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Class struggle, race emancipation or national liberation? The communist movement in South Africa and the Comintern, 1919-1943

1. Introduction: the Problematic

The history of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in the era of the Communist International (CI) is an interesting subject. Formed in 1921 as the successor to a number of white socialist groups sympathising with Russian Bolshevism, the CPSA tried to evolve a revolutionary strategy adjusted to the complex multi-racial environment within which it had to operate.[1] At the same time, it had to reckon with the ever shifting policies of the international organisation it formed part of.[2] The development of South African communism

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[1] The CPSA dissolved itself shortly before the passing of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. In 1953 the party was reconstituted (now as an illegal organisation) under the name of South African Communist Party (SACP). See e.g. A. Lerumo (i.e. Michael Harme), *Fifty Fighting Years. The South African Communist Party 1921-1971* (London, 1971), pp. 90-92, 97. This work is a kind of official party history. Apart from the Party Archives (now apparently back in South Africa) and material on the South African communist movement in the Comintern Archives, primary source material relating to the history of the CPSA can be found in several manuscript collections. The most important of these are the Bunting Papers and various Trade Union Archives at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; the James La Guma Papers (in possession of his son Alex La Guma, who also wrote an unpublished biography of his father) and the Johnny Gomas Papers (deposited with Doreen Musson) in Cape Town; Police Reports, Court Records and Church Records in various centres in South Africa; the archives of various Government Commissions in the National Archives, Pretoria; and material in some archival collections in Britain and the USA, like the CPSA Collection at the Hoover Institution, University of Stanford. The most important printed sources are party newspapers, like *The International*, *The South African Worker*, *Umsebenzi*, *Inkululeko*, *Freedom* and *The Guardian*; party pamphlets, leaflets and other publications, most of which can be found in South African libraries (in particular the South African Library, Cape Town); and the works *South African Communists Speak* edited by Brian Bunting and *Fifty Fighting Years* by Lerumo, both of which contain party documents (programmes, manifestos etc.) and reports from the party press.

[2] The CPSA was the only serious communist party in Sub-Saharan Africa in the Comintern era. There was some communist agitation and contacts between the Comintern and nationalist and labour elements in various parts of Black Africa, but this did not lead to the formation of viable communist parties, although, in addition to South African communists, a small number of Black Africans were trained at the "Eastern Workers Communist University" (KUTV) in Moscow. Besides the Comintern and the League against Imperialism, the Red Iinternational of Labour Unions, through the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (formed in 1928) and its newspaper *The Negro Worker*, and the International Red Aid established contacts in Black Africa. At various points in time, particularly in the early 1930s, contact was maintained with groups and individuals in British and French West Africa, Liberia, French Central Africa, British East Africa, Mozambique and Madagascar. In the last country, a section of the International Red Aid/Labour Defence was formed in 1933 and a communist party in 1939, but the latter was immediately banned. The question of communist activity in Black Africa before World War II deserves more attention from historians. See George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The coming struggle for Africa* (London, 1956), ch. 16 passim; Rolf Italiaander, *Schwarze Haut im roten Griff* (Düsseldorf and Vienna, 1962), ch. 3; Franz Ansprenger, "Communism in Tropical Africa", in S. Hamrell and C.G. Widstrand (eds.), *The Soviet Bloc, China and Africa* (Uppsala, 1964), pp. 77-78, 166 (note 2); Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943. Documents*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1956-1965), 3, p. 124; Fritz Schatten, *Communism in Africa* (London, 1966), pp. 299, 322-323, 326; James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary. George Padmore's path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London, 1967), pp. 15-19, ch. 2 passim, 51; F. Meli, "The Comintern and Africa", *The African Communist*, No. 43 (1970), pp. 89-91; F. Meli, "Comintern aid for Black Revolutionaries", *The African Communist*, No. 59 (1974), pp. 107-108; Francis Meli, "The

was thus determined by an "internal" and "external" dimension, and the communists tried to harmonize the two by defining their policies in terms of both the challenges of local realities and international communist strategy. However, when by 1930 Comintern directives came to totally mould local communist tactics, the CPSA's then relatively strong position was seriously damaged. While there were also internal factors setting definite limits to the potential success of South African communism, it was in the final analysis the external Comintern factor that was responsible for the destruction of the party's position of influence and popularity attained by the late 1920s.

This article examines the experience of the South African communist movement in the Comintern period by trying to outline the dilemmas and crucial problems the CPSA was faced with, the different shifts in communist strategy, the successes and failures of the party and its affiliated organisations, and the reasons why in the end communism did not become a mass movement in South Africa. Most of these issues have in some way or another been addressed in the existing literature, but rarely in a consistent or comprehensive manner. There is very little work which attempts a critical analysis of the early communist movement including its relationship to the Comintern.[3]

The CPSA, which originated as a white political party, saw itself at first as an organisation much like the communist parties in Europe or North America. The communists felt they were fighting for the proletarian revolution and socialism and against a relatively advanced capitalist system which had plunged South Africa into an industrial revolution unique to the African continent. White Marxists were generally aware of the fact that South Africa was a peculiar type of capitalist society inasmuch as black workers were more harshly exploited and oppressed than whites.[4] However, racial oppression was seen as a "secondary" feature of the system, and it was believed that in the end the interests of all workers, black and white, were identical. The more sensitive spirits among the white radicals were beginning to understand they should pay particular attention to the system of white domination. Racial oppression encompassed such notable realities as the fact that the overwhelming majority of the black working class - in contrast to the white workers - were deprived of the vote and other civic rights; that black workers, in particular Africans, were obstructed in their efforts to organise or go on strike (although black trade unions were not prohibited); that Africans

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Comintern and Sub-Saharan Africa 1919-1939" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leipzig, 1973; Roger E. Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question': Communist Policy in the United States and Africa, 1921-1941", *Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1973), pp. 108-113; E.T. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa before World War II* (London and New York, 1976); Robin Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa* (London, 1979), being a new edition and translation of *The Working Class Movement and Forced Labour in Negro Africa* by Ivan I. Potekhin, Aleksander Z. Zusmanovich and Albert Nzula (alias Tom Jackson), first published in Russian in Moscow (1933), pp. 2, 14-15, 145-147, 148 (note 8), 188-189.

[3] The best work is still H.J. and R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth, 1969), although the authors' communist sympathies are here and there all too evident. See for a recent analysis Allison Drew, "Events Were Breaking Above Their Heads: Socialism in South Africa, 1921-1950", *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991). Beside its analytical qualities, the book by Simons and Simons is a very rich source of empirical evidence, although highly important in this respect - and sometimes contradicting Simons and Simons - are also a number of biographical and autobiographical works, notably Edward Roux, *S.P. Bunting. A Political Biography* (Cape Town, 1944); Eddie and Win Roux, *Rebel Pity. The Life of Eddie Roux* (London, 1970); R.K. Cope, *Comrade Bill. The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers' Leader* (Cape Town, 1943); Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane. South African Revolutionary* (London, 1975).

[4] During the inter-war years, whites formed over 20% of the South African population, which increased from 7 million in the early 1920s to 10 million in the late 1930s. Over two-thirds of the overall population were African, 8% were "coloured" (people of mixed race) and 2.5% Indian. The three non-white groups are collectively referred to as blacks. Both whites and blacks were undergoing a dramatic process of proletarianisation and urbanisation during this period.

were restricted in their freedom of movement and that many of them had to carry passes, and so on.[5] Nevertheless, what was seen by socialist radicals as all-important was the struggle against capitalism. Moreover, the white working class, notwithstanding its unmistakeable racism, was seen as the vanguard in the class struggle. White workers indeed were by far the best organised section of the proletariat and seemingly willing to engage in militant action; they would lead the South African working class in the anti-capitalist struggle, or even make the revolution on their own.

The communists believed that the race prejudice of white workers was a temporary phenomenon. It was held to be the product of the bourgeoisie's divisive tactics and ideology, and a matter of false consciousness. It was only when they finally discovered that the white working class was irreversibly developing into a privileged labour aristocracy that could not be won over to their cause, that the communists began to revise their strategic position. Although a change in line did not come about without a good deal of internal strife, after 1924 the CPSA shifted its main attention to the black workers. From a kind of left wing of the white labour movement the party developed into a vanguard of the black proletariat. The fundamental Marxist belief in the ultimate triumph of interracial working class unity was never abandoned, but now the black working class was seen as the most revolutionary section of the proletariat. In addition, more attention was paid to the grievances of Africans in general and the issue of black freedom and emancipation. The CPSA included democratic and anti-segregationist demands in its propaganda platform and party programme and thus became an organisation not only fighting for the black workers as workers, but as blacks.[6] The fact that exploitation and racial oppression were often two sides of the same coin made this a logical development.

