

From Garvey to Lenin, via Kadalie: The ICU's "Ginger" Faction and the Transformation of Interwar Black Radicalism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the "ginger" faction of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU), a cohort of young black teachers and workers who started the 1920s corresponding with the moderate newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*, but ended the decade advocating revolution.

The paper makes three arguments. First, ICU "gingerists" were radicalised by promises of Garveyism, educational up-liftment and biblical salvation, as well as syndicalist and communist ideas. Throughout the interwar years, many communists opposed Marcus Garvey's ideas as petit-bourgeois and reactionary. Many Garveyites reciprocated these antipathies. At the head of the "ginger" faction, radicals such as Thomas Mbeki, Keable Mote and Stanley Silwana, however, worked closely with both Garveyites and communists, synthesising their ideas and leading demands for higher wages and strike action. Although ICU "gingerists" were sometimes noted for their contradictory "vacillations" and "opportunism", they helped define a distinct radicalism particular to South Africa that emphasised the structural importance of both race and class.

Second, ICU successes transformed the priorities of communists, in turn, by demonstrating the possibility, necessity and significance of organising black workers in their hundreds of thousands. By the mid-1920s, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) saw black workers as the instrument of historic change, and the era-defining Native Republic Thesis, in particular, was heavily shaped by ICU ideas and Comintern directives to take over the trade union.

Finally, the ICU's class-based mass organisation transformed black radicalism beyond the CPSA, through Isaac Tabata and Anton Lembede in South Africa, Masotsha Ndhlovu and Charles Mzingeli in Zimbabwe, CLR James and George Padmore in Britain, and August Warreno and A Philip Randolph in America. The ICU created widespread disillusionment after its collapse, but it also popularised a new, particular form of mass radical politics that endured for generations, influencing communists and non-communists alike.

Bio

Henry Dee is a historian of empire, labour and migration in the 20th century. His current research focuses on African and Asian trade unions and the politics of free movement in the British empire during the interwar period. Building on research into the life of Malawi-born Clements Kadalie and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU), based in Southern Africa, he is now working on a comparative study between the ICU and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), looking at how both trade unions championed socialist internationalism, and challenged heightening worker repression and anti-immigrant restrictions.