

BUILDERS OF THE NATION

7

THE EARLY BLACK UNIONS

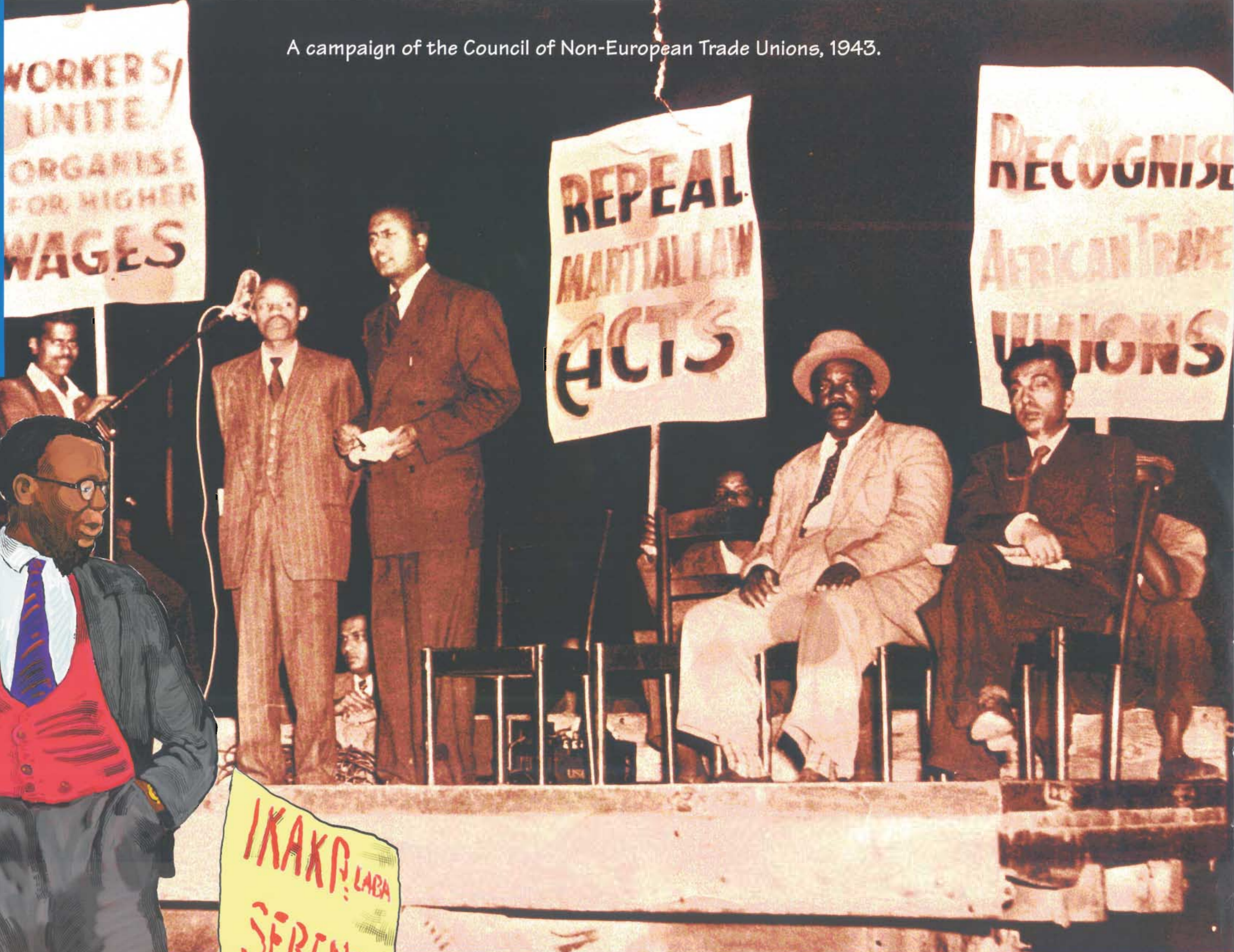
The first union to represent black workers was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). It was established by Clements Kadalie in 1921 after a dockworkers' strike in Cape Town. The ICU grew rapidly and made a huge impact. But it declined ten years later in the face of government hostility and splits in the leadership.



An ICU meeting of farmworkers, 1929



Textile workers get unionised, 1930.



A campaign of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions, 1943.



Members of the Communist Party of South Africa, recruiting workers for the Ikaka laba Sebenzi (Shield of the Workers).

The black unions which emerged in the 1940s were industrially based. This was the time of the Second World War (1939 - 1945), when industries were expanding. White and black soldiers joined the war and the new factories needed new workers. The numbers of workers in shops and industries increased in large numbers. Many trade unions were set up, often initiated by members of the Communist Party of South Africa or other socialists. These black unions were poor and struggled to keep going. In 1941 they combined to form CNETU (Council of Non-European Trade Unions). During the war, hundreds of strikes took place. The government needed the support of black workers in this time of war, so they relaxed the pass laws and allowed unions to negotiate for better working conditions and wages. For the first time, black workers managed to improve their earnings through their organisations. The biggest and most influential strike was the 1946 miners' strike, which mobilised 80 000 workers. But the war was over, and the government no longer needed to appease black workers. Together with the mining companies, the state brutally crushed the strike, killing 18 workers.

In 1948, white voters brought the National Party into power. Apartheid made things even harder for workers and black people in general. But the unions which followed these early worker organisations were able to learn from the legacy of past worker struggles. We salute these pioneer worker organisations.

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