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Politics and

Violence

in the New South Africa

Edited by

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Preface &: Acknowledgements  
Background to the Project

In December 1991, the Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies brought together an outstanding panel of scholars to assess the prospects for a peaceful transition to a new constitutional order in South Africa. The timing was deliberate. The Codesa talks had just begun and there was a general consciousness that the culmination of the process might be just around the corner. One of the most tantalizing prospects available to such a gathering was to see how historical perspectives could help illuminate events that are still unfolding. In addition to the historians present, the panel included individuals from other disciplines who have worked at one time or another at unravelling the meaning of past events. All were acutely aware of the pitfalls lying in wait for those who attempt to make historical judgments on the basis of fragmentary evidence. At the same time, there was general agreement that historians have important insights to offer now. The business of providing the best possible academic interpretations for current events must wait until archives now closed to public view disgorge their secrets.

The contributors hoped, for all sorts of reasons, that the framework for negotiating a new South African constitution would be worked out before this book appeared. Initial euphoria was tempered by the shock of Boipatong. While contributors' spirits have ebbed and flowed as events have unfolded, we have tried hard to produce something without a 'use by' date stamped on the cover. For that reason room was left for some of the papers to be modified as events unfolded. Although this is not a book of prophecy, it may lend some assistance to prophets. Those who want to predict where a projectile will land need to know its trajectory from the point of launch. In South Africa the air is thick with all sorts of lethal projectiles, some of which were launched a very long time ago.

## The ANC and Black Workers

Peter Limb

## Introduction

Characterization of the ANC as petit-bourgeois is all too common in scholarly writing. This image deserves to be questioned. It cannot be denied that the ANC had elite or middle-class elements. However, almost from its inception it had an important worker constituency that grew with the passage of time. In 1918-20, and again in 1928-30, ANC leaders moved to the left and expressed solidarity with black worker struggles, and by the 1940s there was a slowly increasing worker membership of Congress. Even in the intervening periods, including a period of stagnation in the 1930s, there were considerable visible and invisible threads binding the ANC and working people. This chapter uses examples drawn from several periods and from the lives of notable individuals to show how African workers and the ANC related to each other. It also shows that black workers were frequently presented with a dilemma: the ANC seemed to offer some prospect of relief from race-defined oppression, but often appeared little able, or at times willing, to mobilize workers.

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1912-40

The more overt concern for workers shown by ANC leaders of the 1940s had its roots in earlier times. The ANC in its first decade may have adopted resolutions in keeping with the aspirations of blacks in general, and even of African workers in particular, but it remained small, weak in resources, and without an effective nation-wide apparatus.<sup>1</sup> Hence many African workers probably simply did not know much, if anything, about Congress. This should be qualified by the fact that most urban Africans (except miners in compounds) lived in close proximity to each other, and that the identity of Congress, once established in a location, could easily spread, especially by oral means and by tapping inherited traditions. Govan Mbeki recalls that: When Inqindi (ANC) was formed, all strata of African society took part: the middle class led by the intellectuals, the peasantry represented by chiefs and their amaphakathi Icouncillors<sup>1</sup>, and the working class consisting of the then urbanized Africans before 1920 ...the working class took an active part. The presence, of men like Letanka arrested in a workers' strike in 1917, in the executive cannot be ignored.

He recollects that in 1923 (at the age of 13) he attended South African Native National Congress meetings and concerts among peasants in the southern Transkei. While acknowledging that the leadership of Congress was provided by intellectuals, Mbeki maintains, 'it was a people's organization . . . we must not allow weaknesses of organization to obscure this fact'. Congress itself was the product of diverse regional branches, some, such as the Transvaal Congress, more militant than others.

The ANC by 1928-30 was capable of attracting thousands of people to mass rallies, such as those in December 1929 organized by the Western Cape branch, or in Johannesburg in 1928 for ANC President Josiah Gumede on his return from the Soviet Union. Campaigns against passes continued. Abantu-Batho, the Congress newspaper, continued to support workers rights and Garveyism until its demise in 1931. But from 1931-36, the nadir of the ANC, according to Peter Walshe, it turned away from mass actions, 'drawing its executives and the proportion of its members from the new "middle class"'. Although radicals were

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at this time frustrated at ANC moderation, going so far as declaring the body dead, (and there is plenty of evidence to sustain this view), they frequently acknowledged the strength of its heritage.<sup>2</sup>

John Gomas, a working tailor and SACP activist, saw the ANC and ICU as having been 'two mighty mass organizations of the non-European masses', that at their militant best awakened mass support, now lacking leaders with 'the experiences and tradition of struggle of the international working class', but capable of being re-built. Although hostile to reformism, Gomas acknowledged the ANC as a mass organization, and clearly thought it had a future.<sup>3</sup> By its 1938 conference, the ANC was paying greater attention to black workers' demands. Dr. AB Xuma, ANC President-General 1940-48, had already taken an interest in social and working conditions in the 30's, contributing to commissions on health, wages and living conditions, giving detailed analyses of the role of cheap labour and discrimination against black workers, noting that 'because of low wages . . . the wife was sometimes driven to resort to illegitimate means of supplementing wages - such as illicit liquor traffic' .<sup>4</sup> ANC members continued to keep alive those symbols of resistance capable of politically uniting blacks - land, historical traditions, the ANC image itself. Alfred Xuma told a Mendi Memorial meeting in Johannesburg in 1939 that the 1913 Land Act had left 'hundreds of thousands of Africans . . . homeless, landless, moneyless and hopeless'. Land was a major symbol, and it was closely linked to nationalism. But interest in labour issues was also noticeable amongst black political figures. To some it was obvious:

