

**Letter from I. Wolfson to the Comintern,  
15 April 1937<sup>1</sup>**

15th April 1937.

Dear Comrade,

This is a continuation of my last letter which I will also post by to-days mail.<sup>2</sup> E.<sup>3</sup> is also posting you some sets of minutes of the pb. etc., by todays mail and I hope that you will get it O.K. In this letter I want to deal with a number of questions which are of some importance.

Firstly I want to know if you are getting cuttings papers etc., which we post to you from time to time. We have started to send you newspaper cuttings also so that you can get an idea of what is going on here.<sup>4</sup>

Elections. The nominations of the Elections resulted as follows: – Senatorship Rheinallt Jones 300,000. Basner 77,000. Ballinger 4000 (4000)<sup>5</sup> and a few other small ones. For the Native Rep. Council Thema of the 'Bantu World' 132,000 votes and followed by a number of other reformists. Edwin<sup>6</sup> got 3000 votes and thus secures nomination as the minimum is 2000. We had a discussion as to whether they should go forward and agreed to do so. Our main difficulty is finance which has hindered our campaign. Edwin was nominated in many places where the party has not even been to visit. In most places the Electoral committee consists of 'good boys' that is school teachers, petty officials, priests, who follow the instructions of the Native Commissioner and voted for Jones. In those places where we were able to make contact and hold meetings we secured support. The election takes place on the 21st June and we have two clear months but no money, which is a great handicap. We hope to pull Edwins poll up, but the real question we are concerned with is to hold mass meetings and get our message across to the people. We have imposed a 20% levy for three months and a good number of party members have paid up some paying in advance for three months. Kalk, member of sec., who naturally should set a good example has not only paid his levy, but also not paid anything for three months now.<sup>7</sup> This does not inspire confidence but on the other hand brings about a feeling of disgust amongst the rank and file.

---

1. The archives contain at least three letters sent from South Africa to the Comintern in April 1937. This document is the only one signed (I.W.). Judging by the contents the letters were, most probably, sent to G. Hardy.

2. For this letter see: RGASPI, 495/14/50/21.

3. Most probably, Edwin Mofutsanyana.

4. There is a double line in red pencil in the left margin opposite this sentence.

5. '4000' is corrected in pen and written again in pen in brackets.

6. E. Mofutsanyana.

7. To make sense the sentence should, obviously, read: 'Kalk... has not only not paid his levy, but also not paid anything for three months now.'

The Government is very perturbed about Basner polling<sup>8</sup> so many votes and the communist bogey is being chased for all it is worth. Our people also find that due to sectarian mistakes especially on the question of churches and freedom of religion they have a lot of bad feeling against the party to break through amongst the Native people. The government is also preparing to tighten up legislation against the Native people by means of the New Native Urban areas Amendment Act, which will regulate the flow of labour from town to country and vice versa. Hofmeyr is busy making flowery liberal speeches about the Natives rights, but at the same time steers through Parliament a new bill giving the Chamber of Mines permission to import 100,000 Natives from Central Africa.<sup>9</sup> If Basner can win the election it would be of immense value to the party and we hope that he will pull up although it is a terrific uphill fight. I forgot to mention that many of the Chiefs are on the Electoral committees and they have been warned by Govt that if they vote for Basner they will be fired from their position and replaced. We also hope Edwin will pull up sharply & increase his vo<sup>10</sup>

Basutoland. The Lekhotlo la Bafo<sup>11</sup> (Basuto Commoners Association) invited us to send delegates to their conference held in Basutoland and we sent Marks. About 100 delegates were present and a very militant spirit prevailed. The peasants are fuming with discontent against Paramount Chief Griffiths<sup>12</sup> their Ruler who they say has sold out completely to the Imperial Govt and is ruling with an iron hand exacting iniquitous taxes. They are calling for a civil war to remove Griffiths and the situation is not too good from this point of view. We hold the view that if they start a war at the present juncture against Griffiths, they will play right into the hands of the Union Govt who will send an expeditionary force to help Griffiths and then annex Basutoland to the Union of S.A. They are only waiting for a chance like this. Two delegates from Basutoland are coming to see us, leaders of the Commoners Organisation, and we are going to discuss with them what line to take. We are going to point out to them that Basutoland must not be permitted to be annexed to the Union of S.A., as the Natives in Basutoland however hard it is for them, have more freedom and are better off than they are in the Union of S.A. What we also want to do is to put the whole case to the League against Imperialism in London and get them to debate Basutoland in the House of Commons in London, expose the role of Griffiths, and get the British Govt alleviate the suffering of the people. We are preparing a memorandum with all details. Please let us know if we are acting correctly. We also instructed the Commoners to tell the Basuto Tribal Natives who come to the Rand to work

---

8. Or 'pulling'.

9. There is a single line in red pencil in the left margin opposite this sentence.

10. Illegible, probably, 'vote'.

11. The spelling of 'Lekhotla la Bafo' is corrected by hand.

12. Griffiths Leretholi, paramount chief of the Bashotho.



on the Gold Mines to join into a Union with other Natives and to organise for increased wages etc. The Basuto is a fine type of people and as you know have waged several wars under their famous chief Moshesh<sup>13</sup> against the British and also the Boers. Many of them have arms, but not too modern. They are good horsemen and their country though very mountainous and rugged has many fertile valleys and is one of the most beautiful parts of South Africa. What we want to avoid is giving the Union government a pretext for interfering in Basutoland which they look to with very envious eyes.