The linking of economic and political struggles, the party's involvement not only in the emerging black working-class movement but in the black liberation movement as well, resulted in a remarkable growth of the CPSA in the late 1920s. Indeed, there can be little doubt that it was the communists' active role in the struggle against racial oppression and their militant alternative to the hesitant policies of black organisations like the African National Congress (ANC) and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), rather than their ideology of the class struggle or even their efforts in the field of trade unionism, which accounted for their increased popularity with large numbers of Africans, coloureds and Indians. At the same time, however, disagreement on the political nature of the struggle against white domination was leading to a fatal controversy. In 1927, a debate erupted within the party - largely prompted by the Comintern - on the question of whether the struggle for black freedom should be defined as a struggle for *national* liberation of the African majority against British imperialism.[7] The contentious issue was whether South Africa was to be included in the Comintern's analysis of the colonial and national revolution.

At first the majority of the party's leadership rejected the new Comintern line that the first stage in the South African revolution was the struggle for national self-determination of the Africans and that the CPSA should adopt the slogan of an "independent Native republic". After the Sixth Comintern Congress, however, the party had no other option but to accept the Comintern's decision. This turn, and all that is seen

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[5] See for a useful survey of the evolution of the numerous legal, political, social, economic and psychological aspects of race relations, racial discrimination and the system of white domination in twentieth century South Africa, Ellen Hellmann (ed.), *Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1949); Leo Marquard, *The Peoples and Policies of South Africa* (4th edition, Oxford, 1969). Only in the Cape Province, with its non-racial but qualified franchise, a number of blacks had access to the vote, while pass laws were less stringently enforced than in the Transvaal, Orange Free State or Natal. In the 1930s, however, the leverage of the African vote in the Cape was undermined by new segregationist legislation.

[6] The "programmatic evolution" of the CPSA can be followed through party documents published in Brian Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak. Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party 1915-1980* (London, 1981); Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 115-208.

[7] Since 1910 South Africa was a self-governing (i.e. white-ruled) Dominion within the British Empire. Although economically the country was heavily dominated by British capital and British imperialism, in socio-political terms the position was obviously different from those territories that were ruled directly by European colonial powers. Perhaps a suitable definition of the South African situation and South African society would be "internal colonialism". Since the early 1960s, the SACP is speaking of "colonialism of a special type".

as resulting from it, more than any other aspect of the early history of South African communism, has attracted the attention of historians.[8] In order to clarify the issue, it seems important to distinguish between three different elements, which in effect succeeded each other in time. There is firstly the question of whether the "black republic slogan", which became official party policy after 1928, was itself the actual cause of the subsequent demise of the CPSA (a subsidiary question is who was primarily responsible for the slogan's introduction - the Comintern or certain South African communists). Secondly, there is the question of the extreme-leftist sectarian party line after 1929: this altered the way in which the CPSA was working with the new slogan in practice. Thirdly, there is the "Bolshevisation" of the party after 1930. This put an end to internal party democracy and paved the way for a self-destructive series of expulsions.

For South African communism the 1930s were a period of disintegration, confusion and marginalisation. Indeed they were years of gross absurdities, continual strife and at times astounding opportunism. By 1938, the CPSA was on the brink of going out of existence. Thereafter a modest revival began, but the party did not succeed in regaining its former strength and now had to share the field with competing groups like the Trotskyists and non-communist radical black organisations.[9] We may divide the history of the South African communist movement into four periods. During the period 1919-1924, the communists devoted most of their attention to the supposedly revolutionary potential of the white working class, at one point beginning to rationalize their actions in terms of the "united front" tactics of the "second period". In the years 1925-1930, the CPSA turned to the African masses and became a predominantly black organisation of some significance, although whites continued to dominate the party leadership. During the years 1931-1938, comprising the bleakest part of the "third period" and the years of the Popular Front, the party was close to becoming a *quantité negligeable*. Finally, in the years 1939-1943 the party got back on its feet again and - after having adopted a pro-war stance in 1941 - even attained a new popularity, if this time mainly among whites. Thus, the party's growth in the early 1940s did not lead to a complete restoration of its former position of influence among black South Africans. Like the years following World War I, the early 1940s were a period of great labour unrest, and even saw the greatest strike wave among Africans so far. But interestingly enough, while around 1919 the "South African Bolsheviks" were doing everything they could to direct the different worker struggles into revolutionary channels, in 1942-1943, anxious as they were to support the war effort, the communists were discouraging strike action.

2. *White Labour and the Making of the Party (1919-1921)*

At the time of the foundation of the CI in March 1919, South Africa's radical socialists and followers of the Bolshevik Revolution were convinced that the South African working class, despite its remoteness from the European revolutionary scene, was to play a significant part in the world-wide proletarian upheaval. To many a Marxist revolutionary there seemed to be ample evidence for this. Almost simultaneous with the First Congress of the Comintern, striking white municipal workers in Johannesburg ousted the local Town

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[8] See in particular Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'" (although the passages on South Africa are not always correct); Martin Legassick, *Class and Nationalism in South African protest: the South African Communist Party and the "Native Republic", 1928-34* (Syracuse, 1973); Sheridan Johns, "The Comintern, South Africa and the Black Diaspora", *Review of Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1975); Robin D.G. Kelley, "The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa", *Ufahamu*, Vol. XV, Nos. 1-2 (1986); Nyawuza, "The Road to the 'Black Republic' in South Africa", *The African Communist*, No. 122 (1990), and "Left, Right on the Road to the Black Republic", *The African Communist*, No. 123 (1990). A closer examination of the archives of both the CPSA and the Comintern might throw more light on various controversial questions concerning the relationship between the two organisations.

[9] In this article no systematic attention is paid to the origins of South African Trotskyism - this would require another paper. Suffice it to say that, to all appearances, Trotskyism began with the formation in the early 1930s of opposition groups in Cape Town and Johannesburg outside the CPSA. It would appear that within the CPSA itself an organised opposition never existed and that these groups were formed only after the first round of expulsions in 1931. See Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 146; Baruch Hirson, *Yours for the Union. Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947* (London and New Jersey, 1990), p. 40; Drew, "Socialism in South Africa", pp. 54-55.

Council, seized control of municipal affairs and elected a "Provisional Board of Control" which was soon styled the "Johannesburg Soviet". The initiative for this action came from W.H. (Bill) Andrews, a leading member of the International Socialist League (ISL), the major forerunner of the CPSA. Again in January 1920, a self-styled municipal "soviet" briefly took over control of the city of Durban.[10] If these events were all affairs of whites only, they demonstrated that in the hectic years after World War I "Bolshevism" was a popular cry with many white workers.[11]

A typical South African drama, springing from the peculiar amalgam of white worker militancy and racial chauvinism, soon cast a shadow over the Johannesburg soviet of 1919, showing the nature of "white class consciousness". As white workers were engaged in their short-lived revolutionary experiment, Africans were defying the pass laws in a passive resistance campaign mounted by the ANC. The response to this of white strike leaders was to promise assistance to the locked-out Town Council to quell the "native menace"; an assurance was given that "in this particular matter" they would stand by the Council and "the community".[12] It was not the first time, nor the last, that white workers betrayed blacks who were voicing economic or political grievances.[13] The fact of the matter was that even those whites who did not belong to the skilled labour aristocracy but were at best semi-skilled workers, still belonged to a racial aristocracy. What they were most concerned about was to keep the blacks "in their place". It took South African Marxists remarkably long to learn this lesson.

The debate that erupted in the columns of the ISL's newspaper *The International* in connection with the attitude of the Johannesburg soviet, revealed the dilemma the white followers of Bolshevism saw themselves confronted with. Sidney P. Bunting, a lawyer who defended Africans arrested for contravention of the pass laws and who had recently been assaulted by a white mob, called the Johannesburg soviet an "aristocrats' revolution", an affair of white workers who cheered Bolshevism but haughtily ignored the claims of "the underdogs of Bantu race". On the other hand D. Ivon Jones, another prominent member of the ISL and, as much as Bunting, an upholder of the cause of African freedom, defended the strikers in an article titled "The White Workers' Burden". According to Jones it was "anti-proletarian" to sneer at the white workers, who were after all "the engine of the revolution in South Africa, just as the comparatively small industrial proletariat of Russia steered the big mass of the Russian people into the Soviet Republic".[14] Three years later, Bunting was to show that he had not lost his faith in the white working class either.

