

Perspectives

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Reflections on Race and Anarchism in South Africa, 1904-2004

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By *Lucien van der Walt*

The development of an anti-authoritarian response to racial domination and white supremacy is among the most urgent tasks facing anarchists today. We must create of a much more expansive vision of what anarchism can be and also reevaluate the movement's past in light of this imperative.

The following article by IAS grant recipient Lucien van de Walt explores the encounter of South African anarchists with white supremacy.

The South African anarchist tradition provides an interesting case study of anarchist approaches to the question of racial inequality and oppression under capitalism. In modern South Africa, capitalist relations of exploitation were built upon colonial relations of domination. This complex articulation of race and class was a question that South African anarchists continually faced. This paper will examine how both the classical anarchist movement of the first two decades of the twentieth-century, and the contemporary movement of the 1990s, dealt with the racial question.

Racial Questions

From the start of industrialization in the 1880s—spurred by gold discoveries in the Witwatersrand region—until the reform period of the 1970s, South African capitalism was structured on racial lines. There were, in effect, two sharply differentiated sectors of the working class in South Africa.

African workers, roughly two thirds of the workforce, were concentrated in low wage employment, were typically unskilled, and were employed on contracts that amounted to indenture and in which strikes were criminalized. The typical African mine and industrial worker was a male migrant who worked on contract in urban areas before returning to the rural village in which his family resided and farmed. Urban amenities for Africans were minimal—before the 1950s, for example, urban schooling was conducted by churches—state policy neither permitted African workers to vote nor to permanently reside outside the tribal “homelands.” Partly in order to enforce this an internal passport system—the “pass laws”—was applied to African men.

White workers dominated higher paying jobs, were often skilled artisans, and were typically resident in (segregated) urban family housing. Enjoying basic political and civil rights, they were able to change employment fairly easily, to unionize, and the right to strike was grudgingly conceded in the 1920s. However, a large and unskilled “poor White” population (largely drawn from ruined Afrikaner peasant farmers) also existed well into the 1960s.

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Between these two main fractions were workers of the Colored (“mixed race”) and Indian minorities. Like the Whites they were fully proletarianized. Largely urbanized by the 1930s, they enjoyed better public amenities than Africans and had basic trade union rights. Like the Africans, however, they were largely excluded from skilled trades, and, if not excluded, were not paid the going rate; their trading and residential areas and their amenities were also segregated.

Official State ideology centered on the notion of racial difference: at times constructed around notions of biological inequality, at times around notions of inherent cultural difference, and, specifically, of civilized Western versus barbaric African culture. This justification of the social order resonated with the White working class. Precisely because African labor was cheap and unfree, there were continual attempts by employers to expand its spheres of African employment: where skilled trades were deskilled by mechanization, attempts were made to replace White artisans with cheap semi-skilled Africans; where jobs were unskilled, the “poor Whites,” with union rights and the vote, fared poorly in competition with the unfree Africans.

Fear of African replacement, an industrial “Black Peril,” infused the early trade unions, which were established by Whites workers; this fear was an important theme in labor disputes into the 1980s. These unions generally adopted a “White Labourite” position: color

bars in membership, support for segregation, and demands for job reservation. The “poor Whites,” concentrated in cheap but multi-racial urban slums before the 1940s, were in a contradictory situation: similar material conditions led to some social integration, and grave official concern about miscegenation; unemployment and competition for jobs generated bitter racial antagonism and sometimes flared into race riots. For their part, African workers regarded organized White labor with suspicion, and resented their own status. When trade unionism emerged amongst Africans in the late 1910s, it was generally racially exclusive and its demands were deeply colored by racial grievances.

The effect was the development of a bifurcated labor movement. White and African trade unions developed along separate lines: sometimes hostile, a sometimes allied, but almost never integrated prior to the 1990s. The Colored and Indian workers hovered between these two main worlds of labor: occasionally accepted into the White labor movement, albeit on unequal terms, these minorities were also forced downwards towards the African workers by racism. Their consciousness often reflected their status, with antagonism towards White labor often coupled with hostility towards Africans.

Early Anarchist Answers

The first anarchist active in South Africa was Henry Glasse, an Englishman who lived in the small coastal town of Port Elizabeth from 1881, from where he corresponded with London anarchist circles, translated works by Peter Kropotkin, wrote for Kropotkin’s *Freedom*, and distributed anarchist pamphlets.

It was in Glasse’s work that the first traces of an local anarchist approach to South Africa’s racial question appear. The first step Glasse took was to reject a civilized / barbaric distinction; the second was explicit opposition to the oppression of Africans. In a November 1905 letter to *Freedom* he argued that “I would rather live amongst” the Africans “than amongst many who call themselves ‘civilized,’ for you can “still find amongst them the principle of Communism—primitive Communism” and deep “brotherly love.” Yet the Africans were brutally “robbed and ill-treated”:

They must not walk on the pavement, but in the middle of the road. They must not ride in cabs or tram, and in the trains there are separate compartments for them, just like cattle trucks. They must have passes a la Russia, and are allowed to live only in the ‘location,’ those Ghettos set aside for them. They are not allowed to be on the streets after 9 P.M., in the land that was once their own—their Fatherland!

