those involved were unable to disrupt production significantly,<sup>50</sup> and far more limited types of protest tended to prevail. Because the ICU apparently made no attempt to establish

<sup>47</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 22/6/28; PAD, Greytown Preliminary Examinations 1923-1950, see in particular charges against B. Majola *et al*, 8/2/24; preparatory examination of N. Dhlamini, 18/7/28; see also Greytown Criminal Records 1915-1939. The labour farm evidence is fragmentary but suggestive: the Weenen M.P. referred to the Weenen and Umvoti thornveld as the stormcentre of unrest; evictions were particularly pronounced in the thornveld; and the ‘lynch mob’ drove off to the thornveld region after burning the local office. There are also tenuous indications that recruited workers did not participate much in ICU-related protest: farmers’ repressive measures were directed mainly against tenants; farmers recruited migrants in ever increasing numbers in 1927-1928, and the magistrate claimed that locals rather than ‘foreigners’ were evading their taxes in this period. It is tempting to speculate that labourers from Pondoland and Basutoland were alienated from the ICU by its emphasis on Zulu nationalism.

<sup>48</sup> CAD, Smuts papers Vol 39, No 145 (new vol no 223), General Smuts to Dr. A Edington, 18/5/27.

<sup>49</sup> *The Natal Farmer* 20/5/27.

<sup>50</sup> Farmers both reaped their bumper maize crop and paid off many of their liabilities with wattle bark proceeds. It is unclear how those affected by strikes obtained their labour: wealthier farmers may well have recruited workers from further afield, while it is possible that some strikers were forced back to work by various threats.

organisational structures outside the town, and because farm workers' tradition of resistance was highly individualised and informal, it was rather of 'insolence' and 'insubordination' that whites complained most in this period.

In part, this referred to the Union's attack on ideological bonds that in the guise of religion bound black oppressed to white oppressors. In 1927, black membership of the farmer-dominated *Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk* fell significantly, allegedly due to 'die Kadalie gees wat 'n baie nadelige uitwerking het op die jong volk veral op Kerklike gebied.'<sup>51</sup> In part too, it referred to the challenge posed to the use of law as a means of inculcating the hegemony of whites in the countryside. Farmers were outraged by threatened and successful prosecution of some who had impounded cattle, withheld wages, or given inadequate notice of eviction.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the courts ultimately represented the collective if not the individual interests of white masters — and the magistrate was more worried by the challenge to the political authority of the state implicit in the withholding of poll taxes.<sup>53</sup> Although he blamed the ICU for the steady decline in payments between 1926 and 1928, he doubtless remembered it was the imposition of this tax that had precipitated *Bambatha* into rebellion, and that its reimposition in Natal in 1926 had evoked heated opposition. Finally, both officialdom and farmers were infuriated by the intensification on the farms of muted, evasive, but nonetheless damaging informal protest. In neighbouring *Kranskop*, this included groups of labourers reclaiming the use of their old footpaths on white farms, and deliberately leaving gates open so that stock grazed on ripe maize. In *Umvoti* itself, reassertion of customary rights and resistance to farmers was reflected in soaring convictions under the *Masters and Servants Act*. According to the magistrate, the 31 per cent increase in criminal cases in *Umvoti* between 1926 and 1927 was due to the ICU which 'stirred up the native farm tenants and caused considerable restlessness and alarm — and during the first half of the year assaults on Europeans were of frequent occurrence.'<sup>54</sup>

He forebore to mention that bloody violence made up the very fabric of rural society, and suffused with its spirit all relations between landlords and labourers. Because legal action was costly, and because the state represented interests other than those of white farmers, most *Umvoti* landlords regarded the law and the police as totally inadequate to their purpose of controlling and exploiting their workers.<sup>55</sup> Smaller farmers in particular preferred to rely on their own brute force to discipline Africans who had not accepted the right of white farmers ruthlessly to abuse them. Thus in an economy in which black labour-power came cheap, black bodies were the site on which white farmers exercised their blood-stained power. And in a world in

<sup>51</sup> *Notule van die Vyf-en-Vyftigste Algemene Vergadering van die Nederduitsch Ger. Kerk van Natal*, April 1928, 57. ('The Kadalie-spirit which has a very souring effect on the young people especially where the Church is concerned.')