Party We are not making very much progress by recruiting new members during the past two months or so, and we find it a difficult job to retain members that have come in,<sup>14</sup> as many who join do so because they feel that the party is theirs and they want to help, but have not got the necessary political training. The big problem is to keep the membership active and to also train newcomers. This we are trying to do and we have one political training class going in Johannesburg which is quite well attended. We have had some inner troubles, which naturally is to be expected, as you know Kotane is now in C.T., and with Roux and Gomas they are a triumvirate. We are waiting to hear from C.T., as to what is going on there. Roux now has a university post and is lecturer in C.T. University in Botany. Kotane is running a paper Umvikele Thebe which concerns itself with teaching basic English. In Johburg we are carrying on as best we can with our limited resources, and have 5 full time Native functionaries, two of whom do trade union work. We have no full time Europ functionaries, and this of course also handicaps our work. At present the party is concentrating on the Election campaign. Excellent work has been done in the Benoni Location by Joise<sup>15</sup> and Benoni members who have made a big mass movement against the compulsory medical examination of Native residents, and they have raised hell about conditions, so much so that the capitalist press has taken up the question with a lot of space. Good work is also being done in the high rents campaign in Newclare and in Ferriera amongst the Native & Coloured people.<sup>16</sup> In Cape Town the Party has not grown much bigger than when I was there last. There they have some good positions in the t.u., though Emm<sup>17</sup> is still a hidden party member. In Durban the comrades have made progress on the t.u. field and have organised the Native Iron & Steel workers and are doing good work in the L.P. and in other Trade unions. I have also set a small group going in Port Elizabeth of non party people and hope that they will do good work. Pretoria is also doing good work and Com. Findlay one of our members is running a Trade Union class

---

13. Moshweshwe.

14. There is a double line in red pencil in the left margin opposite these three lines.

15. Josie Mpama.

16. There is a single line in red pencil in the left margin opposite this sentence from the word 'examination'.

17. Emmerich.

teaching Marx to 60 European Trade Unionists. One thing however is clear, the name of the party has been raised from the quagmire and it definitely has regained its prestige.

Trade Unions. I have sent you the cuttings of the big controversy about the formation of Afrikaans Trade Unions. I don't want to deal at length with it here, but briefly the Nationalist Party sponsored the formation of Afrikaans Trade Unions in the Mining and Clothing Industries on the basis of 'Christian National' Lines, anti-communist, anti-Jewish, and anti-Native. They started in the Mining and a strike broke out on one mine. The Chamber of Mines was in a pickle; on the one hand it did not want to cause a political crisis by dismissing members of the Afrikaans Trade Union, on the other it did not want a stoppage of mines on the Rand which was threatened by the workers in the Miners Union. So they decided on a bold course and completely reversed their usual policy by deciding on the closed shop principle and every mine worker from the first of June must belong to one of the 8 recognised Mining Unions. This has knocked the Afrikaans Union on the head and at once a tirade started in the Afrikaans press. The Chamber was working hand in glove with the Communists. The communists had captured the trade unions. The communists controlled the labour movement. The chairman of the Trades Council<sup>18</sup> was chairman of FSU alleged the racist press, the Trade Unions were supporting the Communist Government in Spain. The Paper is full of it. The Dutch Reformed Church also stepped in and said the fight must be waged against Communism. What this all shows is the great fear of the reactionary forces of the Afrikaans worker being weaned from the peasant and land ideology and now that he is in industry getting a new outlook, a class-conscious outlook, losing many of his prejudices and becoming imbued with labour outlook. The forces of fascism are making frantic efforts to consolidate their strength. Malan is steering the Nationalist Party towards a definite fascist perspective. He violently attacked the Trades Council who took their orders from Moscow, the Spanish Republic, and is an admirer of Franco Hitler & Mussolini. Pirow is likewise supporting the Afrikaans T.U., and also a fascist.

The Trades Council will have to look to its laurels and not be overwhelmed by the attacks being launched on it. We hope to put some fight into them and make them retaliate to the attacks which have been delivered. We also hope that the Council will also extend its influence by agreeing to unity with the Cape Fed., and that this will be achieved in the very near future. The question of the Peoples Front will be of increasing importance and at present Labour Party branches are discussing what attitude they must take up to the Peoples Front movement. We have a number of younger members who are fighting hard for the L.P. to link up with the Peoples Front.

---

18. Trades and Labour Council.



Our mass organisations are going ahead. The Peace movement is organising a mass meeting for next months and also a Peace Penny week and Com. Tho.<sup>19</sup> is working to make it a success. The FSU is now functioning in the three large centres and has started its own organ, which is selling 1000 per month. It is making a drive for mass membership. The Friends of the Spanish Republic is starting a mass campaign to show 'Defence of Madrid'<sup>20</sup> and is also collecting money for a S.A. Ambulance Unit. An All In Conference is to be held in Johannesburg for Spain during the next month. The Youth Movement is also making progress and they have a club house near the Trades Hall. They are organising on parallel lines Coloured, and Native sections.

Well Comrade, I must say au revoir till I write again. Have not heard for a long time from you.

Revolutionary greetings,  
Yours comradely.

I.W.  
~~~

RGASPI, 495/14/350/22-4.

Original in English.

Typed.

Stamped: 2658 - 17.JUN.1937

## 78

### Letter from I. Wolfson to the Comintern, 23 April 1937<sup>1</sup>

23rd April 1937.

Dear Comrade,

We are grateful for your letter and also for Harry's<sup>2</sup> both of which will be very valuable to us in our work and will help to put things much better here. Moreover getting letters from our brothers in Britain also has a good effect and

---

#### Doc. 77

19. Possibly, M. Thomas.

20. The reference is to a popular pro-republican film about the Spanish civil war of 1936-9. The 'South African Ambulance Unit' was to be sent to assist the republican forces defending Madrid.

#### Doc. 78

1. This is one of three letters sent from South Africa to the Comintern in April 1937. The previous letter (see document 77, Vol. II) is signed 'I.W.'. Most probably, the letters were sent to G. Hardy.
2. Harry Pollitt.