To us Africans the chief 'colour problem' is the problem of discrimination. The spear-thrust of the whole campaign of discrimination is economic . . . The African is undernourished and diseased because he is ignorant ; he is ignorant because he has not the money to go to school . . . cannot bargain his labour in the open market.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence of JB Marks is paradoxical, for it both confirms and denies ANC effectiveness. Marks, the son of an African railway worker, led a strike as a student teacher, was banned from The ANC and Black Workers 287

teaching in 1931 due to political activities, becoming a full-time union, SACP and ANC activist. He joined the ANC in 1928. He estimated, in a 1964 interview, that the ANC had reached its nadir in 1935, and that it was not until 1937 that there were definite attempts made to revive its remnants. Meetings were called up and down the country, with strong support shown for the ANC, even in small dorps and villages: 'The AN C had a very very wide influence, even at the time when it was dead, literally dead. It had a very strong ideological influence'. Touring the Orange Free State and Transvaal to give the message that Congress had 'come back', he noted there 'wasn't much difficulty' in getting this across, and little opposition from chiefs. It is possible some of this ANC 'tradition' included memories of the ICU or other groups. At this time in the provinces Congress tackled local grievances such as passes, land and permits, taking up court cases, yet there was no concrete policy and the 'ANC had very little to do with the trade union movement. Up to very late. I think it comes to the 405 where they convened a conference and conceded the plight of 300,000 African workers. At the time they were not dealing with trade unions!<sup>6</sup> The Conference of African Leaders, which convened to revive the ANC in 1937 elected the communist JB Marks its secretary, and leftists such as Edwin Mofutsanyana and Gert Sibanda played an increasingly active role in regional ANC affairs. Hidden amongst the verbiage of the Annual Congress was a growing interest in the burgeoning urban worker constituency of Congress.

1940-46

Increasing urbanization, and industrialization, begun in the 30's with steel foundries and engineering plant, accelerated in World War II. This stimulated greater African proletarianization, rising

inflation, and low wages, as well as harsh industrial and social legislation which precipitated large-scale African worker strike actions in the 405. The ANC-worker relationship was here at its most problematic. Some workers clearly did not see the organization as relevant to work issues. Moreover, 'moderate' ANC leaders could be expected to be especially reticent about

support of strikes during a World War. Some strikes were organized and led even without formal unions – such as the 1942 power workers' strike. Kin-ethnic based groups may have supplied the social 'cement' for these actions, as Dunbar Moodie and Baruch Hirson suggest, though industrial discipline, shared work experience and associated bonding of workers can also aid united action. Those (formally) 'unorganized' workers such as domestics and farm labourers, as well as the majority of workers who were simply not unionized, left few records and their attitudes to the ANC are only rarely glimpsed.

The 1940s were marked by widespread urban protests over issues such as housing and bus fares. Over 70,000 Africans took part in squatter movements which established shanty towns at Orlando in 1944, and at Albertsville in 1945. Large-scale bus boycotts took place, with some involvement by (SACP and ANC figures, but often led by residents or other political identities. High labour turnover in factories and very low wages contributed to increased activity of criminal gangs, which, whilst often apolitical and difficult to organize, sometimes liaised with the ANC – political gang-leaders mobilized in Benoni for the Defiance Campaign in 1952.<sup>7</sup> Strikes and boycotts may have made some moderate African nationalists feel uncomfortable, but could still be of some use to the ANC cause if solidarity was expressed.

African Miners, their Union, the '46 Strike, and the ANC  
The beginnings of the first real mass trade union for South Africa's black miners was a small event – so small that history records very little about it, save that the initiative came from a meeting of the Transvaal African National Congress Executive in 1941.<sup>8</sup> ANC writers can, with some justification, claim that the organization was, together with the SACP, responsible for the creation of the African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU), whose founding conference in August 1941 was arranged with the aid of both the Transvaal ANC and the LSAG/James Majoro (SACP); Gaur Radebe (ANC/SACB) and SP Matseke, Chairman of the Transvaal ANC were prominent. Edwin Mofutsanyana (ANC/SACP) stated that 'the mines are the starting point and backbone The ANC and Black Workers 289

of the national movement'.<sup>9</sup> The Committee to Organize African Mineworkers, formed in 1941, which made representations to the government that led to the Lansdowne Commission on Native Mine Wages, regarded itself as representing the ANC, and conveyed to Prime Minister Smuts a resolution from the August mineworkers conference (called by the Transvaal ANC) protesting 'against the exclusion of African Mine Workers from the cost of living allowance' and low wages.  
Xuma, endeavouring to incorporate the views of African miners and mine clerks, addressed the 1943 Lansdowne Commission on behalf of the ANC, forthrightly stating that Congress experience that many commissions were simply a device to 'quiet public clamour for certain reforms', and that the terms of the inquiry served 'to protect, and to entrench the position of, the Gold Mining Industry and the European mine workers'. The latter 'in his relation to the African mine worker, is more a capitalist than a worker'. He presented detailed statistics on the labour force, causes of its poverty and social ills, argued that 'we . . . do not believe that some must enjoy the cream lot the gold industry) while others get only skim milk', and then related these facts to the political exclusion of Africans. The ANC called for abolition of the compound system, increased wages, repeal of anti-labour laws, and recognition of the AMWU. 'Conditions of African mine workers can never be what they should be until they have a recognized and registered trade union and the Mines 8: Works Act, the Native Labour 8: Regulations Act and the Pass Laws have been repealed'. Xuma has been portrayed as the 'chief motivator' of ANC resurgence. He helped introduce a more centralized structure and concise constitution to ensure the ANC became more than an annual meeting. He presented evidence, or represented Africans, to numerous commissions, including the Lansdowne and Smit committees. During 1946–1947, Xuma



rejected government offers of union recognition excluding miners and farm workers, as a deliberate denial of 'fundamental rights of workers, namely collective bargaining' .11 What is important here is not that Xuma, by occupation a doctor, was not a worker, but that politically the ANC was allying itself with workers.