<sup>52</sup> See for example *The Natal Afrikaner* 17/5/27.

<sup>53</sup> CAD, JUS 429, 1/667/27, Annual report for *Umvoti*, 1927; CAD, JUS 440, 1/82/28, Annual report for *Umvoti*, 1928.

<sup>54</sup> CAD, JUS 429, 1/667/27, Annual report for *Umvoti*, 1927. See also *The Natal Mercury* 19/5/27.

<sup>55</sup> In 1925, the *Umvoti Agricultural Society* proposed a deputation to see police about 'the unsatisfactory method in which delinquents are followed up . . . at the present time depositions are made for crime committed, and the deposition is just thrown in the Pigeon-hole and forgotten.'

which black males were constantly struggling against their definition as 'boys', white males consolidated their control over black virility by savagely beating both them and their women. The most vivid memories of those who worked on Umvoti farms in the 1920s centre around the brutal, bodily violence to which they were subjected. For the smallest offences, they were threatened with guns, they were beaten with sticks, and they were thrashed with horsewhips by whites ideologically committed to the notion they were dealing with a race of savages.<sup>56</sup>

The presence of the ICU in this raw, dehumanising world heightened farm workers' confidence and sharpened their sense of justice. Not that labourers involved in the rash of assaults on white landlords were necessarily ICU members. There is no known association between the Union and the farm worker Muziwake Cele, who – when two Kranskop whites struck him with a stick, grabbed his testicles, and subjected him to racist taunts – responded by calling them 'two bloody fucking hells' and almost felling them to the ground.<sup>57</sup> Yet the ICU had undoubtedly influenced the consciousness of two Cunu men who retaliated against their Umvoti landlord Louis Nourse. Nourse was attempting both to extend the working time and discipline the private lives of his unmarried male tenants by forcing them to sleep in his nearby 'Kaffir house' rather than in their own homes. Having disobeyed his order, the 23 year old Nkanyama Magutshwa and the 20 year old Vimbindhlu Zakwe arrived for work fifteen minutes after sunrise. Abused and struck by Nourse, Zakwe declared 'there is no law to stop us going out at night' and both demanded to be charged in court rather than beaten. When the infuriated farmer attacked them, both retaliated with their fighting sticks. They forced the bloodied Nourse to back out of the fight, ignored his order that they return to work, and illegally left the farm for the ICU office. From here they were packed off to the police station to lay a charge of assault – only to find that Nourse had preceded them. Their brief moment of victory was over, and their confidence in the courts was presumably shaken the following day when they were sentenced to six months hard labour.<sup>58</sup>

This incident typifies much of the initial ICU-related protest on the farms, in suggesting the workers' faith in the law, in its individualistic nature and in its connection to proletarianisation. But to what extent were Magutshwa and Zakwe typical participants? Certainly young males appear to have taken a leading role. Not only did they bear the brunt of landlords' exactions, but they were also more *au fait* with urban conditions, and less restricted by dependants than elders or women. And certainly Cunu men were prominent in ICU activities. While Cunu people constituted almost half of Umvoti's farm tenants, those who were evicted and 'squeezed' were in a desperate position because the Cunu had not been allocated a ward in the

<sup>56</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with E. Zondi by VN and HB, Greytown, 3/7/80; interview with L. Ngubane. August Kohrs, one of the small farmers heavily involved in the Anti-ICU, widely advertised his method of controlling African servants: to strip them to the waist and give them a 'good hiding'. Louis Nourse, referred to below, justified his physical abuse of his servants by claiming 'otherwise they will do as they like and become top dog.'

<sup>57</sup> PAD, Kranskop Criminal Records 1890-1948, Preparatory examination of M. Cele 1/12/27.