The ISL, which originated in 1915 as an anti-war and socialist-internationalist split-off from the South African Labour Party (SALP), had moved away from racial exclusionism and come to embrace non-racial principles. The usual indifference of white socialists towards the black worker had by no means been

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[10] See on the Johannesburg and Durban soviets E. Gitsham and J.F. Trembath, *A First Account of Labour Organisation in South Africa* (Durban, 1926), pp. 44-46; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 201-202, 223; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 40; I.L. Walker and B. Weinbren, *2,000 Casualties: A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1961), pp. 63-74; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 221-222, 229-230.

[11] See for the popularity of bolshevism among white mineworkers F.A. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold. A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa* (London, 1976), pp. 126-127.

[12] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 40; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 222. For the 1919 pass resistance campaign, see Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, 1964), pp. 117-121.

[13] In February 1920, for example, a strike of over 40,000 African mineworkers in the Transvaal gold-mining industry met with the usual scabbing of white labour. The ISL distributed a leaflet calling on white mineworkers not to scab or shoot at African strikers but to show solidarity - it was to no avail. See Cope, Comrade Bill, p. 215; Roux, S.P. Bunting, pp. 46-48; Roux, Time Longer than Rope, pp. 132-134; Simons and Simons, Class and Colour, pp. 230-233; P.L. Bonner, "The 1920 Black Mineworkers' Strike: a preliminary account", in Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), Labour, Townships and Protest. Studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, 1979).

[14] Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 202-204; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 40-44; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 222-223.

abandoned by the bulk of the ISL membership, but a hard core of "Negrophilists" were stressing the need to make socialist propaganda among the emerging African proletariat and help them organise their own unions. Nevertheless, practical work among Africans was clearly no priority, and it was significant that T.W. Thibedi was the ISL's only African member.[15] Indeed, even among revolutionary socialists there was a tendency to think in terms of racial separation. In February 1920, *The International* wrote that under socialism Africans would form their "own" soviets.[16] The statement was typical of an organisation that was very South African and at the same time wanted to be part of the world communist movement.

The ISL had identified with the Russian Bolsheviks since 1917, and in 1918 Bill Andrews met in London with M. Litvinov. Shortly after the formation of the Comintern, the ISL sent a Russian-speaking member to Moscow with a file of resolutions and publications, and *The International* began publishing the Comintern's manifesto. In early 1920, the ISL - and at least two other socialist groups - applied for affiliation to the Comintern. Apparently, at the Second Congress in July of that year, the ISL was welcomed as a member. In fact, both the ISL and the SALP were invited to attend the congress, but neither of them could send representatives. In the middle of 1920, the ISL's "Declaration of Principles" - which stressed the need to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and soviet power in South Africa - was published in the communist international press, and in August/September the twenty-one conditions of admission to the Comintern were published in *The International*, along with other documents of the Second Congress. Then, in December 1920, the ISL issued a statement on the achievement of "Socialist Unity" in South Africa, indicating acceptance of the twenty-one conditions. Another statement, issued in the same month, dealt with the political tasks of such a new party. While expressing general agreement with the views of the Comintern on the revolutionary role of communist parties, the statement stressed that at the present moment there was no revolutionary situation in South Africa, but that the chief tasks of the party were education, propaganda and organisation. Indeed, preparing for illegal in addition to legal work was considered undesirable in the circumstances; the struggle for the rights of combination, strike action and free speech of the workers should not appear as a conspiracy.[17] It would seem that the ISL, for all its revolutionary talk, in practice had a

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[15] See on the ISL Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 175-221 passim; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 184-261 passim; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 25-49; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 129-134; Sheridan Johns, "The Birth of the Communist Party of South Africa", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. IX, 3 (1976), pp. 372-376; Doreen Musson, *Johnny Gomas, Voice of the Working Class: A Political Biography* (Cape Town, 1989), p. 21, who writes that the ISL gained a number of coloured members in Kimberley in 1919. On early ISL attempts to encourage African trade unionism on the Witwatersrand see F.A. Johnstone, "The IWA on the Rand: socialist organising among Black workers on the Rand, 1917-8", in Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest*; Crain Soudien, "A Brief History of the Industrial Workers of Africa" (paper presented to the History Workshop "The Witwatersrand: Labour, Townships and Patterns of Protest", February 1978). In 1918-1919, ISL militants distributed a pamphlet in Zulu and Sesotho titled *The Bolsheviks Are Coming*, one of the first instances of communist propaganda in the native African languages. The pamphlet is reproduced in Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 115-116, and Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 38-40. The latter work (pp. 36-38) also contains the ISL's Declaration of Principles from January 1919, which spoke of the need for revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the establishment of a Socialist Republic of South Africa. On early forerunners of the CPSA in Cape Town, like the Social Democratic Federation and the Industrial Socialist League, organisations that were like the ISL trying to break out of the constraints of white exclusionism, see W.H. Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist in South Africa, 1903-1947* (Cape Town, 1947); Johns, "The Birth of the Communist Party", pp. 376-377; Evangelos Mantzaris, "The Promise of the Impossible Revolution: The Cape Town Industrial Socialist League, 1918-1921", *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, Vol. 4, 1981.

[16] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 237.

[17] Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 208-209, 217, 220; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 244-246, 250, 256-258; Nathaniel Weyl, *Traitors' End. The Rise and Fall of the Communist Movement in Southern Africa* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1970), pp. 67-68; F. Meli, "Nationalism and Internationalism in South African Liberation", *The African Communist*, No. 57 (1974), p. 48; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 40; Johns, "The Birth of the Communist Party", pp. 374-375, 380-386. See also Johns's unpublished Ph.D.

fairly realistic if not "legalistic" approach to the South African situation.

Another critical note in the ISL's policy statement concerned the question of the relationship to the Labour Party. Lenin's advice to British communists to seek affiliation to the Labour Party was rejected for South Africa. Unlike the British Labour Party, the statement said, the SALP (a party of white workers only and an advocate of racial segregation) lacked the support of the mass of workers, i.e. the Africans, who might turn against anyone who supported it. In 1919-1920, there had been discussions between the ISL and the SALP on the possibilities of co-operation, but these proved abortive and afterwards the SALP was harshly criticised.[18] The fact that the SALP was invited to attend the Second Comintern Congress suggests that Moscow was rather ill-informed about the South African situation, or had as much confidence in the white labour movement as the South African communists themselves. It also shows that at this stage the Comintern's policy of promoting the colonial revolution was not meant for South Africa.

Although the debate on the formation of a united communist party had been going on since 1919, it was only in the first half of 1921 that the decisive steps were made towards the creation of such a party. The ISL's annual conference of January 1921, said to be the "largest" and "most representative" gathering of socialists yet held in South Africa, was attended by members of rival socialist groups, left-wing members of the SALP, and black as well as white trade unionists. The conference adopted the ISL statements of December 1920 and - over the opposition of a minority of white delegates from Johannesburg - a thesis by Bunting on "The ISL and the Coloured and Native Worker" (this will be discussed below). It further decided to create a single party based on the principles of the Third International. While in the event Cape Town's radical socialists proved to be ready to merge into the new centralistic and inevitably Johannesburg-dominated party, the small Durban Social Democratic Party (SDP) would not accept the "spirit" of the twenty-one conditions, which it said "smelled of Russia in pre-war days".[19] Such criticism did not alter the fact that adherence to the decisions of the Comintern proved in the end the only basis on which a united party could be founded.

The CPSA (South African Section of the Communist International) was finally established at a conference in Cape Town in July/August 1921. The party brought together the great majority of South Africa's white radical socialists (altogether not more than a few hundred souls), excluding only a group of syndicalists and the SDP. The party was largely a continuation of the ISL, its headquarters being established in Johannesburg. All the top officials and the majority of the Central Executive were former ISL members and *The International* became the official party organ. The party was overwhelmingly composed of people of British or Eastern European Jewish descent. Afrikaners (some 55% of the white population) were virtually absent from its ranks, and so were the blacks. The manifesto of the CPSA nonetheless declared that the main duty of the party was "to establish the widest and closest possible contact with workers of *all ranks and races* and to propagate the Communist gospel among them [...]". Indeed, the entry of "cheap docile labour" into the working-class movement was "the most deadly blow South Africa can deal to world capitalism".[20]

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dissertation "Marxism-Leninism in a Multi-Racial Environment: The Origins and Early History of the Communist Party of South Africa, 1914-1932" (Harvard University, 1965). Johns refers to work on the socialist and early communist movement in South Africa by the Soviet historian A.B. Davidson, which unfortunately has not been translated into English. Davidson's most important work is *Južnaja Afrika: Stanovlenie Sil Protesta, 1870-1924* (Moscow, 1972). See for a brief summary of this book, *The African Communist*, No. 68 (1977), pp. 101-111.