3 / IB Marks had not been involved with the union at the start,

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but became President after Radebe. The committee formed to establish the union was an 'absolutely independent (from the ANC) body' according to Marks. Although the ANC 'supported (AMWU work in 1944-51 . . . there was no direct liaison, except that anytime I wanted speakers to go to a meeting . . . they would have ANC speakers there'. Xuma also supported the AMWU: 'he did on more than one occasion come to address our conferences . . . I think it had the full support' of the ANC. On the other hand, Marks insists that the Council of Non-European Trade Unions CNETU, had nothing to do with the ANC.<sup>12</sup> The ANC had co-operated with CNETU, the latter noted, 'but the lack of finance and sufficient staff . . . makes it impossible to cope'.<sup>13</sup> There is some evidence of communication between Xuma and the AMWU. In 1942 secretary James Majoro wrote to Xuma issuing an appeal for aid, as the large number of complaints were handled in 'spare time, we have no paid official'. Xuma also corresponded with mine labourers and clerks, writing in June 1943 to Enoch Njozala requesting information on miner housing, compounds, 'sex perversions', family separation, wages and recruiting, for the ANC's Lansdowne submission.<sup>m</sup> The venerable doctor maintained a healthy interest in miners, even if he was not given to taking part in radical strikes. Addressing the Lansdowne Commission Xuma outlined the history of the ANC and stated that its aims included to 'protect and raise the status of the African people in all spheres'. Miners faced deleterious social and health effects of compound life, and 'starvation wages' tempted some to 'traffic with their bodies'.<sup>15</sup>

Organizers of the African trade unions expressed the wish not to appear to be in 'conflict in any way' or to usurp 'any of the functions' of the ANC in the movement for recognition of the unions, according to Michael Scott. Paying greater attention to miners was also perhaps stimulated by a growing intellectual interest in miners and their world by African literati. Dhlomo and B.W. Vilikazi (died 1947) had begun to write of the mines in the 30s; Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* (1946) was a pioneering literary analysis of black miners' lives.<sup>15</sup>

Escalating prices, wages more or less static since 1900, food shortages, and frustration sparked a major mine strike of between 70-100,000 Rand mine workers in August 1946. Moodie

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suggests that izibonda (room leaders in the mine compounds) were responsible for much of the coordination of compound actions, especially on the East Rand.<sup>17</sup> One miner, Palama Lelosa, recounts his experience of how employer attitudes, the return of white miners from the war and the consequent demotion of blacks influenced his decision to join the strike:

What I expected was that something would be done with it, to show that had proved to be a faithful servant during the time of the difficulties (war). But this wasn't done. Instead I was demoted on my job without any increment. I felt that now if people should suffer even when they had done their best under conditions that were trying, that because I am black I must be neglected. That is why I joined the 1946 strike.<sup>13</sup>

What was the attitude of the miners to class and national struggles? Walter Sisulu states that in his opinion he and other miners in the 30's did not know about the ANC. It is likely that many shared this ignorance. It is a prime case of ANC leaders being portrayed as 'petit-bourgeois'. Xuma is accused by I-Iirson of lack of enthusiasm for the 1946 strike and of failing to attend mass meetings. Xuma, who had the year before addressed union conferences, did try and meet with Marks, only to find him arrested. But the ANC was not simply Xuma, and other members besides Marks were involved in the strike. The national Executive committee met during the strike, with Xuma in the chair, mag. gathering which included trade unionists Dan Tloome, Gaha Makabeni and Gosani. The call of the AMWU for all Africans to assist was noted, Xuma stating 'Congress was a national movement fighting side by side with African trade unions for the status of all Africans'. Another meeting on 26

August, after the strike, agreed to give the union financial aid.<sup>19</sup> Moodie suggests that the union delayed the strike for one week to mobilize supporters in the SACP "and ANC to print and distribute leaflets, and Meli notes that 'a crucial role was played by CP and ANC members . . . who went out night after night to distribute union leaflets and . . . because of this work, the strike kept spreading'. On the other hand, inside the mines, Moodie has shown that, at least on the East Rand, it was the isibonda that mobilized miners. The ANC annual conference in December

1946 passed an unopposed motion by Cele 'for the fallen men in the African Mine Strike', and another for the 'fallen women of Springs'.

The fact that ANC and unions were 'organizationally distinct, each with separate membership, leadership and interests', should not be seen as unusual. They had different *raison d'être*. If the ANC had been more closely involved it could have been accused of domination. What is important is that cooperation between the two groups did increase, that worker membership of the ANC increased, and that the strike accelerated these processes. Marks, asked about the level of ANC support for the union, stated:

No, there was no support. Just because of not having been oriented towards the trade (union) movement . . . I didn't keep them well informed. There was not a regular report as to what developments were taking place in the trade union field . . . they also had to rely just on the atmosphere that was created.