<sup>58</sup> PAD, Greytown Criminal Records 1915-1939, N. Magutshwa and V. Zakwe charged with assault.

reserve. Moreover, those in the thornveld were deeply enmeshed in relationships with the Cunu in Weenen, precisely the area where 8/- a day strikes had been pronounced and where subcultures centred around semi-proletarianised youths were concentrated. Focused around the 'faction fights' erupting largely over land boundaries, these subcultures permeated the dynamic of dispute between landlord and labourer in Umvoti, as the use of 'fighting sticks' in assaults graphically testifies. In addition, these subcultures undoubtedly undermined the control exercised over youths by their elders. Youths whose growing economic independence was reinforced by considerable social and even political autonomy were not necessarily mindful of the anti-ICU warnings of homestead heads or Greytown chiefs.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, women were not immersed in these militaristic, male-dominated subcultures to anything like the same extent. Thus their involvement in farm protest – and in 1927 fully one quarter of Masters and Servants cases were against black females – was reinforced by traditions often quite distinct from those of youths. In particular, actions such as refusal to work were frequently informed by strongly-held patriarchal values, which were probably being vigorously asserted in this period of increased demands on female labour. Yet if this would suggest that women may well have participated in ICU-related protest, the contra-indication is that patriarchy limited female response to the Union. The male organisers made no attempt to address the fact that women's subordinate, primarily reproductive role limited their participation in the Union. They also conformed with ease to the view that politics and protest were male prerogatives. Thus although a small minority of women always attended urban meetings, Jumaima Dladla claimed little knowledge of the Union. 'I stayed at home. Men might know that . . . Cards were issued to men and not to us women.'<sup>60</sup>

But members or no, women and children were deeply affected by farmers' response to the ICU challenge. Apart from violence, landlords utilised their single most powerful weapon to control tenant dissidence: their control of the land and their right to evict black residents. Here Umvoti landlords – and indeed Natal landlords in general – acted as a class. At a well attended Greytown farmers' association meeting in June 1927, unanimous resolutions were taken to eject or decline to employ any active ICU member, or any African who refused to work, or anyone evicted by another farmer for these reasons. In the context of the generalised drive to reduce tenant populations, these decisions were immediately put into effect with regard to those suspected of ICU sympathies. As elsewhere in Natal, Umvoti farmers 'spied them out, felling their huts to the ground, burning out others, and

<sup>59</sup> The role of 'gosos' in ICU-related protest may well have been important. These were young men, elected by youths to lead them in dances, at weddings, and in 'faction fights'. They controlled their own 'wards', and, at least in Weenen, exercised more authority over youths than did headmen, chiefs or the Native Commissioner. The existence of similar subcultures in Umvoti is evidenced by the participation of Greytown youths in Weenen 'faction fights' (note 35) and by the 'iminjonjo' beer parties which, to the distress of the magistrate, were not being held at homesteads of responsible men.

<sup>60</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dladla. At the above-mentioned meeting on the thornveld farm, Gwaza and Makanya addressed the crowds in a venue from which women were excluded, and left the two women with whom they had travelled sitting in the car.

throwing them on to the roads, confiscating their stock if they did not leave quickly enough.’<sup>61</sup>

Black tenants were extremely vulnerable to this heavy-handed response. ‘Whoa-aa! Then horror befell us. We suffered . . . Ha! Then the heat was on’, remembered Jacob Mchunu of the ICU-related evictions in Estcourt.<sup>62</sup> From the end of the agricultural year in June 1927, homeless blacks thronged the streets of Greytown, and inundated the ICU office with pleas for the promised farms. They were to be bitterly disappointed. Although the Acting National Secretary George Champion made fairly concerted efforts to buy local farms, he was frustrated both by the Union’s lack of funds and by state rejection of all ICU applications to purchase holdings. Although Makanya led a large deputation of evicted men to the magistrate to plead for accommodation, he was brusquely told that farms belonged to the whites and that refuge should be sought in the reserves. And although locals began to collect money to buy the thornveld farm of a sympathetic Indian who had provisionally accommodated some evictees, they were fully aware that this was the totally inadequate farm ‘Lonsdale’. Thus it was that the ‘Wandering Natives in Greytown’ were largely left to roam through the veld with their emaciated stock, as they frantically appealed to chiefs for land in the congested reserve, or tried to conceal the reason for their eviction from suspicious landlords.<sup>63</sup>

