

# The International Socialist League

- DAVID SIMELANE

The proletarianisation of African people which was brought about through the most brutal mass expropriation of our people and colonial plunder, marked the beginning of a new struggle by a class which has been destined by history to lead South Africa to communism, the radiant future of mankind. Karl Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto say:

"All previous historical movements were movements of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air."

The working class to be a class for itself undergoes a lot of metamorphoses, that is from the point of view of numbers and organisation.

## EARLY UNIONS

The working class is educated during the course of exploitation by the bourgeoisie. They learn lessons in factories, in the clubs, associations, trade unions, political parties and during strikes when they find themselves confronted not only by the bourgeoisie alone but by its instruments of power as well.

In South Africa the dramatic transformation caused by mining and industry shook every inch of South Africa. This encouraged a lot of British immigrant workers to come to South Africa. For them this was a blessing because they were to uplift their own economic positions. Some of these immigrant workers started as independent diggers but with time they were thrown into their rightful class positions, i.e. working class, as a result of the inherent competition involved in capitalism.

The British immigrant workers had a lot of advantages over the local workers. They were already seasoned in class battles, and on top of that they came with skills. This monopoly of skills by white workers was to be the policy of racist South Africa in protecting the whites against Africans. The capitalists using this as the main tool to keep white workers away from the class struggle.

gle, making them feel part of the real rulers of South Africa. On the other hand the presence of foreign immigrant workers accelerated the formation of unions.

From as early as the 1880s-1900s some unions started to mushroom. These were the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and Typographical unions, etc. Fuller expression of this was the South African Labour Party (SALP) formed in 1909. The SALP was an all white political body with mixed ideas. Some elements were conservatives like Cresswell and others were foresighted socialists. The progressive wing within the SALP was able to ensure the reflection of socialist views in the constitution and managed to secure affiliation of the SALP to the 2nd International. The main decisive factor was to be the attitude of the SALP towards the oppressed majority. It became clear with time that the right-wing ideas were dominant when this element came into the picture.

In 1913 when the regime passed the Native Land Act, the Labour Party was passive and when the question of admitting Coloureds into the Labour Party was raised there was opposition by the right-wing elements although they failed. In the executive of the Labour Party there were outstanding principled internationalists like W.H. Andrews, Ivon Jones and S.P. Bunting.

### THE WAR YEARS

When the imperialist war broke out in 1914, the SALP remained faithful to resolutions passed at Stuttgart by the International Socialist Congress i.e. anti-imperialist war resolution. This was maintained within the South African Labour Party until the South African government joined the war on the side of Britain and its allies. Like in other countries this brought about a conflict within the Labour Party, sifting the principled socialists from opportunist forces. The socialists formed what was known as the War on War League and in their weekly journal, "The International", they educated the people about the class essence of the war. The struggle within the Labour Party continued between progressive and reactionary forces. When the right-wingers wanted to force candidates to pledge support for an unjust war the internationalists resigned from the Labour Party and ultimately formed in September 1915 the International Socialist League of South Africa (ISL). This was joined by the Socialist Labour Party which was characterised by De Leonite ideas. De Leonism was a distorted version of Marxism popularised by the writings of Daniel De Leon, an American socialist. This

trend denounced all types of parliamentary activity and even desired to boycott craft and trade unions.

## THE ISL

From its inception, the ISL dedicated itself to the struggle of the South African working class, both black and white. It saw the destruction of capitalism in South Africa as inter-linked with the struggle of the oppressed people. The ISL organised Socialist Sunday schools and night classes for the Africans, which were conducted by Ivon Jones, who can also be regarded as the father of the Communist Party of South Africa. These were baptismal schools for the South African working class. In 1916 the First Congress of the ISL adopted a petition of rights, a document that was demanding political, economic and social rights for Africans. 'The Indian Workers' Industrial Union of Durban and the African National Congress shared a platform with the ISL in the 1917 conference. In the same year the ISL fought against the Native Administrative Bill which was aimed at finalising African proletarianisation.

The first trade union organisation for Africans, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) was engineered by the ISL. The slogan used by the IWA then was "Sizi funa zonke" (We want them all). This trade union was later absorbed in 1919 into one of the most powerful trade unions in South Africa at the time, the Industrial Commercial Workers' Union (ICU). An organisation that was to command the following of thousands of workers in South Africa. During the Bucket Strike and the great African miners' strike of 1919 the ISL featured prominently. Leaflets were issued to the white workers, urging them not to scab. Others were meant for the education of the African working class.

## INTERNATIONALISM

The ISL continued to be a revolutionary and consistent internationalist movement. When the world shaking event, the Great October Socialist Revolution, occurred, the ISL took it upon itself to educate the South African working class and all the toiling masses about its significance. Some articles were quoted directly from "Pravda", the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Ivon Jones, who was editor of "The International" wrote under the following title:  
"Dawn of the World";

"What we are witnessing is an unfolding of the world-wide Commonwealth of Labour, which if the oppressed of all lands only knew... would sweep them into transports of gladness. It

is this high ecstasy which animates the Russian people today... Our task in South Africa is a great one. We must educate the people in the principles of the Russian Revolution...". This was the type of spirit in which the pioneers of the CPSA accepted the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution. When in 1920 the Comintern was established, the ISL was amongst the first parties to affiliate and some of the outstanding leaders, Ivon Jones and Sam Barlin, participated in its deliberations.

In this mighty Year of the Youth, when the SACP marks its 60th Anniversary, we salute all the co-founders of the Party for their unswerving will to fight against capitalism and their dedication to the cause of the working class. Indeed the ISL served as a firm basis for the CPSA which was to chart a path during sixty years of an arduous and most difficult struggle.

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## HONOUR TO LABOUR

He who swings a mighty hammer  
He who reaps a field of corn,  
He who breaks the marshy meadow  
To provide for wife, for children,  
He who rows against the current,  
He who weary at the loom  
Weaves with wool and tow and flax  
That his fair-haired young may flourish,  
Honour that man, praise that worker!  
Honour every callous hand!  
Honour every drop of sweat  
That is shed in mill and foundry!  
Honour every dripping forehead  
At the plough. And let that man  
Who with mind and spirit's labour  
Hungering ploughs be not forgotten.

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