Yet once the strike was on, the SACP 'were on the spot and so with the members of the ANC it was all hands on deck . . . they were all there'. Marks seems to be saying that the ANC was not involved in union affairs, but expressed solidarity in struggle. Characterization of the ANC as simply 'middle class' must come to terms with these facts,

A Worker-ANC Dialogue? Some Case Studies

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The ANC's 194 African Claims was drawn up by a committee of twenty-eight, including Xuma, Rev. James Calata, businessman Baloyi, journalist Richard Godlo, and the radicals Kotane, Mbeki, Mofutsanyana and Makabeni. It spoke of the right of self-determination of Africans in the face of the peculiar circumstances of a politically-entrenched European minority ruling a majority non-European population'. It also called for better labour, welfare and housing conditions, for peace, a Bill of Rights, a common voters roll, full female ANC membership, equal pay, a minimum wage, and union recognition. Xuma's preface referred to the ANC as 'the mass liberation movement'.<sup>20</sup>

The ANC by now was 'profoundly influenced by their economic

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environment and responded to the widespread frustrations and land recognized African emancipation involved more than the organization of the 'middle class'. . . Vigorous trade unions were recognized as an essential means to a just wage structure and a vital support for the 'national movement'.<sup>21</sup> ANC strategy now largely coincided with CPSA and union policies, facilitating ANC-worker unity. Workers active in the ANC/SACP or unions now had no major ideological obstacles to united action, although anti-communism influenced the ANC until the late 1940s. Already by 1945 the ANC had declared that it was:

Looked upon . . . by the broad masses of the African people as a National Liberation Movement . . . It is high time it is realized that our struggle . . . is two fold, not only are we nationally oppressed but we are also economically oppressed . . . It is, therefore, of prime importance that the African National Congress should take up the dual oppression as a whole, marching side by side with the African Trade Unions . . . The Africans and their Trade Unions have no semblance of democratic rights . . . That being the case we are inclined to think that the most important field is the 'INDUSTRIAL ARENA' wherein African Trade Unions have been, and are waging a fairly promising fight but as an isolated group. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the IANCI to co-operate with the Trade Unions and fight the issue as a whole . . . to foster a spirit of national consciousness ; and to propagate the necessity of all Africans in industry to join Trade Unions and the National movement. Congress and the Trade Unions must march together. They are merely different aspects of one and the same movement and objective. All Trade Unionists must become members of Congress so that we can have a Labour Government in the African National Congress. (emphases added)

This is a remarkable document in several respects. It was issued in an official National ANC bulletin in 1945, four years before the

1949 program, and one year before the miners' strike. It specifically identified unions as the most important field of work. It was possibly written by Dan 'I'loome; it had earlier appeared as a memorandum to Xuma under his name, although it may have been a joint work. However, it is inconceivable that Xuma did not know or approve its contents. Here is clear evidence that important ANC leaders identified closely with the workers.

/ HIE Dhlomo noted that 'of recent years the political struggle

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has been given a new impetus by organized African labour today the African is turning to the weapon of economics. . . for to him it is a question of survival'. The way in which black workers and unions approached ANC leaders also shows the dose interrelationship felt by both sides. CR Masekela, Secretary of the Bantu Trained Nurses Association wrote to ZK Matthews of the ANC and Natives Representative Council member, about discrimination against black nurses. Martin Ncayo of Craddock, employed by the Railways, wrote that:

We blacks, work 10 hours a day while Europeans... take turns in resting at our expense. . . We have no holidays . . . if you feel unwell and stay away from work, you are immediately dismissed... We have no houses in which to live... We live in tin shanties... We don't know what pay we can get per hour. We can not ask any questions for fear of being dismissed?

Had he first contacted the union, or was that considered dangerous? Why then write to an ANC/NRC leader unless workers felt the ANC in' some way represented their interests? Albert Luthuli had worked as a teacher, and in 1950 drew attention to legislative barriers to African workers 'limited by state legislation and general attitudes of racial prejudice to the category of unskilled worker', disadvantaged from the start by poor nutrition and low wages which barely covered family expenditure. This sort of awareness of industrial issues by nationalist leaders of the AN C has been given too little attention. The 1949 AN C Program of Action referred explicitly to the need for 'consolidation of the industrial organization of the workers for the improvement of their standard of living'.<sup>24</sup>

In 1952 the Defiance Campaign was launched and the ANC was again moving amongst workers, but this time on a much larger scale. The mass approach resulted in a swelling of Congress ranks, from an estimated 7,000 to 100,000, particularly in the Eastern Cape where membership was put at 60,000. Port Elizabeth Africans called for a general strike, and at the regional conference of the ANC at New Brighton in 1952, with delegates representing 30,682 members, condemned the City Council for suppressing African unions and the ANC. Walter Sisulu addressed Port Elizabeth ANC supporters in 1954, stressing the

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pivotal role of black workers:

There is no need for me to tell you about the disabilities of the African people. You know that thousands are arrested every week under the notorious pass laws . . . living below the bread level because of low wages . . . We say to the Minister that the lovely homes, the schools . . . of the Euro n children . . . are almost entirely due to the sweat and toil of the African worker. Born in 1912, in a poor rural family, Sisulu stands apart from many of the inner core of ANC leaders. He had neither higher education nor professional credentials. He left school at age 15 to work in the mines, cutting rock below ground, and in kitchens and bakeries, before being sacked for leading a bakery strike. At 28 he joined the ANC, apparently after hearing AB Xuma speak. He became prominent in the Youth League, and in 1949 was elected as ANC Secretary-General. He recalls the ICU and Garveyist Wellington movements, strong in the Eastern Cape, as at 'the first time that political ideas began to work in my mind. . . during the Wellington period linked with . . . Garvey'. Personal resentment against the pass laws strengthened his radical nationalist beliefs: 'I think the thing which pushed me, more than anything else, is the question of the pass laws \_ that irritated me right from the beginning'. However, when a gold miner on the Rand, he and other miners generally did not know about the ANC, indicating its remoteness, or inaccessibility, to the world of miners. Yet lack of education was not an obstacle to class or national consciousness:

When I was fired from my job as a baker's 'boy', it was not necessary for me to read a book to understand that what I was experiencing was national oppression. When I was assaulted on

the job, I did not need a degree to know that this was gross injustice . . . we did not accept the history that was taught to us. I remember in standard one being taught that Shaka was a murderer. But this was not what we understood from the lesson. Our understanding was that he united the Zulu people.<sup>25</sup>

A few months later, along with other ANC leaders, he was banned. 'Despite all this', he wrote, (the) 'movement is growing in strength, gaining new adherents and reaching new levels of effectiveness'. Nelson Mandela asserted trade union and worker

rights, noting 'ties between the working people and the Congress have been greatly strengthened', urging members 'if you are not allowed to have your meetings publicly, then you must hold them over your machines in the factory, on the trains and buses'.<sup>26</sup> There is thus evidence of growing worker-ANC dialogue.

