

HISTORY 8

TOWARDS the end of 1915, the most advanced white socialists, led by David Ivon Jones and Sidney Percival Bunting, began to urge upon the newly-formed International Socialist League that it should pay attention to the needs of the Africans.

The chief obstacle they had to overcome was the fear of most Transvaal socialists that any recognition of the African as an equal would doom the ISL to stagnation as a small 'debating-society' without influence among the white workers. In the Transvaal, where the white socialists had identified themselves with Labour's colour-bar policies, they had become a power in the trade union movement. And their policies seemed to be justified by the fact that the white workers had engaged in a series of militant struggles against the bosses.

On the other hand, where, as in Cape Town and Durban, the socialists had refused to go along with the white-labour policy, they had shrunk into small and unimportant bodies.

To turn against the colour bar meant to lose all influence with the white workers and, this, in the eyes of most white socialists, was to cut oneself off from the entire labour movement.

The African proletariat was still relatively very weak and it was most difficult for a white trade unionist to visualise a labour movement based on the Africans. In a few years time, with the meteoric rise of Clement Kadalie's great Industrial and Commercial Union, the Africans were to demonstrate how great a force they were, but, until they saw it happening, there were few white trade union leaders indeed who believed it possible.

Not Marxists

An advanced socialist—one who knew something of dialectical materialism and of political economy—would have understood the inevitability of the rapid growth of the African proletariat. But it must be clearly understood that the men who formed the new War-on-War League and then the ISL were not advanced Marxists. They were socialists of many hues—fabians, co-operators, syndicalists, anarchists and a host of others including those who were pacifists and conscientious objectors rather than socialists. They were outside the mainstream of socialist theoretical ferment then taking place in Europe, and being in the main new immigrants, were not sufficiently inside the mainstream of South African life to enable them to make any fundamental theoretical contributions as South African socialists.

On the war issue, however, every man who was a sincere socialist—no matter what brand of socialism it was—stood united. And as a result, the very thing which the militants had so feared, came to pass.

The anti-war socialists were stripped of all power in the white labour movement. They became a small, isolated group. The white workers broke up their public meetings, tore up their newspapers and reviled them.

THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO WOULD LISTEN TO THE SOCIALIST SPEAKERS WERE THE AFRICAN AND COLOURED WORKERS.

But even so the old ways died hard. At the first conference of the ISL in January 1916 Bunting moved a resolution (called "Petition of Rights for the Native"): "That this League affirm that the emancipation of the working class requires the abolition of all forms of Native indenture, compound and passport systems; and the lifting of the Native workers to the political and industrial status of the white."

Opposition

A delegate tried to delay the decision by moving that the matter be referred to a committee and one of the ISL leaders, Colin Wade, put forward "biological evidence" on the inferiority of the Africans. When this proposal to delay the decision was defeated, Wade moved the addition of a clause that the ISL would, until the African's status had been so lifted, endeavour "to prevent the increase of the African population."

Socialists Learn

This meeting coming within weeks of the ISL resolution to 'prevent the increase of the Native wage workers' served to reveal dramatically to the more advanced socialists the nonsense of their resolution. The Land Act had killed any illusions anyone might have about keeping the working-class 'white.'

The contact was showing that the white socialists had at least as much to learn from the black congressmen as the ANC had to learn from them.

In an article on Father Hill's lecture, Bunting declared:

"Perhaps if Marx had lived today in Johannesburg he would have founded his International Association of Working Men, not on the well-paid craft unionists who themselves batten on Native labour and form the 'Federation,' but rather on such class conscious elements as he could find among the black workers, who groan under a hundred special and serious disabilities of their own, in addition to those attaching to all workers—disabilities which naturally hinder them from joining up with the white; and hinder the white from linking with them, who form the bulk of the South African proletariat."

Now the role of the African worker became a regular editorial theme in the International. An editorial in March 1916 explained what folly it was for socialists to fight to keep the African worker out. It would require as much power to keep the African out as it would to smash capitalism. "But we have learnt that we cannot deliver any serious blow against capitalism without the co-operation of the kaffir."

On social relations, however, the white socialists had not yet broken free. An "International" article spoke of "an ethnological tendency... which makes for the natural apartness of white and black." Capitalism had "tampered" with this and brought them together. Socialists by destroying capitalism would allow natural apartness to reassert itself, said an editorial after May Day 1916. "The way to healthy social segregation is through industrial co-operation."

ANC Speaker

In June an African addressed a Johannesburg socialist meeting for the first time. ANC leader Robert Grendon, editor of the Congress organ Abantu-Batho spoke to the ISL on "The link between black and white." There were a large number of Africans present.

The Africans startled the ISL stalwarts by proposing that the meeting begin with a motion of condolence at the recent death of one of the Allied field marshals. Jones, who was in the chair, turned the proposal down.

Saul Msane, in his contribution to the discussion said that the important thing was to educate the white workers. "The trade unions had been formed to fight the Natives. Let them remove restrictions and the Natives would join the unions."

This was greeted with loud approval. "which these meetings produce in the mind," Jones wrote, "must be the hilarity and good feeling due to the fact that socialism is beginning to right a great wrong."

The Grendon meeting was roundly condemned in the daily papers. One Labour Party MPC called for the deportation of the socialists for telling the Africans to organise.

The Indians

The ISL now began to consider for the first time the position of the Indians in South Africa, too. S. G. Rich, a socialist attorney addressed the League on "Production for Profit and the Natal Coolie" and "The barbarities to which the Indians in Natal were treated prior to their great kick in 1913," were enlarged upon in the discussion by Mr. Polak. The discussion lost much of its interest the International reported, "through lack of information as to the present condition of the Indian Coolie, his habits of thought, custom, ambition, and what is most important to the so-

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The resolution as amended—Bunting and Jones appear to have accepted the amendment—was carried by an overwhelming majority, and Socialist theory, after a momentary grab at the sun, fell back into Alice-in-Wonderland.

Even so, the International recorded, "There were some misgivings on the result of the debate... the misgivings arose from the inclusion of 'political rights' in the status which Native workers should aim at."

Nevertheless the resolution was a go-ahead signal for those who were trying to turn white socialist attention towards the Africans, and February 1916 saw a landmark in the history of the liberatory movement—the first coming together in the Transvaal of the white socialists and the African National Congress.

The occasion was a socialist meeting on the Land Act addressed by one of Father Huddleston's predecessors of the Community of the Resurrection, Father Francis Hill.

He, correctly, described the Act as being aimed at driving the Africans out to work for the whites.

Present at the meeting was Saul Msana, a leading figure in the ANC and one of the delegates sent by them in 1913 to protest against the Act. With him were several other ANC leaders.

Msane told the meeting that so strictly was the ANC observing its pledge not to criticise the government for the duration of the war that he did not feel that he should say anything about the Act.

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By the middle of 1916 the policy of the ISL as expressed through the International was firmly established as one of solidarity with the Africans as fellow workers in a common struggle, although a beginning had not yet been made to the finding of effective means of putting the policy into effect by the recruiting of African members.

In 1917 the Native Administration Bill was introduced to place the Africans at the mercy of the Native Affairs Department, without recourse to the courts. The Governor-General was given powers, by proclamation, to make laws affecting almost every aspect of the life of the Africans.

The ISL called a protest meeting in March in the Trades Hall, a historic meeting, for it was the first political action taken by the

socialists on a matter not directly linked with the white workers—a political protest against a law affecting the Africans.