

**Minutes of Special Meeting, Johannesburg Branch, CPSA,
24 May–2 June 1934 (Extracts)**

RECORD OF SPECIAL MEETING OF JOHANNESBURG DISTRICT,
C.P.S.A., HELD ON THURSDAY, 24TH MAY, SUNDAY, 27TH MAY AND
SUNDAY, 2ND JUNE, 1934.

Present on Thursday morning 24th May: Coms. Roux, Botha, Grey, Abramovitz, Hilda Saks, W. Lunt, Schohet, Molete, Ngedlane, Tsikane, Ramutla, Spilkin, Golomb, Schwarz, Tefu, Edward, Rosenblatt, E. Cohen, Jacobson, Wolfson, Baker, L. Cohen, Joffe, Diamond, Kotane, D. Cohen, Kalk, Bach, Basner, Margolis.

Present on Thursday afternoon: As above, also Coms. Levenberg and Kagan.

Comrade Kalk (in chair): Comrades, this meeting has been called to discuss the inner Party situation and the fractional activities in the Party with its disastrous effects on Party work. The P.B. has called this meeting in order to get clarity in the Party on the Party line and to see if it is possible to overcome our differences and to bring unity into the Party. We must discuss our future tasks, especially in relation to mass organisations. Our difficulties arise out of the mistakes of the old leadership. The present leaders have difficulties due to mistakes made long ago by left sectarianism in the Party. These mistakes can be broadly classified as follows: 1) Leftist policy, 2) Desire for 100% influence in mass organisations.

Comrade Kotane: The chairman did not give us the full situation as it is. I am sorry that I have to speak in the absence of Com. Bach. We have in the party an impossible situation. We have called this meeting because the P.B. cannot come to a decision. The P.B. is not agreed as it should be. There are two streams of opinion in the P.B. and we cannot come to definite agreement, with the result that no work is carried out. This meeting was called to settle this difference so that the P.B. will know what line we are following. Before going on to the causes of the trouble I have to criticise the attitude of certain comrades. With the development of this disagreement certain comrades have taken to sneering at things. This is very bad. It makes the comrades into cynics. People who do not discuss the matter from a political standpoint, who are inclined to minimise things by their remarks. The differences in the P.B. are due to mistakes committed in 1931–32 and certain comrades deny that mistakes of a leftist character were made. The letter written in the Communist Review of December, 1932,¹ was not agreed

1. The reference is to an article on South Africa in the December 1932 issue of *The Communist Review*. See footnote 2 to document 29, vol II.

to by Molly,² Bach and Co. Those of us who agreed with the analysis of the position were told that we did not know the position and that the people who drew up the letter were not acquainted with the situation in South Africa. We were also told that the party had many members, up to 200 in the Rand mines, so many groups, etc. I personally took the trouble to investigate these statements and found no such membership. Statements were made as to the membership of the party and 95% of these statements were untrue and inexact. In 1931 when the new line put forward, correct as it was, we had at the time only a skeleton of a party. The leaders put forward the line of bolshevising the party. In the process they went to a ridiculous extreme. Everything we had was smashed. They even adopted the ridiculous attitude of wanting physical fights at every meeting, against people who did not agree with them. This is the fundamental cause of the trouble and it is from here that we have to view it. This line was carried out up to the end of 1932. We did not agree with the line at the beginning of 1933 and started carrying out a clarification of the party line, which we are told today was wrong. Comrades used to write resolutions and letters in the party showing what an enormous amount of work we had done but nothing had actually been done. When we began training classes in 1933 we found out that, despite the fact that we had been told all comrades had discussed the resolution drawn up for the plenum which took place at the beginning of that year, it was not so. They may have glanced at the resolution but it had not been discussed with them. Our training class was carried out on the line of discussion re the mass organisations. We pointed out the mistakes that had been made by the party in making all mass orgs. into second editions of the C.P. Bach, in Durban, did not agree with my point of view. I wrote letters criticising certain aspects of the work. He never agreed with me but accused me of being a right winger. He did not put it exactly that way but wrote Gomas and told him that I adopted the point of view of a right deviationist. When I came here the position was hopeless. There was nothing done in a proper way. The party office had illegalised itself. Umsebenzi lay about in huge piles at the office and in Joffe's shop,³ but no attempts were made to sell it. Why was it so? It was because there was no organisation.