Some African wage earners were motivated to join the ANC by their work experiences.<sup>27</sup> Alfred Nzo qualified as a health inspector in 1951, the same year that he joined the ANC. 'As a health inspector I was brought face to face with the conditions under which the African people lived, and having known that there was an organization which concerned itself with their suffering, I became a member'. Mary Ranta had been a herd-girl, then a 'tea lady' at the Pretoria mint, and a typist for the African Iron and Steel Workers Union in 1946, becoming a union organizer in 1949. The previous year she had joined the ANC, apparently after watching a huge Congress demonstration. This may have led her to become an active unionist. A common slogan of the period, popularized by Luthuli, but preceding him, was for every unionist to join the ANC, and vice versa. Wulf Sachs' psycho-portraits of John Chavafambira, an African nyanga (doctor) who turned to political activism after experiencing deep alienation, and Tshakada, a well-educated clerk, describing himself as a 'New African', show how office workers and others were swept up in the mass movement. Politicized by the 1945 Johannesburg bus boycott Chavafambira 'was no more merely a nyanga . . . I had become an effective propagandist . . . addressed small groups', and joined the protests of Mpanza, whilst Tshakada attended SACP and ANC meetings.

In some cases unionism can clearly be identified as a reason for people to affiliate themselves to the ANC. Eric Mtshali became a factory worker in the Lion matches factory in Durban and was active in campaigns on behalf of the Freedom Charter. Mtshali was a dock worker in Durban from the early fifties, at age 18, joining the dockers' union after encouragement by the radical Wilson Cele. He recalls that 'on the docks there were Indian workers, but it was mainly African unions on the docks at the time. But in Durban there is . . . a big group of the Indian The ANC and Black Workers 297 working class. I must say in the 50's the Indian working class was very active and revolutionary'.

He did not immediately join a union on the docks, and adds that it was not strikes that determined his early political consciousness but the personal role of Cele. 'When I joined the unions it was through this comrade and he was the one who shaped my political thinking . . . he was my political mentor'. When first introduced to ANC politics, it did not appeal to me, because it was speaking of freedom which was a little far from my problems as a worker . . . a little bit abstract . . . as a trade unionist thought my problems were going to be solved immediately because it means going to the boss, asking for higher wages, better conditions of work . . . But with the encouragement and education that I got from this comrade . . . and of course with Othrylater, it became clear to me that trade unionism was not a solution to the problems of South Africa. It was at that time that I decided to join the ANC. It was 1953, I think, or 1954.

He joined the Clermont branch, 'a very big one and . . . mainly working class . . . it was not very difficult to organize the ANC in Clermont because the same people . . . we were organizing to join the ANC were the same workers who were in the unions'. Luthuli was also an important influence. Though he was a Christian . . . he had extraordinary qualities of combining Christians and Communists, workers and other sections of the population. I remember his call . . . that every ANC member must be a trade unionist, and every trade unionist must be a member of the ANC, and he went on to say SACP is the spear and ANC is the shield. And that call . . . did not only help to build the ANC, but SACP is as well. It also cemented the relationship between ANC



and SACT U to an extent that you can hardly find a person, even those days, who would say I'm a member of the ANC, a worker but not a trade unionist, or that I'm a trade unionist but I'm not in the ANC'.

Mark Shope, born in 1919, a herd-boy in Letaba village near Tzaneen in the northern Transvaal, son of a rail worker, supported his family from the age of seven until all the family cattle died during the depression. He recalls 'we used to make our living by going along picking bones along the river . . . and

then you get a packet of mealie meal'. He 'had no chance of going to school' and began working as a farm labourer, earned 3/ 6 a month, picking oranges and watering oranges trees, then as a kitchen worker. He took part in his first strike at the age of sixteen, and worked in the gold mines from 1935-39, experiencing the 'ruthless regimented' compounds and indunas, with no complaints avenue. Shope then worked in the railways, and for the Johannesburg City Council in 1940. In 1941 he was employed as a messenger in the Director General of War Supply. After the war he was a laundry worker, becoming an organizer for the Laundry Workers Union, then union chairman in 1952, the same year that he was inspired by the Defiance Campaign to join the ANC, later becoming General Secretary of SACTU. This was the same period, and appears to be the same sort of influence that influenced Maboee, as noted above. Shope was in a mine strike in 1935 'but it didn't mean anything to me'. By the time of a laundry strike in May 1946, and the miners' strike of August, 'for the first time I became aware of what was happening . . . beginning to understand . . . what life is all about and he recalls attending the miners' strike meeting. His awakening was probably related to the radical political traditions of the laundry union, but he states that it was 'only after the Nationalist Party came to power that most people began to realize that now we are faced with a real enemy and we must fight'.

