

## HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

### CLEMENTS KADALIE AND THE I.C.U.

Clements Kadalie was born in Malawi (then Nyasaland) and came to South Africa as a young man. He is remembered as one of the founders and most prominent leaders of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) - the largest and most powerful African trade union ever to be formed in South Africa.

The I.C.U. was established in Cape Town in 1919, first of all as a trade union for African and Coloured dock workers, but later grew into a general workers union, with membership open to workers in all industries. The first meeting of the ICU in Cape Town was addressed by Mr. Selby Msimang from Bloemfontein, who later returned to his home and established his own ICU. This later joined up with the ICU based in Cape Town, as it was believed that it was not in the workers' interests for there to be a separation like this. Kadalie was elected Secretary - General of the new ICU.

The Union spread throughout South Africa like wild-fire, the object of the ICU being to organise workers industrially to improve their living conditions and wages. African workers were suffering from low wages, bad living and working conditions and rapidly increasing prices. They realised that by standing together as members of the ICU, their demands would be much stronger than if they stood alone. The ICU made wage demands with a strong voice - the voice of thousands of struggling workers.

The first strike associated with the ICU was one of African dock-workers, who went on strike for higher wages and because the government was selling food overseas when there wasn't enough in South Africa. The strike failed because white workers came in and did the jobs left vacant by the striking Africans.

The ICU spread to East London and Port Elizabeth the central and eastern Cape, the O.F.S., Johannesburg and the Transvaal. Membership included farm and city workers all crying out against the bad conditions.

In 1925, the headquarters of the ICU were moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg.

The ICU had a lot of trouble from the police at this time. Leaders were arrested and workers attending meetings of the ICU were harassed. Kadalie was subjected to the pass laws in 1926. He once asked for permission to go to Durban to address a meeting of workers, but he was refused. He decided to go regardless. He addressed thousands of workers in Natal, and got back to Johannesburg before he was finally arrested. The magistrate found him not guilty, since he had been to Natal "on business".

It was mentioned before that the role of the ICU was to organise workers industrially. However, in about 1925, arguments developed amongst the leadership as to which path the union should take. One group advocated mass strike action, burning of passes, and the refusal to pay taxes. The other group adopted a policy of "hambe kahle". They did not want to anger either the employers nor the government too much.

This argument was never really resolved and was one of the reasons that the ICU eventually failed. No concrete programmes were decided on, many of the workers lost faith and stopped paying subscriptions. The radical group therefore decided that if the ICU was going to remain strong, changes must be made in the organisation.

The finances of the Union, they said, should be brought under stricter control (since there were cases of union officials stealing union money), and that the powers of Kadalie and the provincial secretaries be reduced so as to make the ICU a true workers union, with decisions being made by the workers and not by the executive. It was at about this time that the government started applying heavy pressure on the union. Not only was the government hostile, but farmers and other employers were threatening their employees with action if they joined the ICU. Apart from the two sections, there was a third made up of "liberally-minded" individuals who were afraid of the growing unity and militancy of the black workers, and this section began to intervene in union affairs. They persuaded Kadalie that the radical group in the ICU was the reason for the governments hostility, and that they should be removed. Kadalie listened, and the radicals were removed. This caused an outcry from the provinces, where workers had strongly identified with the ideas of the radicals. In the end, Kadalie won the issue, and the left-group were kept out.

In 1927, Kadalie went overseas to the International Labour Conference. This was the first time that the black workers in South Africa had been represented at the conference. While he was away, strikes for higher wages occurred in the Transvaal and Natal. The strikes failed because whites filled the vacated jobs.

In 1928, the ICU could count on the support of 500,000 members. In this year, Kadalie announced that the ICU would reorganise along proper trade union lines. Whereas before the ICU was a general union, he wanted in 1928 to organise workers per per industry ie. have one union for each industry, which would all affiliate to a central council. This would enable workers' complaints to be dealt with in greater detail. His plans, however, were never carried out.

Around this time, Kadalie attempted to gain recognition of the ICU by the white trade union council, known as SATUC (now TUCSA) Kadalies' application was rejected, since the membership of the SATUC at this stage was 30,000, which would have meant that the black workers in ICU would have outnumbered the white workers by a lot.

While Kadalie was overseas - a Natal organiser, Mr.A. Champion, entrenched himself in control of the ICU. A feud developed between him and Kadalie when Kadalie returned, and the argument ended with Champion withdrawing Natal from the ICU to form the " ICU yase Natal". After this, there were a number of other withdrawals from other parts of the country, and the ICU under Kadalie began to collapse. The final death blow came when Kadalie was deported back to Malawi under the Riotous Assemblies Act, after trying to call a general strike of Railing and Harbour workers in East London. The ICU yase Natal collapsed after Champion was deported from Natal for a while. On his return, he decided to keep out of politics.

Kadalie's role in the ICU was essential. It was his brainchild and it operated under his leadership until its collapse. He achieved a position of great power in the land. Newspapers accorded him with as much publicity as they gave Cabinet Ministers. Intelligent, capable and a passionate orator, Kadalie built up a huge organisation which raised the prestige and negotiating power of the African worker. The weakness in Kadalie and therefore in the ICU, was that he was unable to resolve the conflict between his own self-interest, and the interests of the union and thus of the workers. The ICU earned the fear of the authorities and Kadalie swayed between co-operation with the hostility towards the government. He did not recognise clearly enough that to be popular with the workers would have meant that he would be unpopular with the employers and the government.

The ICU faced the problem also of lack of trained leadership. Once Kadalie and Champion were removed, there were no other trained men or women to take over the leadership from them and keep the union going.

This problem is tied in with that of the nature of the union itself. It was a general union convening all workers. What was needed were separate industrial unions which looked after the interests of the workers in their particular industry. This would have ensured that workers in all factories in an industry learnt about the workings of their own union, and in this way the strength of the union would rest on the knowledge of all the workers; and not just the knowledge of the leadership. The trouble with the ICU was that only Kadalie and his executive knew in detail how the union functioned. Once they were removed, the union died.

But for all its weaknesses, the ICU was a power in its day, and earned the respect of people inside and outside South Africa.

ISSUED BY WAGES COMMISSION.  
SRC, UCT,  
RONDEBOSCH.

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