Glasse soon took a third step: the application of anarchist internationalism to South African labor through the rejection of “White Labourism.” In the *Voice of Labour*, the first socialist weekly in twentieth century South Africa (founded in 1908) he argued: “For a white worker in this South Africa to pretend he can successfully fight his battle independent of the colored wage slaves—the vast majority—is, to my mind, simply idiocy” (26/1/1912).

Color bars, for Glasse, undermined workers' common struggle against the class enemy. Such views were influential in the early radical left, including the revolutionary syndicalist current that emerged around the *Voice of Labour*: a De Leonite group, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and a section of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that was formed in 1910 were openly in favor of interracial unionism. These groups emerged soon after the South African tour of British syndicalist Tom Mann in early 1910. Sponsored by mainstream White trade unions, he annoyed his hosts with calls for workers' solidarity across race: "Whatever number there are, get at them all, and if there are another 170,000 available, white or black, get at them too" (Cope, 1940, *Comrade Bill*, p. 110).

1915 and the New Radicals

However, the local SLP and IWW did not make headway in breaking racial barriers: the SLP confined itself to abstract propaganda; the IWW was focussed on White transport workers in Johannesburg, Pretoria and possibly Durban. Both failed to take a crucial fourth step: combining opposition to racial oppression with trade unionism to *campaign* against racial oppression.

By the end of 1912, the SLP, IWW and *Voice of Labour* were disintegrating and thus did not play an organized role in the strike wave of June 1913 to February 1914, in which a minor dispute on a single mine exploded into a general strike across the Witwatersrand. Led by an unofficial strike committee, the strike ended with riots, the strikers in control of Johannesburg, and government humiliation. It did not, however, resolve grievances, and an attempt at a second strike was made in early 1914: the State was now better prepared and crushed the movement with martial law.

Two things are significant about the period. First, some strike leaders tried to draw African laborers into the strike movement in 1913, most notably George Mason of the strike committee, helping precipitate independent African strike action. Second, the drama and repression of 1913-1914 generated new radicals within the White labour movement. In the South African Labour Party (SALP), the party of the White unions that combined socialism with segregation, a radical faction emerged and was galvanized by a losing battle against SALP support for World War One. Their "War-on-War League" also attracted many SLP and IWW veterans.

Unions and Race

By September 1915 the "War-on-War League" broke all ties with the SALP, launching the International Socialist League (ISL). The ISL advocated an inter-racial unionism and revolutionary syndicalism. Its weekly, the *International*, called for a "new movement" across the "bounds of Craft and race and sex": "founded on the rock of the meanest proletarian who toils for a master" it would be "as wide as humanity" (3/12/1915). From this period, revolutionary syndicalism dominated the radical left, with the ISL the biggest group.

Like the revolutionary syndicalists of the *Voice of Labour* period, the ISL argued for the futility of "White Labourism"; unlike its predecessors, it added that active *struggle* against racial oppression was a crucial anti-capitalist struggle: "If the League deals resolutely in consonance with Socialist principles with the native question, it will

succeed in shaking South African capitalism to its foundations" (*International*, 1/10/1915). The ISL stressed that racial oppression not only divided the working class but was also functional to capital: "cheap, helpless and unorganized" African labour ensured "employers generally and particularly industrial employers, that most coveted plum of modern Imperialism, plentiful cheap labour" (*International*, 18/2/1916).

Finally, it stressed the role of direct action in destroying racial oppression, with particular emphasis on trade unionism. Mason stressed the need to help Africans unionize in order to repeal repressive legislation "by the strength of Trade Unionism" (*International*, 7/5/1916). For the ISL (*International*, 19/10/1917):

Once organized, these workers can bust-up any tyrannical law. Unorganized, these laws are iron bands. Organize industrially, they become worth no more than the paper rags they are written on.

In July 1917, the ISL set up study groups for African workers in Johannesburg, where Andrew Dunbar, former IWW general secretary, played the key role. Police reports note that he spent the first meeting arguing that "the natives who are the working class of South Africa" had to be "organized" and "have rights" like any "white man." In September the study groups became a trade union, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) and the African Trade Union in South Africa.

Other syndicalist unions were established, reflecting the fragmentation of the working class: in Durban, an Indian Workers



Left and right page and cover: "May Day is Ours!" series by a Community Arts Project (now renamed as the Arts and Media Access Centre) printmaker, Cape Town, South Africa.



Industrial Union in 1917; in Kimberly, a Clothing Workers Industrial Union and a Horse Driver's Union in 1918 amongst the mainly Colored population; in Cape Town that same year, the Industrial Socialist League (IndSL), an independent syndicalist group, organized (mainly) Colored factory workers into a Sweet and Jam Workers Industrial Union in 1918. In each union, workers of color played the key role, and from the ISL attracted key members such as T.W. Thibedi, Bernard Sigamoney and Johnny Gomas. The ISL and the IndSL also sought to radicalize the White trade unions, but with limited success.