This suggests that strikes, per se, do not necessarily precipitate a change in political consciousness, but that it is the interaction of political forces with economic struggles that are more likely to induce changed thinking. Although more advanced, more politically conscious sections of the labour movement may have been aware of the gambits of Smuts and the creation of false consciousness about union recognition amongst Africans, it took a major political shock to rouse large numbers. Although Shope's evidence may well be coloured by a desire to justify the Congress Alliance, his recollection is that: From the trade union point of view, the African trade unions, since their very inception in 1919 . . . have never found themselves separated from the main political, or immediate, goal, that is of joining hands with the ANC. It is true that at certain stages, the ICU The ANC and Black Workers 299

was so popular among the people that it nearly overclouded (the ANC), but as time went on there was this question of looking at the struggle of South Africa not only from the trade union point of view but also from the national liberation struggle . . . the African trade unions in South Africa had always found themselves on the progressive side of the trade union movement . . . In the 1940s CNETU . . . always fought not only just for higher wages, better working conditions . . . it fought also for the freedom of our people, that is, it was in line with the national liberation movement, the African National Congress . . . We believe that the working class has got a role to play in politics and . . . that in any struggle, or in any revolution, the outcome . . . in history has always depended on what role the working class is playing. Whether it plays a passive role . . . or it always plays a real political role . . . After all, what is politics if it's not so that you have to eat, if it's not the roof under which you have to sleep, the clothes you've got, the education of the children. These affect the workers daily.

After finishing only primary school, John Nkadameng, born in Sekhukhuneland in 1925, was a domestic worker in Germiston. Becoming a factory worker in Johannesburg he lived in a hostel and recalls where he read Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* (1948). He took a job in a tobacco factory where he experienced harsh conditions and strikes, joining the Tobacco Workers' Union in 1950, and, following another strike for wages, the ANC: 'I was shop steward. We were vomitted by our factory'. Others were re-employed but he and the union secretary were arrested, and then sacked in 1952. He became a CNETU organizer, then first National Organizer, and General Secretary of SACTU. Stephen Dlamini, born in 1913, was at first a teacher, but as a result of discrimination left his teaching job and also stopped

going to church. 'When I left my schooling, I became a teacher, and then because of the exploitation of teachers and so on and so forth, then I decided to go and work in a garage in Durban'. In the 1930s he was selling petrol in the Transvaal and Free State. Later he became a factory worker in the textile industry, helping create the African Textile Workers' Union, of which he was eventually chairman. He was also active in the Municipal and Milling Workers' Union. In 1954 he was elected to the ANC Natal executive in 1954:  
In fact I created the union and got the comrades in the industry

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together . . . a hard job, getting together, to fight the employers for  
higher wages... We used to also have loutl newspapers, arty  
newspapers... lbecame a member of the CP in Durban in 19 5  
I stayed in the textile industry until I got to Robben Island, for 29  
or 28 years.

He is clearcut on the relationship between workers and the ANC,  
in fact the workers were 100% behind the ANC, behind the  
Defiance Campaign, behind the Revolution, because they were  
conscious of the fact that there could be no freedom unless you  
get rid of the bourgeoisie in South Africa'.

Ben Baartman joined the ANC the year after the 1946 mine  
strike, at the age of 23, while working in Worcester. He suggests  
there was flexibility in the ANC, that 'if you couldn't pay (dues),  
you still got the (ANC) membership card'. He later became a  
textile worker and joined the Textile Workers' Industrial Union,  
which worked closely with the ANC. 'The ANC and TWIU  
didn't have separate ways of working. You would find that the  
leaders in the trade union were also leaders in the ANC... In  
Worcester you could not separate a trade unionist and an ANC  
member'.

Another poorly educated worker was former herd-boy,  
Greenwood Ngotyana, born in 1922, who did not pass standard  
6 until aged 20. He later worked as a rail labourer in Cape Town,  
and organized for the Non-European Railway and Harbour  
Workers' Union. In 1951 he was assistant secretary of the  
Western Cape ANC, as well as being secretary of the Cape  
Western Advisory Boards and Vigilance Associations.

The list can be expanded- with case after case. Alpheus  
Maliba, the son of a peasant, was born in 1901 in the northern  
Transvaal, became a factory worker in Johannesburg in 1935 but  
maintained close links with the rural areas. He founded the  
Zoutpansberg Cultural Association and the rural sister-  
organization, Zoutpansberg Balemi Association. Joining the  
\_SAClLin 1936 after contact with the party night school, he edited  
Mbofolowo, the Venda language section of InkululekoQHe was  
also a leader of the ANC. Pious Mei, born in 1912, joined the  
ANC in 1936, went on to become a leader of the African Textile  
Workers's Union and of the Natal ANC in the 1950s. Peter  
Nthite, born 1929, son of a labourer, worked as a driver after  
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leaving school, joining the ANC in the 1952 Defiance Campaign.

#### Conclusion

From its inception, the development of the ANC has been  
entwined with the aspirations of the black workers of South  
Africa. Characterizations of the ANC leadership as petit-  
bourgeois do not tell the whole story. Without the support of  
workers the ANC could not have become a mass movement. Its  
aspirations to dominate the political landscape of 'the new South  
Africa' likewise depend on its continued ability to attract support  
from workers. A w ,5, ,h s: \_ . 41