[18] See note 17. On the question of the British C.P.'s strategy towards the Labour Party, see John Callaghan, "The Background to 'Entrism': Leninism and the British Labour Party", *The Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1986), pp. 380-403.

[19] Johns, "The Birth of the Communist Party", pp. 384-386, 393; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 257, 260-261.

[20] Johns, "The Birth of the Communist Party", pp. 394, 397; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 255-263; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 206-210; A. Lerumo, "How the Party was formed", *The African Communist*, No. 44 (1971). The party's manifesto is published in Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 117-120; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 62-65. For the party's Constitution and Rules, see *ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

The CPSA was in principle open to all races, but there was not a single black person present at its founding conference. At a mass meeting in Cape Town organised to announce the formation of the new party, only whites spoke, although at least half of the two-thousand people present were coloureds and Africans. That the CPSA's non-racial perspective was as yet more a question of theory than practice, was also demonstrated by the fact that the party moved back into offices in the Johannesburg Trades Hall which had been abandoned by the ISL some years ago because of the hostility of white trade unionists to Africans attending the League's meetings.[21]

If South African communists nonetheless recognised the need to involve blacks in the class struggle, this did not mean they could identify with African nationalism or the ANC. African nationalism was seen as a petty-bourgeois movement, hardly an ally in the struggle against capitalism. In Bunting's report on "The ISL and the Coloured and Native Worker" of January 1921, only industrial workers were identified as a revolutionary force among Africans. Of course the struggle of African peasants against white landowners and campaigns against the pass laws and for democratic rights for blacks should be supported. But a slogan like "Africa for the Africans", raised by followers of the black American leader Marcus Garvey, was considered reactionary in South Africa, for here the whites had become a permanent element of the population. In Bunting's view South Africa was a "unique case" of ruling and subject races jostling together, "an epitome of what happens on a world scale". The crucial issue was always how to bring about unity between white and black workers. As usual it was maintained that such unity was prevented by the divisive tactics of the capitalists, while at the same time it was also argued that white workers would sink to the black man's level unless they raised him to their own through combined struggle. As long as the white labour movement was excluding the African and conniving at the policy of repression, Bunting warned, it doomed itself to failure and rendered inevitable what socialism alone could prevent: a race war between white and black.[22] Bunting's analysis was typical of South African communism at this period. It placed South Africa outside the "colonial world" and on one line with the industrially developed countries. What was on the agenda was the class struggle; the struggle for black liberation was merely part of this.

The same tendency was apparent in a report drafted by Ivon Jones for the Comintern, entitled "Communism in South Africa". Ivon Jones and Sam Barlin were sent to the Third Congress in June/July 1921 as delegates of the ISL - they were the first South Africans to attend a Comintern congress. Apparently Jones was repeatedly asked by other delegates "why he wasn't black", which made him feel "quite apologetic about our colour", as he wrote in a letter to Johannesburg. He nevertheless firmly believed that "the African revolution will be led by white workers", even if the "general tendency" was for the latter to engage in collaboration with the "masters". But Jones also spoke on the "national and colonial question", urging the Comintern to consider the problem of the "Negro". Indeed, he asserted that, "Primitive though they be, the African natives are ripe for the message of the Communist International". In his report he stressed the special significance of South Africa for winning the Africans to communism, as Johannesburg was "the industrial university of the African native". On his initiative the Third Congress passed a motion asking the Comintern's Executive Committee (ECCI) to pay serious attention to the "Negro question or the proletarian movement among the Negroes". Jones stayed on in the Soviet Union until his death in 1924 and apparently played an active role on various Comintern committees. It may be assumed that he had a considerable influence on Comintern views on South Africa.[23]

Like Bunting, Jones tried to analyse the manifold divisions which afflicted South African society and inhibited the growth of a strong communist movement. In his report there was again the overestimation of the revolutionary potential of the white working class, the belief in the levelling effect of capitalism, and the expectation that African workers would form class organisations that would eclipse movements like the ANC. In a reference to the "theses on the national and colonial question" adopted by the Second Congress in 1920, Jones claimed that the African's national interests could not be distinguished from his class interests, which formed the basis of a "revolutionary nationalist movement in the fullest meaning of Lenin's term". However, at present the South African communists were absorbed in the white trade union movement, which

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[21] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 34-35, 49; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, p. 198; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 261, 376.

[22] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 259-260.

[23] See note 24.

he admitted threw the more difficult task of "native emancipation" into the background.[24] What this "absorption" in the white labour movement might lead to, became evident only a month after the formation of the CPSA in 1921, when it was disclosed that the Johannesburg branch was adopting a markedly reserved attitude towards Africans who applied for membership. The issue was discussed at three successive branch meetings, and it would seem that a possible influx of Africans was consciously forestalled. The communists were obviously afraid to offend the white trade unions. In practice they were also sceptical about the possibility of turning the "submissive, docile and backward native" into a revolutionary.[25]

3. Rand Revolt and White "United Front" (1922-1924)

In January 1922, communists and left white trade unionists formed a South African section of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).[26] Not much was heard of it during the following months, although the communists were involved in the greatest strike of white workers in South African history, the so-called Rand Revolt. White mineworkers in the Transvaal goldmining industry rose against the attempt of the Chamber of Mines to lower working costs by relaxing the colour bar regulations that protected white jobs against black labour competition, which might lead to the replacement of a few thousand semi-skilled whites by low-paid Africans. The mine-owners' offensive sparked off a violent reaction, issuing in the declaration of a general strike in March 1922 and an armed uprising which was bloodily suppressed. Organised white labour declared it would fight to maintain the colour bar and a white standard of living, in order to "protect the white race" and "preserve a White South Africa".[27] Although the communists said they did not agree with such slogans, they did not hesitate to rally to the support of the white strikers. The onslaught by the Chamber of Mines seemed to confirm the communist theory that capitalism would undermine the higher standards of the white worker and so foster a more homogeneous working class that would learn to embrace interracial solidarity. However, as usual white workers were not at all willing to make a common front with Africans and they ignored communist appeals to do so. At one stage white strikers began to attack and kill

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[24] Jones's report "Communism in South Africa" is published in Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 41-56. See further Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, pp. 398-399; F. Meli, "Comintern aid", pp. 102-103; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 263-265; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 20-23; Johns, "The Comintern", p. 210. See on Jones also A. Lerumo, "D.I. Jones 1883-1924", *The African Communist*, No. 58 (1974). In August 1921, Jones became a member of the ECCI with a consultative voice. During the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, Jones was replaced by Bunting, while Andrews was elected ECCI member for 1922-1923. See on this Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, pp. 454-455; Meli, "Comintern aid", p. 106; Lerumo, "D.I. Jones", p. 68. See for different accounts of the debates at the Second Comintern Congress on the national and colonial question, D. Boersner, *The Bolsheviks and the National and Colonial Question, 1917-1928* (Geneva, 1957), pp. 64-93; Robert C. North, "The Revolution in Asia: M.N. Roy", in Leopold Labedz (ed.), *Revisionism. Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas* (London, 1962), pp. 91-93; James W. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International* (Stanford, 1964), pp. 202-203; E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Vol. 3 (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 253-258; Schatten, *Communism in Africa*, pp. 57-60; Legassick, *Class and Nationalism*, pp. 39-41; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 23-26; Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, pp. 138-139. The theses on the national and colonial question are published *ibid.*, pp. 139-144.

[25] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 268; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 101. According to Musson (*Johnny Gomas*, p. 46), the CPSA "carried with it the paternalism of the old European social democracy on the colonial question".

[26] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 274.

[27] For an account of the Rand Revolt see N. Herd, *1922: The Revolt on the Rand* (Johannesburg, 1966); Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, ch. 13; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 227-283, for an interpretation defending the white workers and the role of the CPSA; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 50-54, and *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 147-151, for a very critical account.