It was in this context that the ICU further increased its membership by strongly challenging the right of landlords to evict their tenants. Moses Majola recalls the ICU ‘saying when the white man evicted you, you shouldn’t leave, but you should come to us and join; we shall give you the law which prohibits the white man from evicting you’. People ‘believed that the ICU would persuade the white man to let them stay on the farms.’<sup>64</sup> Indeed they did, with their belief reinforced by the fact that refusing to leave the property claimed by the white man was an old form of resistance, and one highly appropriate to existing conditions. Hence from about mid-1927, tenants either returned to the farms from which they had been ejected, or simply ignored their notices and refused to quit. As the Chief Native Commissioner put it in mid-1928, tenants ‘have adopted an attitude of passive resistance . . . and are placing every possible difficulty in the way of the authorities.’<sup>65</sup> As he also pointed out, however, it was not only ICU rallying cries that spurred on this action, but also dissension within the ranks of the ruling classes themselves.

### *Friction Between Farmers and State*

Umvoti farmers and their ideologues had long since realised that they needed to

<sup>61</sup> G. Coka, ‘The story of Gilbert Coka of the Zulu tribe of Natal, South Africa’ in M. Perham (ed.), *Ten Africans* (London, 1936), 299; *The Natal Witness* 6/7/27.

<sup>62</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Mchunu by VN and HB, Mooi River, 1/12/81.

<sup>63</sup> University of Cape Town, Forman papers, B3.162, CNC to G. Champion 17/11/27; *ibid.*, B3.154, C. Martens to Champion 10/11/27; UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dhlomo; CAD, correspondence in NTS 3238, 736/307.

<sup>64</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with M. Majola.

<sup>65</sup> CAD, NTS 9252, 1/371, CNC to SNA 27/6/28.



mobilise a broad anti-ICU alliance. Using the institutions that had shaped their own social power – the rifle associations, the NGK church, the press and political parties – they vigorously disseminated the view that the Union threatened both white domination and capitalism itself. It sought black rule, they argued, and its activities could well culminate in an African uprising like Bambatha's rebellion. Moreover, since the Union was a socialist organisation, the African uprising might well be followed by a Bolshevik revolution. For this reason, they demanded that the state should immediately weigh in on the side of farmers: by passing an anti-sedition law; by denying Africans the right of access to the Supreme Court; and by entrenching black homestead heads as white farmers' allies by legalising their practice of contracting out household labour.<sup>66</sup>

Now the dominant classes were certainly agreed on three basic principles: that white supremacy should be maintained; that private property was sacrosanct; and that workers could not repudiate their contracts. When the ICU or rural blacks in Umvoti undermined any of these cardinal precepts, then officialdom responded swiftly and forcibly. Thus all primarily repressive state apparatuses – the police, the courts, the prisons, the 'Native Administration', and the legislature – were enlisted to intimidate and punish protesters and organisers. In addition, an attempt was made to engage the Union at an ideological level by ordering chiefs actively to counter ICU propaganda.

Yet for all this, the state represented interests other than those of Umvoti farmers. For one thing, certain of its branches registered the fact that under a Labour Party coalition government, the victimisation of trade union members – black or white – was unacceptable. For another, the state reflected the presence within the white body politic of certain social forces deeply opposed to the 'primitive' nature of Umvoti agriculture. In this period, spokesmen of significant sectors of more highly developed industrial, commercial and even agricultural capital were denouncing the appalling conditions of black farm workers. These blocked the expansion of a home market, they argued. They produced an atmosphere of simmering discontent in the countryside. And they undermined the national policy of limiting the flow of fully proletarianised Africans to the towns.<sup>67</sup>

Because such antagonistic views were inscribed within the very structures of the state, Umvoti agriculturalists attempting to suppress ICU-related protest were frequently frustrated by the authorities. To their intense annoyance, a leading official in the Department of Health blandly declared that the Umvoti unrest reflected the inadequacies of farm workers' diet. Furthermore, the government refused Natal farmers' request to proscribe the ICU, while the Prime Minister himself stated that farmers ought to prevent the flood to the towns by paying higher wages. Finally, as Greytown landlords attempted to counter the ICU's legal challenges, they angrily discovered that they could rely upon neither the local nor the higher courts.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *The Natal Witness* 14/5/27; *The Natal Witness* 6/7/27; *The Greytown Gazette* 16/3/28.