#### Notes

1 The ANC was then the South African Native National Congress  
(SANNC).

See C Tim, 17 December 1929; P. Walshe. The Rise of Afrtcan

2 Natiorgleism in S oath Africa : the African National Congress 1912:1952

(London: Hurst. 1971), p. 243 ; P. ka 1. Seme, The fifrican National

Con 5: Is it Dead? (s.n.:n.d. lca.19331) In Carter Kans

Collection (henceforth CKC), reel 14A, pp.51-4,h&\_ruhis Surion-t

Congress Clubs and Ensure Employment', K'Ugntetghwa Ban 10

November 1934,) in which he supports Congress Clubs to

'encourage all Native business enterprises (and) help the

Native shopkeeper, the hawker and the pedlars ... The chefs Will

be able to get their motor cars more cheaply we shouki always

remember that it is the duty of the Congress to. satisfy the

Minister of Native Affairs of our good intentions'. Little wonder that radicals such as Gilbert Coka gave the ANC a Wide berth at this time; I. G. Coka, 'Congress Wash-Out', Umsebenzi 25 Aug. 1934, counted 12 participants at one ANC conference session; Umsebenzi 25 April 1930; Abantu-Batho 30 April 1931. . 256-263. See . Gomas, 100 Years of 'Emancipation .of 3 y\$??535ash the Chains of Slavery! (a Call to National 6! Scan! Emancipation) (Cape Town : CPSA , 1934), pp.5, 9, 15-16; D: Musson, Johnny Gomas: Voice of the Working Class (Cape Town . Buchu, 1989) pp. 88-94; R.Alexander, 'Johnny Gomas as I Knew Him', South African Labour Bulletin, 15 (1991): pp.80-83; J. Comas, "Now How is this 'Civilised Labour Policy' to be Fought , Umsebenzi , 16 February 1935.

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A.B. Xuma, 'Bridging the Gap Between White & Black in South Africa', paper presented to Conference of European & Bantu Christian Student Associations, Fort Hare, 27 June-3 July 1930 (Lovedale : Lovedale Press, n.d.): 'when one complains Native wages in the mines are low one is, at once, told that the Native miner receives more wages in kind However when the Native worker becomes a phthisis victim, the wages in kind are never included in compensation'; Evidence to Native Economic Commission, 22 May 1931, Xuma, Evidence Given Before the Kaffir Beer Commission, September 1941 (5.1: n.d.), p.66Xuma

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k Papers/(henceforth XP) reel 2 ; Africans were 'working for the same wage in cash or in kind as was paid my father some fifty years ago', p.2. Xuma experienced the rigours of manual work when a student in the U.S.; 1. Burger, (Leo Marquardl, The Black Man's Burden (London : Collancz, 1943), p.210.

Umlindi we Nyanga 15 March 1939 ; speech of a 'Bantu delegate to a Conference held at Adams College in Natal' cited in CF. Miles-Cadman, Socialism for South Africa (Johannesburg: SA Labour Party, 1941D, p.97.

Interview by Sheridan Johns, April 1964, in CKC reel 2:XM42:94. T. Moll, 'Did the Apartheid Economy "Fail"', Iqumal of South African Studies, 17 (1991), pp.271-291; CPSA fostE.2 for All' (n.d.); CPSAKT FeeroRlle Overflow' (CPSA, n.d.), p.7-8 , ' By 1947/8 Africans' iri manufacturing comprised 308,0 , compared to 210,355 whites and 74, 795 'Coloureds'. Nationwide they comprised 47% of the total manufacturing, 88% of the mining and 92% of the farming work force. Over all, urban Africans were about 23.1% of the national African population in 1946, up from 12.5% in 1921: see Report of the Industrial Legislation Commission of Enquiry (U.C. 62-51) (Botha Commission), pp. 7-11, 18; Union of South Africa. Population Census, 7 May 1946, v. 1 p. 39. SB. Ngcobo, The Response of Africans to Industrial Employment'. Race Relations Journal, 21 (1954), pp.10-17 noted an increase of urban African women from 147,000 in 1921 to 357, 000 in 1936, and 642,000 in 1946. B. Hirson, Yours for the Union (London: Zed. 1989), chapter 12; P. Bonner 'The Politics of Black Squatter Movements on the Rand, 1944-1952', Radical History Review, no.46/7 (1990), pp.89-1164) Features of the Grievances Regarding the Passenger Transport Operating between Alexandra Township 8: the City of Johannesburg: Specially Presenting the Women's Case Is.n., n.d.1, in XP reel 10, also noted in Hirson, pp.13&41 ;A.B. Xuma, Memorandum of Evidence on Behalf of the Residents of Alexandra Township 27 September? 43, XP, reel 10.

Toussaint', IpseudJ, A Distant Clap of Thunder (London: The ANC and Black Workers 303

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Inkululeko, 1986), p.1.

F. Meli. South Africa Belongs to Us: a History of the ANC (London: Currey. 1988), pp.103-4: 'the ANC played a crucial role in establishing the union, with the active participation of a number of communists'.

M. Scott, A Time to Speak (London: Faber, 1958), p.115 ;Transvaal African Congress, Circular letter of Gaur Radebe, Secretary for Mines, 9 June 1941, re 'African Mine Workers' in CKC reel 3B 2:DA21:41/1; letter of Committee to Organize African Mineworkers to Smuts, 12 Sept. 1941, signed by Radebe and A. Msitshana, annexure B to AMWU Evidence. XP reel 4; CR.

Diamond, 1Afn'can Labour Problems on the South African Gold Mines with Special Reference to the Strike of 1946'. MA. thesis, University of Cape Town 1969, p.114.