Africans. The communists distributed a leaflet calling on white workers to leave the Africans alone and blamed the assaults on *agents provocateurs*, although not only the Minister of Justice and the police but the strike committee asserted that it happened "wantonly and without any reason or cause".[28]

Remarkably enough, the communists, who were from the outset deeply involved in the events (particularly strike leader Bill Andrews), went so far as to defend the colour bar in the mines. They claimed that the struggle to maintain the colour bar was perhaps "reactionary in form", but "progressive in content", since it was in effect a struggle for white standards for all. The abolition of the colour bar would benefit only a handful of Africans and leave the great bulk in the same low-paid position; to agitate against it was "simply playing the game of the capitalist". It was this kind of opportunistic reasoning which led to communist support for the notorious slogan "Workers of the World, Fight and Unite for a White South Africa".[29] Ivon Jones, watching events from Moscow, said the colour bar provided "the best possible condition for cooperation of white with black", as open competition would lead to the introduction of the ugly forms of race hatred prevalent in America.[30]

After the suppression of the uprising, the bourgeois press published sensational stories about the communists' involvement and an alleged Bolshevist conspiracy.[31] A judicial commission of inquiry quoted long extracts from the proceedings of CI congresses and other communist literature in order to show how Bill Andrews and others were carrying out the instructions of Moscow. It is possible that this kind of paranoia on the part of the ruling class encouraged the communists to glorify the Rand Revolt. In August 1922, indeed, *The International* called the Revolt the "most glorious event in the history of white civilization in South Africa". A pamphlet written by the "Negrophilist" Sidney Bunting, titled "Red Revolt", again defended the colour bar regulations, whose repeal "will not benefit the native worker, rather the reverse". Also of interest was the reaction of the Comintern. *The International* of 18 August, 1922, reported that the ECCI had declared that communists and "other brave labour leaders" honestly fought for racial equality, but the mining magnates' idea of equality was to reduce the white worker's living standards to the black man's level. They "brought the black wage slaves into the field against the white exploited workers", thus the ECCI commented in an apparent attempt to explain communist support for the white mineworkers.[32] The Fourth Comintern Congress in November/December 1922 passed a resolution (drawn up by Karl Radek) in support of the Rand strikers saying they were convinced that "the South African workers [...] will learn how to draw the native workers too into the struggle". Another resolution on the "Negro Question" tried to place the Rand Revolt in an anti-imperialist perspective by maintaining that "England's fear of the threat to its position in Africa is shown clearly in the extreme methods used to suppress the Rand strike".[33]

The questionable attitude of the communists towards organised white labour did by no means end

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[28] Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 268-271, presents the most far-fetched version of this "provocation thesis". At a mass meeting of Africans and coloureds in Cape Town organised to protest against the violent actions of white labour, a resolution moved by communists urging support for the strike "because defeat would mean defeat for all classes, both black and white", was rejected. See Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p. 151.

[29] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 281-285. According to Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba (*Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London and Bloomington, Indiana, 1992), p. 14), the slogan was never a party slogan and the party tried to dissociate itself from it. Unfortunately, they do not give any evidence for this. Lerumo (*Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 51) admits that "at no stage did the Party [...] turn its attention to the African workers" or "propose that they be given skilled work at equal rates of pay".

[30] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 282.

[31] Even the *New York Times* (March 22, 1922) reported that "Smuts Says Rebel Aim Was a Soviet Republic" - quoted in Weyl, *Traitors' End*, p. 82.

[32] Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 245-246, 277-283; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 294-298.

[33] "Theses of the Fourth Comintern Congress on the Negro Question", in Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, p. 399; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 69; Meli, "Comintern aid", p. 106.

with the suppression of the Rand Revolt. The "Pact" of the SALP and the Nationalist Party (that was supported by many Afrikaner workers) that eventually won the general election of June 1924 was actively backed by the CPSA, which shared the hatred of the "anti-worker" government of Jan Smuts and his South African Party. This policy was rationalised in terms of the Comintern's "united front" tactics introduced after December 1921 and sanctioned at the Fourth Congress.[34] Andrews and other prominent communists were making common cause with Labour and Nationalist Party leaders. The CPSA declared that the united front policy was a defensive strategy against the victimisation of strikers and unemployment, its ultimate aim being a "people's government". What such a government would mean for black South Africans became clear at the Labour Party's annual conference in January 1923. F.H.P. Creswell, the party's parliamentary leader, told delegates that Labour's national aim was to strengthen the white race, stop the "kaffir" from turning whites out of industry, and "ransom" Natal for whites by sending Indians back to their homeland. Nevertheless, the communists' second party conference in April 1923 decided by a two to one majority to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party. The minority objected that a united front without blacks would compromise the party's principles, but the majority view was that the application - which was rejected out of hand - was in accordance with the Comintern's and British Communist Party's united front policy. This "well-tried tactic" would enable the CPSA to reach the mass of the white workers and win their approval for joint action with Africans, thus it was rather naively argued.[35]

It does not appear that at this stage the party's notorious "Negrophilist" Sidney Bunting supported the minority view in the CPSA. When Bunting attended the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922 - which elected the CPSA's secretary Bill Andrews to the new ECCI - he did not appear to consider the Comintern's new resolutions on the colonial and "Negro" questions to be in contradiction with the CPSA's white united front line. The "Theses on the Negro Question" declared it "the special duty of communists" to apply the theses on the national and colonial question of 1920 to "the Negro problem" as well, stressing that support for the struggle of blacks against national oppression was also in the interests of the "white toiling masses". In a speech to the congress, Bunting said the CPSA should increase its influence within the white labour movement, while admitting that the task of influencing white workers "to abandon their prejudice against native labour organisation and to cooperate with it" would be extremely difficult. Perhaps even more difficult would be the task of carrying out "propaganda directed among the native workers" and assisting them in developing their own industrial and political activities. Indeed, this aroused "fierce resentment among the Europeans, workers no less than bourgeoisie". Even many communists opposed work among Africans arguing that they should be left to develop "along their own lines". Bunting said he welcomed the resolution on the Negro question, and on his return to South Africa he urged the party to act in the matter of organising black workers and recruiting African members.[36] It is quite clear, however, that the party was not ready for this and that Bunting himself was more impressed by other features of his Moscow experience like the intricate debates on united front tactics and communist support for the workers' daily demands. Back in South Africa, Bunting strongly criticised "leftists" in the party's Cape Town branch whom he said had failed the year before to support the "daily demands" of the Rand strikers, thus "coming dangerously near to playing traitor to the working class". He stressed it was "almost incumbent" on the party to accept the Comintern view on the united front as a matter of discipline, calling for "purity" in the party and warning

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[34] See Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Vol. 3, pp. 386ss.; Günther Nollau, *Die Internationale. Wurzeln und Erscheinungsformen des proletarischen Internationalismus* (Köln, 1959), pp. 67ss.

[35] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 302, 309; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 286-287; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 71-72, 76-77.

[36] Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, "Theses of the Fourth Comintern Congress on the Negro Question", p. 401; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", pp. 97-98; Johns, "The Comintern", pp. 211-212; Meli, "Comintern aid", p. 106; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 27. Bunting's speech appeared under the title "The Labour Movement in South Africa" in *Inprecorr*, Vol. II, No. 98 (1922). A second CPSA delegate to the Fourth Congress, W.H. Harrison of Cape Town, never reached the Soviet Union. Later he criticised the united front policy - see Harrison, *Memoirs*, pp. 95, 98-101.

against any kind of "exceptionalism".[37] At this stage there were indeed no indications of any fundamental disagreements between the CPSA leadership and the Comintern. The ECCI did not appear to press the party to draw practical conclusions from the Comintern resolutions by initiating a more active policy with regard to black South Africans. Obviously, agitation among white labour was considered a higher priority than among black, also in Moscow.[38]

During 1923-1924 Ivon Jones, the CPSA's permanent contact in Moscow who appears to have acted as adviser to the South African comrades, unfolded a near to absurd design for a far-reaching united front strategy. He suggested a united front policy vis-a-vis the Labour Party *in combination with* an anti-imperialist united front involving the black nationalist movement. Within this all-embracing anti-imperialist united front the task of the CPSA would be to bring about working-class unity by becoming the link between white and black workers. In this connection, Jones felt that the CPSA should perhaps modify its unqualified rejection of racial discrimination and look for "planks of common interest" for both sections of the working class.[39] In April 1924, shortly before his death, Jones was in a more sober frame of mind, for he wrote to Andrews that "there is no room for a CP in white South Africa *except* as the watch-dog of the native, as the promoter of rapprochement, watching, *within* the broader organisations, for every opportunity to switch the white movement on right lines on this question [...]".[40] There can be little doubt that Jones, Bunting and other white South African communists were sincere in their professions of sympathy for the cause of black liberation.[41] However, the communists' obsession with the white working class, their paternalistic attitude towards the African and the priorities of the international communist movement effectively discouraged the development of a serious communist policy with regard to the black proletariat.