<sup>67</sup> *The Star* 22/11/27; *The Star* 3/3/28; F. Lucas' addendum to the *Native Economic Commission*, U.G. 22-'34, 201; *The Farmers' Weekly* 3/9/30.

<sup>68</sup> *The Natal Witness* 30/5/27; *The Farmers' Weekly* 2/5/28; *The Rand Daily Mail* 27/7/28.

Their outrage at being publicly beaten in the courts is captured by a Greytown lawyer's claim that the ICU's 'winning cases in the courts created by ourselves is injustice.'<sup>69</sup> Farmers' exasperation with the legal system reached new heights when tenants commenced refusing to quit farms. Such was the level of black militancy that individual landlords found their guns insufficient to enforce their eviction notices, and were driven to enlist the law and the police on their side. They obtained some satisfaction: about 160 ejectment orders were granted against black homesteads in 1927.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, white farmers' already tenuous faith in the law was steadily eroded as the Supreme Court repeatedly overturned local rulings, and as ICU lawyers victoriously argued the illegality of numerous evictions. Above all, landlords were incensed by tenants who obdurately returned to farms even after having been subjected to police-enforced eviction.

Up to this point, apart from the fall off in tax payments, there were few signs that blacks were heeding Gwaza's claim that they no longer need respect the magistrate.<sup>71</sup> On the contrary, the white state, as manifested most concretely in the white magistrate, had acquired a degree of legitimacy which landlords were far from attaining, and which Gwaza's desecration of white police graves did little to disturb. Moreover, for at least some farm labourers, the ICU's successful exploitation of the gap between the landlords and the law reinforced the belief that the oppressed could win rights from their oppressors without challenging the state.

Yet the ability of a racist court to secure acquiescence in the white man's rule was both partial and unstable. For one thing, rural blacks drew on alternative traditions of justice – and it is notable that in Estcourt the Union actually held meetings in the headmen's courts.<sup>72</sup> For another, ideas about the legitimacy of the state and the possibility of opposing it were forged in the process of struggle. When the ICU and certain tenants proved they could compel even the forces of law and order to retreat, increasing numbers of blacks defied their ejectment orders, and concretely demonstrated their contempt for the courts and police.

So too did Mageitshimane Mgunu, a 32 year old Cunu who was almost certainly an ICU member. In October 1927 Mgunu, who had grimly returned to his farm after an ejectment order had been enforced against him, was charged with trespass in a test case before crowds of blacks and whites. For technical reasons, the magistrate was compelled to discharge him, and the triumphant Mgunu turned the packed courtroom into a political arena. On being dismissed and ordered to salute in the customary ritual of obeisance,

a big commotion was caused and the Induna Native Constable Makayana again called upon accused to salute the Court and the accused remarked in a loud insolent manner '*Angi kuleki Inkosi*' (I am not saluting the 'chief') and made for the exit at the back of the Court Room and the Induna native Sergeant Magidi pulled him back and made him salute which accused

<sup>69</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 16/3/28.

<sup>70</sup> See note 65. Ephraim Zondi refers in his interview to farmers patrolling the hills with guns to counter tenants' defiance in refusing to quit the farms.

<sup>71</sup> *The Natal Witness* 6/7/27.

<sup>72</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with C. Kumalo by VN and HB, Mooi River, 1/2/82.

did by pressing his elbow against his ribs and lifting his hand, his fingers only showing just above his chin.<sup>73</sup>

Gestures have subversive power – and Mcunu's three month sentence for open contempt of the white man's court did little to pacify local farmers. All around them, black resistance seemed to be spreading unchecked while the state was in disarray. In Estcourt, white police were refusing to execute ejectment orders. In Mooi River, resistance to ejectment had culminated in a series of bloody confrontations between constables and crowds of Africans. And in Umvoti itself, an outbreak of midnight stock maiming extended the scope of tenants' challenge to landlords' property. To make matters worse, wattle bark prices began their precipitous slump in November 1927, and the following year farmers lost their cherished contract to supply timber to the mines. The summer rains failed – and by early 1928 agriculturalists were fully aware that they were entering the worst drought for some thirty years. And like predators swooping in for the kill, banks intensified their pressure on farmers, a number of whom had already been sued by storekeepers in the course of 1927.<sup>74</sup> By early 1928, fears about the looming economic crisis were subordinated only to fury about the apparent helplessness of the state to check tenant resistance.