A.B. Xuma, ANC, Evidence Given Before the Native Mine Wages Commission July 13 1943 on Behalf of the ANC, pp. 9-17, XP reel 4 ; The interests of the ANC and the SACP in the mine

workers were not entirely new although the vigour  
unionization was pursued was unprecedented' the  
Transvaal ANC was 'less inclined towards parliamentary  
politics, partly because blacks never had the vote in the  
Transvaal and partly because the gold mines were such an  
overwhelming reality for most blacks'; W. James, 'From  
Segregation to Apartheid: Miners and Peasants in the Making of a  
Racial Order. South Africa 1930-1952', Ph.D. University of Wisconsin,  
1982, pp.64, 94-98; L.P. Hendricks, 'From Moderation to  
Militancy: a Study of African leadership 6: Political Reactions in  
South Africa, 1936-1960', Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1983, pp.  
3, 8-9; Xuma, Evidence to the Interdepartmental Committee of  
Enquiry Concerning Economic, Health & Social Conditions of  
Africans in Urban Areas, 11 Oct. 1941, XP reel 6.  
Notes of interview by S. Johns, April 1964, pp. 12-13, in CKC reel  
2:XM42:94. In an earlier interview with the late Cwendolen  
Carter, Marks stated that the union reached a maximum of 20,000  
members, enrolling members by the lights of police cars. AK.  
Brooks. 'From Class Struggle to National Liberation: the Communist  
Party of South Africa, 1940 to 1950'. M.A. thesis, Sussex University.  
1967, p.71 suggests the ANC was incapable of launching the  
AMWU alone.  
ANC (Transvaal). Report of the Provincial Secretary to the  
Annual Provincial Conference, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1 1945, p. 2, in CKC  
reel 313, 2:DA21 :30 / 3.  
Letters: Majoro to Xuma, 30 May 1942, XP reel 3 ; Xuma to  
Njozala, 30 June 1943 ; reply by Njozala 4 July 1943, XP reel 4,

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who estimated a miner could only save 618 a year on their current wage of 2/- per shift.

AB. Xuma, Evidence to the Natives Mine Wages Commission, in X1), reel 5. Xuma sent a form letter to African contacts regarding mine conditions. One reply was from induna Daniel Denalane of the Robinson Deep Mine, who on the question of sexuality claimed 'every Shangaan youngster leaving his fathefs home to work on the Mine is destined to be a 'wife' Faction fights have been known to be caused by this filthy thing'; letter to Xuma, 25 June 1943, in XP. Ieel5.

See letter Michael Scott to Xuma, 3 September 1943, XP reel 3; E. Gunner, 'Literature and Apartheid', in J. Lonsdale (ed.), South 174frxca zn Question? (London : Currey, 1988), pp.217-233, pp. 221- T. Dunbar Moodie, "The Moral Economy of the Black Miners' Strike of 1946," Journal of Southern African Studies, 13 (1986). pp.1-18, 33.

Interview, Apartheid, producer Brian lapping (Granada TV, 1986), with permission (transcripts ICS archives). Strike Bulletin of the AMWLI , 4 (15 August 1946), pp.1-2; Cape TIMES 16 August 1946; Hirson, pp.178-9: Xuma 'was not a keen supporter of trade unions and wanted funds for the ANC from the Bantu Welfare Trust, which had connections with the Chamber of Mines' (p.170) ; ANC. National Executive Working Committee Minutes, 13 August 1946, in S.M. Molema Papers, ICS (M842); Moodie, p.31. .

ANC. g 'gicngngms (1943), pp. i-ii, 54, 9, 15-16. The ANC Produ 80;000'&:opies of African Claims, costing 2160.15/ - ; invoice 2 September 1944, Xuma Papers, reel 8. Walshe, pp.275-77, E4, 307, 320.

The ANC & the African Trade Unions', ANC Bulletin, I19451, XP reel 10 ; Hirson, pp. 116,121. See also, D. Tloome, The African National Congress & African Trade Unions In.d.l handwritten meln'gorandum to (AB. Xumal President- General ANC, in XP, ree .

H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'The African Artist & Society', Ilanga lase Natal '5 March 1949, in NW. Visser (ed.), 'H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory & Criticism', in English in Africa, 4 (1977), pp.71-72;; letters to Z. K. Matthews 14 April 1944, 30 December 1942, in ZK." Matthews Papers ICS Archives (M932) 8.1.1.

AJ. Luthuli, 'The Policy of the State in the Union of South Africa Hmders the African from Making His Fullest Possible Contribution to the Development of the Country', Mss. of address to Pietermaritzburg City Parliamentary Debating The ANC and Black Workers 305

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Society, 25 September 1950, pp.7-8, in Luthuli Papers ; statement by G. Mzamane, D. W. Bopape, Bloemfontein, 17 December 1949 in H. Joseph, If This Be Treason (London: Deutsch, 1963), pp.185-7. Walshe, p . 402-3 ;Advance, 6 November 1952 ; Speech Delivered by W.M. isulu, Secretary-General of ANC, (Port Elizabethl, 28 March 1954, in CKC, reel 14A; WalterMax Ulyate Sisulu (London: SATIS, 1982), pp. 6-8 ; N. Cordimer, 'Walter Sisulu' Ia biographical essay) in CKC, reel 14A. He 'did not go beyond standard two', W. Sisulu, The Road to Liberation (30th University of Cape Town T.B. Davie Memorial Lecture, 1990), p.3 ; 'Walter Sisulu : a Leader Rooted in Challenging Racism', New Nation, 27 October 1989; comment to the author, Perth, 23 August 1991. Statement of W.M. Sisulu, 20 August 1954, in CKC, reel 14A. In the fifties, as Tom Lodge notes, there was little history writing by the ANC; Charters from the Past: the ANC & its Historiographical Traditions'. Radical History Review 46/! (1990). But there was J. A.



Calata's, 'A Short History of the ANC' (1957), mimeo, in ICS Archive, Horm'tch Papers E/SI. This was more a set of notes for Congress members than history, but exhibited two interesting points : that historical tradition was alive in the ANC, and that the move to defiance was seen as having little alternative ; N. Mandela, 'No Easy Walk to Freedom' Inot the book, n.d., ca. 1953, pp. 5-6 mimeo, in CKC, reel 2: XM33z84/2.

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