The D.P.C. was reorganised at the end of 1932 by people from Cape Town such as Gomas. It was left to C.T.⁴ comrades to carry out the work in Johannesburg. These people who also adopted my point of view were dubbed rightists. Our leftists were great theoreticians for instance Molly once said that the masses were ready and only waiting for a call. You can

2. Molly Wolton.

3. Most probably, Louis Joffe.

4. Cape Town.

imagine such a situation. It was ridiculous. If the masses actually were ready we should have had a revolution long ago. If the masses are ready in S.A., how about England and Germany? These people thought that a revolution could be brought about by issuing leaflets. I told them that the leaflets we issued were like a call to organised masses who were just waiting for the time to commence action. That is how it seemed to me. They immediately made an analogy that my arguments were those of a social-democrat: organise first and strike afterwards. Well, I do say that you cannot conduct a successful strike without organisation, by mere issuing manifestos. The C.I. directives are to win over the majority of the workers to our side in order to carry on the struggle, and before we can go to war we must be prepared with our troops. You must have people trained before they go to war and in the same way we must prepare the masses for the struggle. I do not imply by this that we must not do work. We must! We must issue leaflets but our chief task is to organise in the factories, etc., especially the masses outside the towns.

Our paper became a rag, we adopted Inprecor style, language, etc. If Inprecor is considered a political journal and many C.P.'s have to have their own simplified papers, how can we issue a paper in the style of Inprecor? The majority of our people are politically backward, yet the paper used to be filled with long theoretical arguments and I am quite sure that three-quarters of those present would not understand them. How about the masses, the people for whom the paper was supposed to be written? We had to improve the political content of the paper from the time when it was published in Cape Town. But in improving the political line we went to a ridiculous extreme. We wanted our paper to be a copy of the COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL, the IMPRECOR and COMMUNIST REVIEW. That was wrong, in my opinion. The circulation of the paper fell though actually more were printed. There was merely a distribution of the paper and the number of subscribers dropped to 16, of which 4 were Natives. The 12 Europeans were those who paid some time ago, and had paid for a long time ahead!

We did not agree with this and so we changed it and as a result the paper is as you see it now, quite different from what it used to be and arousing interest among the masses. We have about 52 subscribers and the old agents have come back. The position we have to decide is whether we want the paper to go ahead increasing its circulation or whether we should do as certain comrades, particularly Bach, want, i.e. to go back to the old days when the paper lay about in piles and nobody read it. Bach has not even got the guts to admit that the party is organisationally in a better position than it was at the beginning of 1933. We have tried to show him, in regard to Ikaka, but he still refuses to admit it. He wants to maintain that the mistakes of the leftist leadership were not so serious as those made today.

We admit our present weaknesses. Bach does not want to see that our paper is becoming a mass organ. The masses understand what is written in it

to-day. Bach says that the paper before though written in obstruse⁵ language was a political leader of the masses. I ask you how can it have been a leader of the masses when the masses did not understand what was written in it? It is like giving an Englishman a Chinese paper as a political leader. The recent disagreements arise from these basic questions.

I see in Bach's opposition merely a fight for position and further a fight against Native leadership in the party. Nominally it was agreed to have a Native leadership but if what they had was a Native leadership, the people who had no understanding but just had black faces, then it is not my idea of a Native leadership.⁶ The C.P.S.A. must develop a Native ideology and outlook. This is the first time we are beginning to get such a leadership. We have never had it before. Because we had a collection of Natives who were politically illiterate, who did not understand basic questions and the resolutions they were supposed to have passed. Can that be called a Native leadership? To-day it is beginning to manifest itself. We have a Native leadership and this is the basis of the struggle.⁷ People who speculate on certain positions here as if they were in European countries, who try to apply mechanically tactics meant for European countries, – such are leftists. We have to apply things here correctly. There is a different ideology among the masses. We must get this into our heads. If we are to make our party a mass party we must cater for the masses. People must understand what the C.P. is, not look at it as a group of fanatics, who merely shout slogans. This meeting will have to decide whether we are to go back to things as they were in 1931–2 or to go on to do things in a proper manner. We must commit mistakes if we do work. But we shall rectify these if we are in contact with the masses, instead of writing leaflets and shouting slogans.

I should like to characterise some of our leading comrades as they are. There is a tendency among them to start shouting that others are counter-revolutionaries, etc. View their work concretely and consider it objectively and you will realise that they themselves are the real counter-revolutionaries, in that they do nothing and ridicule comrades who try to work. They make communism an intellectual thing that does not apply to concrete situation. Sometimes I ask myself what they mean by the political line, made at will. And in my opinion the mistakes committed show the same tendency as Trotskyism: to hell with organisation and preparation, always fight, fight.

If we take this as our standard of comparison we shall find that all the parties of the world are right wing, because if the masses are ready and only we are lagging behind we shall never see the difference between India or China and South Africa, etc. We shall not be in a position to appraise the situation and know where we stand.