It was in this context that Zaboloni Gwaza detonated an explosion. Dismissed from the ICU in August 1927 for 'misconduct', Gwaza's plans to form an opposition movement for those who did not want to work for whites were foiled by his imprisonment until February 1928 for desecrating the police graves.<sup>75</sup> Four days after his release, two Voortrekker graves were wrecked, and on the night of Leap Year 1928, over one hundred headstones were toppled in Greytown's white cemetery. By breaking white taboos surrounding death, these acts not only enraged the citizenry but also had the appeal of natural justice for blacks, many of whose graves had been ploughed over by landlords. Moreover, the placing at the cemetery of two cowtails – one black, one white – was interpreted by whites as a Zulu symbol of war, while for blacks it undoubtedly evoked memories of the *tshokobezi* badges worn by those who fought in Bambatha's rebellion.<sup>76</sup>

On the morning of March 1st, Gwaza was roughly thrown into jail as the prime suspect. This time, embittered Umvoti whites were not prepared to rely on officialdom adequately to punish the man who had pioneered the ICU. They embarked on five days of mayhem, itself infused by the diverse military traditions of fighting for British imperialism, for Boer autonomy, or simply for white supremacy.<sup>77</sup> Apart

<sup>73</sup> PAD, Greytown Criminal Records 1915-1939, appeal of M. Mcunu vs. Rex, 31/10/27.

<sup>74</sup> H. Bradford, 'Strikes in the Natal Midlands: landlords, labour tenants and the I.C.U.', *Africa Perspective* 22, 1983; *The Natal Mercury* 12/3/28; *The Farmers' Weekly* 28/11/28; CAD, JUS 429, 1/667/27, Annual report for Umvoti, 1927.

<sup>75</sup> *The Workers' Herald* 17/3/28; *The Star* 17/4/28.

<sup>76</sup> *The Natal Mercury* 2/3/28, 3/3/28, 13/4/28; Marks, *Rebellion*, 309.

<sup>77</sup> A considerable number of those who participated in the raids and/or the supportive Anti-ICU meetings had fought for King and Country in battles ranging from those of 1879 and 1906 to those of 1914-1918. This military background, together with ongoing involvement in the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, was apparent in their march down the streets of Greytown, and their raising of the South African war cry outside the Pietermaritzburg office. Boer traditions were in evidence in the calls for laagering, while more than one spectator referred to the raiders as 'the Greytown commando'.

from the attempt to lynch Gwaza and the successful wrecking of the Greytown and Kranskop offices, they made two spirited bids to attack the Pietermaritzburg ICU Hall, had extensive contact with the local whites who burnt the Weenen office, were undoubtedly linked to the effort to destroy the Escourt office, would have destroyed the Dalton office had it existed, and in general did all in their power to annihilate ICU presence in their vicinity.<sup>78</sup>

From the outset, officialdom's response to this virulent counterattack was shaped by fear of African retaliation. From an informer, the authorities had recently heard that the ICU planned an insurrection for May 1928. Allegedly, when whites took reprisals against the first stage of the rebellion — a general strike and the appropriation of white property — then Africans 'were to massacre the whites respectively marked for them, so that none should escape. Arsenals, barracks and police posts also were to be seized.'<sup>79</sup> Partially believing this story, state functionaries made concerted efforts to prevent a further escalation of conflict. So in the context of a telegram from the Minister of Defence to the Prime Minister that unless the Greytown mob was controlled, 'native reprisals by members ICU may result firing cane wattles etcetera', white authorities actively protected the Union and overtly clashed with the raiders.<sup>80</sup>