In June 1918, the ISL, ANC and IWA cooperated in organizing an attempted African strike movement, the first of its kind. IWA members active in the ANC played a key role in pushing this moderate group to the left. Although the campaign fell through, eight people—two ISL, three IWA, and two ANC—were prosecuted for public disorder in South Africa's first multi-racial political trial, but acquitted.

In March 1919, the ANC launched a campaign against the pass laws on the Witwatersrand—with IWA members Reuben Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai playing a key role—but it was called off by ANC moderates. Kraai and Cetiwe then moved to Cape Town, setting up the IWA on the docks and working with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). A restructured ICU, incorporating the IWA, would explode across southern Africa in the 1920s, combining endorsement of the IWW *Preamble* with serious levels of internal autocracy, corruption, and political chaos.

After Syndicalism

The Russian Revolution had tremendous effects on the local radical movement. Initially the ISL regarded the Revolution as a confirmation of its syndicalist views: the soviets were “the Russian form of the Industrial Union” (*International* 18/5/1917). Gradually a Leninist position was adopted. The ISL that played the key role in founding the official Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921; the *International* became the CPSA organ.

Some revolutionary syndicalist tendencies remained in the early CPSA but the overall trend was towards acceptance of Communist International directives. Between 1921 and 1924 the CPSA mechanically applied V.I. Lenin's argument that British communists affiliate to the Labour Party in South Africa, by striving to join the SALP: the costs was abandonment of real work amongst workers of color. In 1924, the CPSA turned back to Africans, but in 1928 adopted the Communist International thesis that colonial and semi-colonial countries must pass through a national-democratic stage before socialism was possible. The “Black Republic” approach led the CPSA to focus on reforming the State, on de-racialising capitalism, and, from the 1940s, on building the ANC as the leading nationalist force. The ISL's link between anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle was effectively broken.

From the 1970s, the State sought to remove the most odious features of apartheid: low-wage migrant labor was less economically important, popular struggles centered on African labour unionism and community and student struggles were in upsurge, and the economy was entering crisis. The reform project was overtaken by revolts, leading to the negotiation process that abolished apartheid

and left the ANC with the project of restructuring capitalism to restore profitability.

After Apartheid

In the late 1980s and early 1990s anarchism re-emerged in the mainly White and Indian punk scene, through fanzines such as *Social Blunder* and *Unrest*. The new anarchism was anti-racist, but vague and general: the ANC were distrusted as “new bosses” but no alternative analysis and strategy was presented. Matters changed after the 1994 elections, with the formation of study groups, the rise of a class struggle anarchist current in Durban and Johannesburg, and the formation of a national anarchist organization, the Workers Solidarity Federation's (WSF), with an explicit focus on the African working class.

The first issue of the WSF's *Workers Solidarity* argued that the defeat of legalized apartheid in the 1994 elections was a massive advance, but that a non-racial capitalism would incorporate the African elite without improving working class African conditions. A subsequent issue linked racism to “500 years” of capitalism, arguing that apartheid was primarily an expression of capital's need for cheap labour (*Workers Solidarity*, third quarter 1996). Rejecting the two-stage conception of change, it argued that “the fight against racism is a fight against capitalism and the State” and thus a class struggle.

The WSF was able to transform the racial composition of local anarchism, largely through involvement in student struggles and strike support: at its dissolution in 1999, it was a predominantly African organization. Its general approach to the race question continues to dominate local anarchism, but the WSF stress trade unionism has been largely superseded by interest in the new township movements against the ANC's austerity policies. The WSF's early recognition of the shift towards neoliberalism in post-apartheid South Africa helped provide an analytical bridge between the union and community foci.

Conclusion: In Red and Black

Several conclusions follow from the above discussion. First, the not-too-uncommon view that race is the historic blindspot of anarchism is indefensible. If, for example, within white dominion, within the British Empire, within colonial Africa, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists could play a path-breaking role in organizing workers of color, in defending African labour, in civil rights activities, and do so on the basis of a class struggle and anti-capitalist analysis and strategy, there is much that to be learned from the anarchist past. Their analyses may be context-bound but represent a larger position on the race issue: Cuba, Mexico and Peru are other examples.

Secondly, whilst the anarchist tradition in South Africa has generally been anti-racist, it has best succeeded in incorporating people of color when anti-racist *principle* has become anti-racist *strategies* and activism. The bridge between the two was an *analysis* rooted in the architecture of classical anarchist theory: class struggle, internationalism, anti-statism, anti-capitalism, and opposition to hierarchy. Such tools bear use, if some sharpening; rather than leap to incorporate “whiteness studies,” postmodernism, nationalism and so on into anarchist analyses, the richness of classical anarchist theory rewards examination. ✨