5. Obviously, 'abstruse'.

6. There is a single line in pencil in the left margin opposite this paragraph.

7. There is a single line in pencil in the left margin opposite the first six lines of this paragraph.

What is our task? We have left out the question of organisation, because it was considered a right wing deviation. We have smashed everything that was once there because it was created by right wingers. We must hide our heads in the sand like an ostrich and pretend the world does not exist. We do not face facts. The outlook of Molly and Bach is mechanical, that of a Trotskyist. We must not consider people by the phrases they shout, we must consider them objectively in view of their activities. We must examine the thing correctly and act accordingly, otherwise we cannot see how things are developing, e.g. if comrades say that masses here are ready and only waiting for a call, what is that? Is not that minimising the achievements of the C.I.? If we think the masses are ready how can we understand the tremendous work and sacrifice of the C.P. in other countries? Before the revolution in Russia the party carried on systematic work. That is why they succeeded. Their success was not due merely to issuing leaflets and slogans but to energetic, heroic work. The spade work has to be done here as there. The approach to the masses, organised or not, must be such that it will draw them to us and not antagonise them. In the past we had organisations. But if they did not want to strike, was it not our task to show them, teach them, that striking is their weapon. But no! Our attitude was: YOU MUST STRIKE. And we banged our heads against a wall. As a result people were antagonised, driven away. All our organisations were smashed. We are having a difficult task to win the masses back. There is a concrete instance. I can give many more.

I have not given the real causes of the differences in the party; we cannot settle them; the meeting here is called to decide on this matter. We want to know who is who. We are convinced that our line will build the party on a sound basis. It is your task to tell us whether we are right or not. We have made mistakes but we can rectify them, IF we are following a correct line. If we are going to swing to the left and deny Pollitt's letter⁸ and fail to understand the situation, then we shall never have a party in this country. We shall become a mere sect, which tomorrow, instead of having even those few we have today, will have only two followers. [...]

There is a struggle in the party for supremacy: some people wish to dictate and do not consider whether correctly or incorrectly. There is a struggle for either a white or black leadership.⁹ I want to make it clear, to emphasise, that there has never been a black leadership before, despite all that has been said in Umsebenzi and the resolutions adopted.

Another point is the paper: you must decide whether Umsebenzi is to be a theoretical journal or a mass organ, giving a lead to the masses, not written in

8. See footnote 2 to document 29, vol. II.

9. This sentence is enclosed in square brackets in pencil and there is also a single line in pencil in the right margin.

incomprehensible language, but in clear language which the masses will understand.¹⁰

This is my conclusion: unless we settle this affair the party in Johannesburg will split. Of this there is no doubt. The party was deteriorated and if we go back to 1931–32 the paper will go down again and we shall never win the masses back.¹¹ [...]

Our task now is, in accordance with the directives of the C.I., is to raise a national revolutionary movement in this country. We shall never succeed if we go on as we are now, because immediately one speaks a language that is not the style of the C.I. and Inprecor, we are characterised as national reformists.¹² I am convinced that the way I am carrying on things is the correct way. I shall continue to work that way. I shall be prepared to say what I have done. But I will not make the party a sectarian group.¹³ That is a crime. These long phrases, intended to bluff the C.I. that we are doing work, do not bluff them at all. They laugh at the letters and reports that were sent them in 1932. They wrote a letter in direct contradiction¹⁴ to these reports.¹⁵ The information furnished was incorrect. They carried out own investigation¹⁶ and refused to believe the official reports. Unless we admit that their analysis was correct (as some comrades do admit) we are bluffing ourselves and will never succeed in doing any work in this country. [...]

Comrade Kotane¹⁷ [...] The new line of Molly and company was put into operation in 1931. We had some Native followers before then. But Wolton came with a mandate from the C.I. to smash the reformist party. He did smash it. He did it so thoroughly that some of the members of the trade unions are so hostile that we cannot speak to them.

We are not howling for Bunting to come back. He knows nothing of Marxism.

Those who asked for an explanation of Bunting's expulsion were called 'Buntingites'. Terms like counter-revolutionary, left-winger, right wingers, etc. are not understood by the Native masses. [...] With regard to the Native leadership: the Native leadership of 1931–32 (so-called) consisted of nothing but boys. They had no opinions of their own. In the P.B. they agreed with Wolton but outside it they said 'we must have bread'. (e.g. on the expulsion of Makabeni).

10. There is a single line in pencil in the right margin opposite this paragraph.

11. There is a single line in pencil in the right margin opposite this sentence.

12. There is a single line in pencil in the right margin opposite the first three lines of this paragraph.

13. There is a single line in pencil in the right margin opposite this sentence.

14. It is not clear whether the reference is, again, to *The Communist Review* (see footnote 2 to document 29, vol. II) or to another document.