At least until the first half of 1924, Sidney Bunting continued to adhere to the policy of supporting the Pact. When the Cape Town branch voiced its concern about the CPSA's identifying even with the Nationalist Party, he declared that the Pact was a powerful aid to the social revolution. In view of Bunting's subsequent volte-face, it was a remarkable statement. The communists admitted that the "colour problem" was the "only real difficulty" between them and the Labour Party - although when stripped of its "irrelevant racial matter", this problem would be seen as simply one of uniting "dear" and "cheap" labour in a common fight against capitalism. The CPSA maintained that the Pact was essentially a workers' movement; it was raising election slogans like "Down with Smuts and his gang, and clear the way for the Workers' Government". The "workers" were urged to support the Pact parties in the General Election in June (although some communists had reservations about this and suggested to put up independent communist candidates)

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[37] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 58-61; Johns, "The Comintern", p. 207.

[38] According to Kelley ("The Third International", pp. 103-105) there was a fundamental difference between the positions of the Comintern and the CPSA on the question of support for the African national movement, but there is no evidence for this. Nor is it at all clear, as Johns ("The Comintern", pp. 210-211) suggests, that in the early 1920s the Comintern considered South Africa primarily in the context of the national and colonial question and the "world Negro problem". It would rather seem that during this period the Comintern leadership was just as "albinocentric" in its strategic approach to the South African situation as the CPSA itself. An anti-imperialist ECCI resolution of August 1921, for instance, referred to the hostile attitude of the "farmers of South Africa" (the Afrikaners) towards British imperialism, without mentioning the blacks at all - see Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, p. 289. Further, the Comintern's attitude towards the Rand Revolt clearly demonstrates the importance it attached to the white labour movement.

[39] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 309-312. They comment: "One can only suppose that Jones's judgement was warped by his absence from South Africa, the hectic political atmosphere of the Comintern and his long illness, then in its final stage."

[40] Cope, *Comrade Bill*, p. 296; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 312.

[41] At the Second Comintern Congress the American John Reed stressed the importance of organising the blacks in the United States, but Jones was the first to demand more attention for Africa and for the "Negro Question" as an important aspect of the colonial question. See Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 1, pp. 398-399; Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Vol. 3, p. 253; Meli, "Comintern aid", pp. 102-103.

and it would seem the party hoped it could play a role in a new government.[42] The year 1924 proved to be of crucial significance for both South Africa and the CPSA. The Pact parties won a majority at the polls, formed a coalition government and inaugurated a new era of racial segregation and protective measures in behalf of the white working class. The communists were ignored.

4. The Turn to the Black Working Class (1924-1930)

The CPSA's decision in December 1924 to turn to the black proletariat came somewhat as a surprise. It is not quite clear why, after the victory of the Pact parties and all the support given to them, the CPSA suddenly appealed to the Labour Party not to join the new government as this would mean "sheer surrender". It is possible that since the SALP was clearly the junior partner in the Pact - it won only eighteen seats in parliament as against sixty-three Nationalists - and the CPSA was excluded from the coalition altogether, the communists were afraid that the "working-class parties" would be corrupted by a government heavily dominated by the Nationalist Party.[43] Furthermore, the Pact government lost no time in beginning to bolster the structures of white supremacy and entrench the privileged position of white workers in the labour market. It implemented the Industrial Conciliation Act which excluded Africans from collective bargaining, introduced a "civilised labour policy" of replacing blacks in government employment by poor whites, announced it would legalize the colour bar regulations in the gold mines, and so on. The overtly discriminatory and white supremacist policies of the Pact regime strengthened the hands of the "Negrophilist" minority within the CPSA who wanted to reorient the entire outlook of South African communism. The opposition against the old party line basically consisted of three elements: the Young Communist League (YCL) formed in 1921, the majority of the Cape Town branch[44] and Bunting and his supporters after the latter had changed his mind. It would appear that at the latest by the second half of 1924 Bunting had come to the conclusion there was no future for a predominantly white Communist Party in South Africa. The party had never succeeded in breaking out of its marginal position, and the white working class was now anticipating salvation from the Pact government.

During 1923, the YCL was engaged in an intense debate on the "native question" and the problem of how to integrate Africans in the young communist movement. At a meeting of the Johannesburg branch in November 1923, a resolution was adopted saying that the YCL's "main task is the organisation of the native youth".[45] Around this time the first Africans were invited to attend the YCL's meetings. "It was thrilling to see for the first time two black faces among the many white ones", Eddie Roux, one of the leading members of the YCL, later wrote.[46] Roux became a regular speaker at African meetings, occasionally assisted by party members. At a conference of the YCL in early 1924, however, a stormy discussion erupted between supporters and opponents of the admission of Africans to the organisation, the latter arguing they should be enrolled in a parallel body. When the opponents of integration got the backing of the majority of delegates, the "Negrophilist" minority led by Roux and Willie Kalk decided to appeal to the Executive of the Communist Youth International (CYI) in Berlin for a verdict. The CYI decided to support the minority view,

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[42] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 313-315; Theresa Zania, "The ICU and the White Parliamentary Parties, 1921-1924", *The African Communist*, No. 120 (1990), p. 80.

[43] When the Labour Party entered the new cabinet the communists declared it had "signed its death warrant". See Cope, *Comrade Bill*, p. 294.

[44] Relatively little is known about the important Cape Town branch of the CPSA, which showed indeed on several occasions it had misgivings about the party's white orientation. Legassick (*Class and Nationalism*, p. 5) suggests that its support for the turn to work among non-whites may be explained by some coloured membership and the racially more fluid Cape milieu. Probing the local bases of the communist movement may be a promising line of further research with a view to establishing the social profile of communism and related questions.

[45] Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 74.

[46] Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 35.

which enabled Roux's faction to turn the YCL into an integrated and "officially pro-Native" organisation.[47]

At the CPSA's third conference in December 1924, things came to a head. A motion to apply again for affiliation as a "left-wing" to the Labour Party was opposed by a common front of the YCL, Bunting and delegates of the Cape Town branch, who reported on the support they were receiving from coloureds and Africans in the Cape.[48] Andrews and other defenders of the old line (most of them white trade unionists) pointed as usual to the decision of the Comintern on Britain, but this time they were defeated by a narrow majority. It was argued successfully by the "pro-Native" party wing that the party should formally recognize the strategic importance of starting serious work among the black workers. A resolution was passed declaring that a united front could not be built from the top and that "the problems of the working class can only be solved by a United Front of all workers irrespective of colour". Roux stressed the need to "guide the native workers into the labour movement", while his fellow YCL member Willie Kalk even insisted that the party "must recognise the necessity of supporting every form of native movement which tends to undermine or weaken capitalism and imperialism". Kalk said the party must use every instrument to induce the trade unions to admit African workers or, failing this, must organise them into unions of their own and "apply United Front tactics". Roux called the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), a rapidly growing black trade union, the "most important factor for the Communist Party in the present situation". At the conference three African representatives of the ICU - two of them also members of the YCL - were present in the capacity of "visitors". One of them said that the party "has got to prove to the masses that it is different [...]. The natives look upon the whites as one class and their enemies". The conference elected a completely new Executive dominated by Bunting, Roux and other "Negrophilists", and with the Scotchman Jimmy Shields as general secretary. The change in line resulted in part of the old guard of white trade unionists and old-style socialists dropping away from the party. One of them declared that the CPSA had become an "anti-white" party and that Africans "could not possibly appreciate the noble ideas of Communism". Men like Bill Andrews remained members of the party but effectively withdrew in the white trade union movement, where they certainly did important work in trying to prevent it from becoming purely reactionary. Thus December 1924 was a turning point in the history of the CPSA. Apart from the directive issued to the YCL in early 1924, the introduction of the new line was decided upon without outside intervention.[49]

At the beginning of 1925, the CPSA was more isolated than ever before, its membership having

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[47] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 62-65; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 34-38; Meli, "Comintern aid", p. 103. During the 1924 election campaign YCL members and Bunting tried to have demands relating to African grievances included in the CPSA's election manifesto. But as the majority of the Central Executive were afraid to offend the white workers, and therefore not keen on mentioning the Africans at all, they were only partially successful. The party's election manifesto from May 1924 is reproduced in Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 77-80.

[48] According to Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London and New York, 1983), p. 7, the initiative for the switch in 1924 came from the Cape Town branch, which had a substantial coloured membership.