However once it became apparent that no such black revolt was in the offing, vigorous efforts were made to heal the breach between local whites and officialdom. A handful of those involved in the raids were charged and received trifling fines. Senior state functionaries scathingly overrode ICU objections to the nominal sentences, while the magistrate who sentenced the men aggressively argued:

farmers cannot get Natives who fail to fulfil their contracts moved off their land . . . the aggrieved parties are the whites; they have applied to the Law for a remedy and the law has failed utterly to help them. If they . . . adopt primitive measures for redress can anyone blame them?<sup>81</sup>

It was not only farmers with tenants who favoured primitive measures. The motley nature of those involved in the raids — wealthy English businessmen sped off with struggling Afrikaner farmers and penurious clerks — testifies to the tightly knit nature of white Umvoti society. A complex skein of bonds based on kinship and marriage, as well as on economic and legal relationships, crosscut political and cultural affiliations, and linked town to countryside. Above all, the interests and institutions of the master race welded white Umvoti together in almost unanimous antagonism to the ICU. Nearly the largest meeting ever held amongst Greytown whites was one in early March 1928 to launch the Anti-ICU: a succinctly titled society pledged to support white supremacy.<sup>82</sup>

Yet for all this appearance of a united white community, the great bulk of those charged for their involvement in the raids appear to have been poorer whites partially

<sup>78</sup> CAD, correspondence in JUS 437, 4/366/27; *The Star* 23/3/28; *The Natal Witness* 6/3/28.

<sup>79</sup> Defence Force Archives, CGS 67, 1G 45, C. Wheelwright (CNC) to Major Herbst (SNA), 11/1/28.

<sup>80</sup> CAD, JUS 437, 4/366/27, Minister of Defence to Prime Minister 5/3/28.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, Magistrate of Estcourt to Secretary of Justice 2/4/28.

<sup>82</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 16/3/28.

or completely proletarianised.<sup>83</sup> Often they were stragglers at the hind end of large families, now either farming with their kin on the shares or occupying badly paid jobs in town. They included struggling agriculturists like Jas. Martens who had successfully been prosecuted by the ICU for withholding wages, as well as numerous indebted farmers and their relatives like A. Havemann. Indeed, symptomatic of their general lack of ready cash is the fact that one third of the Greytown men fined £5 for the Kranskop raid had to pay in 10 shilling installments.<sup>84</sup> Small wonder that such men were violently opposed to the idea of Africans obtaining equal opportunities, or that farmers whose only chance of survival was a vigorous response to the boom were outraged when faced by refusal to work, refusal to quit, or demands for 8 shillings a day. For such marginalised men, ICU-related resistance deeply threatened their class as well as their racial identities.

The presence of such incipient and actual class differentiation amongst Umvoti whites explains more than the pattern of participation in the raids: it also explains the ideology used to channel – and limit – the actions of poorer whites. To a large extent, those who organised the anti-ICU meetings as well as those who led the lynching and arson were relatively well-off businessmen and farmers. Especially prominent amongst them were English South African Party men, undoubtedly alarmed by their growing political alienation from both Afrikaner farmers sliding in penury and from white wage-earners.<sup>85</sup> Joined by local Nationalist Party leaders – who, as wealthy farmers, appear to have been equally uneasy about socialism – they drummed into their poorer compatriots that the ICU was ‘the Communist part of the Labour Party backed up by Russia’.<sup>86</sup> By thus linking the hated ICU to the Labour Party and to socialism, dual objects were attained: rioters clashed with the ICU as *whites*, and the development of working class consciousness amongst an objectively differentiated community was obstructed.

Of more immediate concern to social forces operating on a national scale, however, was the inculcation of the notion that whites could not take the law into their own hands. Institutions ranging from the press through to political parties and upper echelons of the state were all involved in this process.<sup>87</sup> Apart from the ideological work this entailed – such as the comparison of the ‘Greytown lynch mob’ and their Anti-ICU organisation to the Ku Klux Klan – the ability of the courts to protect private property was enhanced. Thus through a series of administrative actions, landlords’ major grievance over state inaction *vis-a-vis* tenants resisting eviction was rapidly alleviated.

The apparent success of the June 1928 evictions was due as well to the devastating

<sup>83</sup> This is subject to the qualification that only about a third of the men involved in the raid were ever charged, and that poorer whites were more obvious targets for exemplary punishment than were their wealthier compatriots.