15. There is a single line in pencil in the right margin opposite these two sentences.

16. The reference is, probably, to Dennis's stay in South Africa.

17. Final speech.

We have now a native leadership. We have comrades who have a point of view. It is a fight against Native leadership when backward comrades like Tefu are described as the 'best leaders in the Party' and other more advanced comrades are described as 'jingoes', as being of the Marcus Garvey type, etc. This, precisely this, is the real undervaluing of the Native leadership.

We have to decide whether the present policy is wrong. If it is wrong then we must throw it away. Either we revert to the old policy or we carry on with the present policy. We must consider the political level of the readers of Umsebenzi and of the leaflets, manifestos, etc. which we issue. If to consider this is the right danger then we are falling into the right danger. But actually it is only plain common sense. When I was in the country I saw different picture. Even our branches: they are not really our branches at all. They are branches of the A.N.C. They do not even know that Umsebenzi is the communist organ. They don't know what you are talking about when you advocate unity between white and black. It is very difficult to convince them.¹⁸

We need now to start a united front revolutionary movement. With the present membership here, all white faces except two or three we cannot hope to carry this out.

It is not true to say that Bach will not hinder the work if he remains on the P.B. The petition is a manifestation of the discontent which existed before this meeting.¹⁹ We can't do work in such an atmosphere. We can't afford to maintain a left opposition in the Party as Com. Roux suggests.

Here are two quite distinct lines: that of 1931-32 and that of to-day. Bach refuses to abandon his position of defending in the main the line of 1931-32.

Comrade Kalk. I do not agree that it is a question of reverting to the old line. We can take a decision here and at the same time we can refer the whole matter to the C.I. The P.B. should come to a decision on the subject and this should be forwarded to the C.I.

Comrade Bach. Certain things should be clarified. But I want now a decision on one thing, namely that my disagreements are genuine and not based on a fight for position and an attack upon the Native leadership.

Comrade Kalk I think that this question also should be cleared up by the P.B. About Bach's fighting for position, I don't think that we can accept this. But in the matter of his attacking the Native leadership, it is so!

(UPROAR)

Comrade Bach. I ask that a vote be taken. I ask this meeting to recognise that my differences are genuine political differences and not based upon a struggle for position or upon a desire to attack the Native leadership.

18. There is a single line in pencil in the left margin opposite the second half of this paragraph starting from 'we are falling...'

19. The reference is probably to the letter against Bach sent to the PB by a group of Johannesburg communists earlier the same year. See document 29, vol. II.

Comrade Kalk Will Com. Bach answer me this: in effect did his fight not undermine the confidence of many Party members in the Native leadership?

Comrade Bach. I understand clearly that political differences must weaken the leadership. But subjectively you cannot accuse me of being against the Native leadership as such. I ask that a vote be taken on my motion.

Comrade Diamond. I submit that Com. Bach's motion is equivalent to a vote of non-confidence in Comrade Kotane. I therefore propose a vote of confidence in Comrade Kotane.

Comrade Bach. I withdraw my motion.

(The motion of confidence in Comrade Kotane was not put to the vote)

THE CHAIRMAN THEN CLOSED THE MEETING.

RGASPI, 495/64/137/30-3, 64-5. For the full text of the document see; RGASPI, 495/64/137/29-65.

Original in English.

Typed. Copy.

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**Resolutions of Political Commission, ECCI,
3 June 1934¹**

Confidential

**THE NEXT TASKS IN THE SPHERE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL
CONSTRUCTION OF THE PARTY (SOUTH AFR.)**
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The next four years that have elapsed since the VII Congress of the Party were years of a severe struggle inside the Party against the survivals of Bunting-ism, for the line of the Comintern, on questions pertaining to the colonial revolution, years of an unprecedented sharpening of the antagonisms between the toiling mass and Anglo-Boer imperialism, between the working class and the bourgeoisie. On this basis the Party succeeded to a considerable degree in increasing its influence upon the broad masses of the toilers, in heightening its authority in the eyes of the toiling native population, and in making some headway in the mutual relations of the white and the native workers. However, the organizational consolidation of this growing influence of the Party is exceedingly weak. The Party was not able to reconstruct itself on the basis of

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1. It seems most likely that this resolution, approved by the Political Commission of the ECCI before Marks's and Mofutsanyana's departure from Moscow in August-September, provided the basis for them to oust Kotane as secretary of the CPSA at the end of 1934. From the way the document is formulated (e.g. 'the Congress puts forward the task . . .', etc.) it would seem that it was intended as a more or less exact text of the resolution of the next party congress.