[49] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 66-69, 86; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 326; Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 58; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 28-29; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 105; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid*, p. 15; Obituary of Willy Kalk, *The African Communist*, No. 119 (1989), pp. 21-22. See Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 80-84, for the Draft Programme adopted by the party conference in December 1924. Musson (*Johnny Gomas*, p. 47) claims that the change in line was inspired by the Comintern, "which was at this time engaged in a debate on the Negro question in the United States", but she does not produce any further evidence for this. According to Cope (*Comrade Bill*, p. 296), after 1924 the CPSA "went through nearly 15 years of uneven struggle marked by frustration and isolation", thus completely ignoring the party's position of influence among black South Africans in the late 1920s. An important source for the history of communist activity in the white trade union movement in the 1920s and 1930s are the Records of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA Papers) housed at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

fallen from a few hundred in 1921 to two hundred after the Rand Revolt and some 150 after the third party conference.[50] However, new activities were to infuse new life into the fledgling party. Under the guidance of T.W. Thibedi (for years the only African member of the ISL and CPSA) a night school for semi-literate Africans was started in Johannesburg, laying the basis for future black party cadres. Further, the communists began to penetrate the ICU, established in Cape Town in 1919 and under the leadership of the charismatic Clements Kadalie rapidly developing into a black mass movement. In 1924 a number of leading ICU members in Cape Town had joined the party, and in Johannesburg African members of the YCL founded the first ICU branch in the Transvaal. Kadalie had on occasion attacked the communists, but now he seemed to tolerate their new position within the ICU.[51]

The fourth party conference in December 1925 was attended by the first black delegates, with Thibedi being elected as the first African to the Executive. The conference declared that the immediate objective of the party was a "Workers' and Peasants' Government", apparently defined as an intermediate stage on the road towards socialism. In June 1926, the Executive resolved that the *South African Worker*, the party's new journal, should start publishing articles in the native African languages. By the second half of 1926 there were five black communists on the ICU's National Council, but friction with non-communists was beginning to undermine their position. Kadalie, who tried to gain concessions from the government by becoming "respectable", began to seek support from white liberals and the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in Amsterdam. Liberals urged him to get rid of the communists, who on their part warned the ICU against their new bourgeois advisers and against lining up with the "labour reformism" of the IFTU instead of the RILU and the Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism to be held in Brussels in 1927. In December 1926, Kadalie forced the communists out of the National Council, and a few months later ICU members were instructed to keep aloof from the CPSA. The communists tried to mobilize the ICU rank and file against the expulsions which resulted in several branches lodging their protest, but communist work within the union had not brought enough converts to reverse the turn of events. Kadalie's playing on feelings of racial antagonism towards the "white-controlled" CPSA contributed considerably to his ability to retain the backing of the ICU's rank and file.[52]

During the years 1927-1928, communist organisers formed a number of new African trade unions composed of industrial workers who had been neglected by the ICU, thus partly filling the vacuum that the rather amorphous ICU left behind as it began to disintegrate into warring factions. Most of these industrial unions were established in the emerging manufacturing industries on the Witwatersrand which employed African workers who were often of a semi-skilled type and recruited among the more stable urbanised section of the black population. The new class of factory workers constituted the hard core of the emerging

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[50] At the time of the Fourth Comintern Congress in late 1922 the party claimed two hundred members, clearly having lost a number after the Rand Revolt. By 1927-1928 the party had only 150 white members. See Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 52, who says that in 1922 many white trade unionists left the party to throw their weight behind the Pact; note 73 below. If we assume that the figure for 1927-1928 reflected the position as it was ever since the party conference in December 1924, we may conclude that another fifty white members left the party after the conference. Indeed the number of white party members remained the same for several years also after 1928.

[51] Sheridan W. Johns, III, "Trade Union, Political Pressure Group, or Mass Movement? The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa", in Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), pp. 707, 713, 719; Zania, "The ICU and the White Parliamentary Parties", p. 78; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 70-1; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 39; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 354; Theresa Zania, "The ICU reaches its peak - and begins to break up", *The African Communist*, No. 123 (1990), pp. 70-71. See also Clements Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU. The Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist in South Africa*, edited by Stanley Trapido (London, 1970), pp. 85, 153-154.

[52] Johns, "The ICU", pp. 721-726; P.L. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (Cape Town, 1978), pp. 106-109; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 161-169, 202; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 72-75; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 354-360; Theresa Zania, "The I.C.U.", *The African Communist*, No. 38 (1969), pp. 71-75; Meli, "Nationalism and Internationalism", p. 48; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 29; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 84; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 106.

African proletariat and were easier to organise than the migrant workers in the mine compounds or the general mass of unskilled labourers. In March 1928, industrial unions of black workers in the furniture, clothing, baking, laundry and engineering industries were brought together in the South African Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU). The Federation, which claimed to represent some 15,000 workers by mid-1928, had a white president, but a black general secretary (Jimmy La Guma), chief organiser (Thibedi) and vice-president (Moses Kotane), all of them communists. By the time of its second conference in September 1929, the FNETU comprised some ten unions of predominantly African workers. In the same year it affiliated to the RILU, although its communist leadership avoided laying too much stress on its political orientation and rather focused on immediate economic issues. Both RILU and FNETU stressed the ultimate goal of achieving non-racial unions in South Africa, even at the expense, it would seem, of refraining from attacks on the reactionary policies of white trade unions.[53] At the RILU's fourth international congress in 1928, indeed, the amalgamation of workers of all races into a single trade union centre was urged as "the fundamental task of the revolutionary wing of the trade union movement in South Africa".[54] In keeping with these directives, the communists distributed pamphlets urging African workers to unite with white workers. Yet the reality was, as Jack and Ray Simons write, that parallel unions and a separate non-white trade union centre were formed, which "mirrored the white workers' racial exclusiveness, and represented a significant departure from the communist ideal of inter-racial solidarity".[55]

5. The Communist Movement and the "Black Republic" Controversy (1927-1928)

The CPSA's fifth conference in December 1926, January 1927, was a demonstration of the party's new orientation on the black proletariat, although white workers were by no means lost sight of. The party had by now some hundred African members, out of a total of approximately 250. The conference was attended by delegates of all races and elected three Africans to the Executive. It was decided to train "cadres of class-conscious native workers", form party branches in African areas and put forward democratic demands like the extension of the Cape's non-racial franchise to the rest of South Africa. The conference further declared that an immediate campaign should be started against the "enslaving" pass laws and the Pact government's new Segregation Bills, which were denounced as "an aggravated measure of colonial oppression" that would "undermine the standards of the white workers also". Bunting said that no government had done more to incite racial hatred than the Pact, but at the same time white labour was naively called upon to support a general strike of Africans (which never materialised) against the new Bills, "if only in their own interests". The CPSA obviously tried to combine practical support for the economic and political struggles of Africans with theoretical non-racialism and propaganda among whites.[56]

In July 1927, the CPSA left the Johannesburg Trades Hall and moved its offices to a predominantly

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[53] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 376-377, 379, 400; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 207-209; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 82-83; Jon Lewis, "The New Unionism: Industrialisation and Industrial Unions in South Africa, 1925-1930", in Eddie Webster (ed.), *Essays in Southern African Labour History* (Johannesburg, 1978), pp. 133-135; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 45-46; Jack Simons, "Builders of the Communist Party", *The African Communist*, No. 108 (1987), p. 34.

[54] Quoted in Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 377.

[55] *Ibid.* See also Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p. 213. For examples in the late 1920s of the refusal of white workers to support strikes of their black counterparts in the same industries, see Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 207-210; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 378-379, 384-385, 401; Lewis, "The New Unionism", pp. 137-138.

[56] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 344, 388; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", p. 98; Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union*, p. 98; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 29; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 106. For the party's propaganda among whites and white hooliganism at communist meetings, see Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 42-46.