<sup>84</sup> PAD, Kranskop Criminal Records 1890-1948, Case no 158, 1928.

<sup>85</sup> The South African Party’s loss of the 1924 election on a national scale was reflected in Umvoti in the cutting of the SAP majority from 329 (1921) to 111.

<sup>86</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 16/3/28.

<sup>87</sup> The solid wall of disapproval constructed by such quarters seems to have led to the fairly rapid demise of the Anti-ICU, which could not even get its advertisements placed in the conservative *Natal Witness*.

1928 drought. As stock died, homesteads starved, and men streamed off the land to seek work, tenants found it more difficult to withstand the more efficient reprisals. In addition, most blacks had considerably less confidence in either the competence of the ICU or its ability to protect them against intensified repression. Understandably, organisers were remarkably reluctant to reappear in Umvoti, fearing that like the Kranskop secretary they would become a 'pillar that was stripped . . . until he remained a beam without bark.'<sup>88</sup> Understandably too, in view of the lack of concrete support for their plight and the disintegration of the ICU on a national level, the Greytown branch executive passed a vote of no confidence in both Champion and Kadalie. Not that this resolved the problem of dealing with white reaction. In June 1928 at the first public meeting since the raids, only sixteen Africans braved the Anti-ICU whites circling the office in their cars. Once these faithful few had discussed fundraising for the erection of protective netting around their building, Jas. Martens addressed them, saying:

he had given all I.C.U. boys on his farm notice to quit, and if they had not left by Saturday he intended to burn their huts. This attitude, he explained, was one that all the farmers had decided to adopt towards the I.C.U. natives.<sup>89</sup>

Even this did not completely cow Umvoti blacks. Three months later, at least one thousand Africans attended the first and apparently only meeting of the secessionary ICU yase Natal, called to discuss the position of blacks on farms. They could not, however, have been much impressed by assurances that 'if the Native Workers in Greytown obey and behave themselves like a people, the white masters would always listen to their grievances.'<sup>90</sup> The consciousness of militant rural blacks in Umvoti had developed far beyond this stage, and from then on they appear to have decided to go it alone. Thus the beer boycott, in full swing in Greytown months before the boycotts swept rural Natal under ICU auspices in 1929, was organised entirely by locals drawing on their own ideas about how beer should be brewed.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, while assaults on farmers, resistance to labour dues and even land take-overs occurred in the next few years, these were spontaneous, endemic forms of protest bearing no trace of Union organisational involvement or inspiration.

The legacy of the ICU was not however completely eradicated. It reappeared in the 1930s in opposition to white churches by 'I.C.Y. (sic) agitators.'<sup>92</sup> It was also incorporated into myths about those who, like Bambatha in the past or Buthelezi in the present, were perceived to be fighting against white supremacy. Indeed, in Greytown today the ICU is remembered above all because 'They wanted to remove

<sup>88</sup> CAD, NTS 49/328, CNC to SNA 8/11/29, enclosing translation of the ICU yase Natal's booklet 'Blood and Tears'.

<sup>89</sup> *The Natal Witness* 25/6/28.

<sup>90</sup> *The Greytown Gazette* 5/10/28.

<sup>91</sup> The boycott was already evident in May 1928, and appears to have peaked around the end of the year. Locals argued that the liquor sold by the municipal beer hall should be brewed by women, not youths.

<sup>92</sup> PAD, correspondence of Greytown magistrate, N2/3/2, Rev. Sandstrom to Greytown magistrate 13/5/31.

the whites from the land, like Gatsha is doing now',<sup>93</sup> and because 'they said that this was our country as it is still being said today that this country belongs to the black people.'<sup>94</sup> It was by meshing such nationalist aspirations with the class concerns of rural blacks undergoing proletarianisation that the ICU achieved mass support in Umvoti. And it seems clear that today, as was the case over fifty years ago, it is only by articulating both class and communal aspirations that the well-springs of rural radicalism will be tapped.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with L. Ngubane; UW, ASI, OHP, interview with E. Zondi, who sees Gatsha Buthelezi as completing the unfinished tasks of the ICU.

<sup>94</sup> UW, ASI, OHP, interview with J. Dhlomo.