African part of the city. According to Roux, this was "the final break with the old line".[57] It was indeed a symbolic act, emphasizing that the "Africanisation" of the party had become an irreversible trend. Now that the communists had been expelled from the ICU, the party also began to pay more attention to the ANC. For most of the period up to the 1940s, the ANC was a moderate organisation led by African chiefs and black intellectuals who believed in British constitutional justice and strove for a gradual achievement of equal opportunity for Africans in the political and economic field. From time to time it went through brief periods of radicalization, whereby its usual eschewing of direct mass action was temporarily put aside. This happened during 1917-1920 and again during the years 1927-1929, when indignation over the Pact government's Segregation Bills and other repressive measures led to a new wave of militancy. Indeed, in 1927 Jimmy La Guma and John Gomas, both members of the party's Cape Town branch, were elected secretary and president respectively of the ANC branch in the Western Cape.[58] The ANC also accepted the invitation to attend the Congress against Colonial Oppression in February 1927, and sent its radical member Josiah Gumede as delegate to Brussels. The other South African delegates to this congress were La Guma for the CPSA and Dan Colraine, a white trade unionist representing the pro-communist "minority movement" in the South African Trade Union Congress. Gumede, who was not a communist himself, declared at Brussels that "the Communist Party is the only party that stands behind us and from which we can expect something". With a view to bringing Black Africans into the anti-imperialist movement, and possibly in an attempt to take the wind out of the sails of the Garvey movement,[59] the Brussels Congress adopted a resolution on the "Negro Question" which asserted the principle of "Africa for the Africans". It also passed a resolution submitted by the South Africans calling on "all workers and oppressed peoples of South Africa, irrespective of race, colour or creed", to unite for the right of self-determination, the overthrow of capitalist and imperialist domination, and the removal of restrictions on freedom of organisation.[60]

After the Brussels Congress the South African delegates travelled to the Soviet Union, where Gumede was quite impressed by what he believed to be the policy of equality and national autonomy for the inhabitants of the Central Asian Republics. It seems that, after his return to South Africa, Gumede's reports on his experiences in the Soviet Union were well-received by the ANC. At the ANC's annual meeting in

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[57] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 77.

[58] Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 30. See on the ANC Mary Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (Harmondsworth, 1966); Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress* 1912-1952 (London, 1970); Philip Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-1920: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand", in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and social change in South Africa. African class formation, culture, and consciousness, 1870-1930* (London and New York, 1982). Jimmy La Guma and John Gomas, two "coloured" communists from the Cape, are among the most interesting figures in the history of the CPSA. Unfortunately, La Guma's biography has not been published (see note 1), but Musson's recent biography of Gomas provides interesting material, particularly on his ambiguous attitude towards the white working class. If on the one hand Gomas felt the need to support the party's aim of trying to "wake up" the white workers, on the other hand he had less illusions about them than many of his white comrades and would on occasion burst out in violent attacks on them. See Musson, *Johnny Gomas*, pp. 71, 77-81, 95 (note 3), 103. According to Musson (p. 117), in his unpublished memoirs Gomas looks back on his party period much like Padmore did, viz. that blacks were used by white communists for political purposes. For a reaction to Musson's book by an old party comrade from Cape Town, see Ray Alexander in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (January 1991), pp. 80-83.

[59] See on the failure of the American communists to woo the Garvey movement Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, pp. 303ss.; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", pp. 92-94. For the League against Imperialism, see Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, pp. 11-13, 24-25; Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, pp. 322-330.

[60] Italiaander, *Schwarze Haut im roten Griff*, ch. 2; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 353, 389; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", p. 101; Johns, "The Comintern", p. 216; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 111; Francis Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: A History of the ANC* (London and Bloomington, Indiana, 1989), p. 75.

June 1927, Gumede, who reiterated that the CPSA was the only party that sincerely fought for the emancipation of the black oppressed, was elected president-general and the communist E.J. Khaile secretary-general. Later that year, La Guma and Gumede visited the Soviet Union again, this time to attend the October celebrations - it seems that the Russians asked the CPSA to send two delegates representing the "Native community". When they returned in January 1928, the CPSA and the ANC held a combined meeting in Cape Town, on which occasion the president of the Western Cape ANC declared that "it had become necessary for the members of Congress to realise that the Communist Party were the real friends of the oppressed people". Gumede said he had been to the "new Jerusalem", that the central issue in South Africa was to remove "the monstrous burden of Imperialism", and that all races suffered under the "capitalist class which grinds the faces of White and Black alike the world over". Further, they should unite with the only country in the world where freedom existed, "Workers' Russia".[61] In Gumede the communists had obviously found an ideal fellow-traveller, who did much to popularize communist ideas among the members of the ANC. However, the more conservative section of the ANC remained a dominant force on the background, while the new emphasis on the anti-imperialist struggle was creating problems within the CPSA itself.

The Brussels Congress and the launching of the League against Imperialism marked a new stage in the international communist endeavour to promote the struggle for national liberation in the colonies. Of particular importance was what happened on the occasion of La Guma's and Gumede's visits to Moscow. As party representative La Guma discussed the South African situation with members of the ECCI, in particular Bukharin. The Comintern's interest in South Africa was clearly on the increase, and now the ECCI began to uphold the view that, rather than being a direct anti-capitalist proletarian struggle, the struggle in South Africa was first of all concerned with the national oppression of the Africans by British and Boer imperialism. The primary task of the revolution was therefore to overthrow the rule of the white imperialists and fight for the national liberation of the African people. It would seem that La Guma subscribed to these views - and perhaps was even the co-auctor intellectualis of them - and agreed with Comintern leaders that the immediate goal of the South African revolutionary struggle should be to set up a democratic independent "Native republic", which would give white workers and other "non-exploiting whites" certain "minority rights". An ECCI "draft resolution on South Africa", prepared by the "Negro sub-committee" of the Comintern's Anglo-American Secretariat (which was responsible for African affairs also) and supported by La Guma, stated that the CPSA's main slogan should be "an independent Native republic, as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government". The resolution was to be discussed by the CPSA and submitted to the next Comintern Congress.[62]

The response of the South African party leadership to the ECCI draft resolution as well as the Brussels resolutions was a sceptical one. They welcomed the ANC's turn to the left and urged it to pursue a fighting policy against capitalism, but a national-revolutionary struggle for African independence was seen as something quite different. Bunting believed that a successful revolution was not yet possible because of the "extreme backwardness" of the African masses. He disapproved of "the instructions" from Moscow which

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[61] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 219, 394-395, 402; Harrison, *Memoirs*, p. 103; Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, p. 175; Benson, *The Struggle for a Birthright*, pp. 50-51; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p. 211; Meli, *South Africa belongs to us*, p. 76; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid*, p. 18, according to whom Gumede even met Stalin.

[62] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 389-390; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 88-89; Johns, "The Comintern", pp. 204-205, 218-219; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 32-33; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid*, p. 17, who write that La Guma told Comintern officials of the party debate on strategy after 1922 and the potential for forming a broad alliance with black organisations; Kelley, "The Third International", pp. 111, 114. Kelley suggests it was La Guma, and La Guma alone, who was responsible for the introduction of the "preliminary" draft resolution, the black republic slogan and a distinctly national-revolutionary and anti-imperialist position in accordance with Comintern policy, although he admits that La Guma's position was adopted by the CPSA only through pressure by the Comintern. Indeed, much remains unclear as to the origins of the black republic policy. Cf. Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, p. 306; Boersner, *The Bolsheviks and the National and Colonial question*, p. 178; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", pp. 101-102; Johns, "The Comintern", pp. 217-221; Legassick, *Class and Nationalism*, pp. 26ss., who attempts an analysis of the evolution of Marxist thinking on the national revolution.

were "drawn up by people with insufficient knowledge of S.A. African affairs".[63] According to Roux, to the majority of party members the new slogan came "like a bolt from the blue" - they saw it as Garveyism and as being in opposition to internationalism and non-racialism. "All the white communists were indignant", he writes, "and black communists like Thibedi, who had been trained in the old school, equally so".[64] However, for La Guma and a number of other party members, a national-revolutionary reorientation of party policy was obviously less of a problem. The South African supporters of the new Comintern line were probably a small minority but ready to question the old belief in the primacy of the "non-racial" working-class struggle on which the majority view was essentially based. On his second visit to Moscow in late 1927, La Guma presented a statement on the "South African Situation" informing the ECCI that the Executive of the CPSA did not approve of the draft resolution, although the members of the Cape Town branch, including most of the whites, were said to be supporting it.[65]

In a subsequent letter to the ECCI, La Guma insisted that the white workers refused to co-operate with Africans. He followed Bukharin in maintaining that white workers were "soaked with imperialist ideology" and said they would have to be "forced" into understanding that their future lay in unity with the blacks, who were rapidly developing a "national consciousness". In La Guma's view, the black republic slogan and the national struggle for independence from colonial rule would act as a catalyst for the working-class revolution. The majority of the Executive, including most of the black members, nonetheless rejected the slogan. Three years after they had turned to the black working class, most South African communists were still highly suspicious of African nationalism and clinging to their belief in the proletarian class struggle and the possibility of winning over the white workers. They declined to abandon the perspective of a struggle directly for socialism and accept the intermediate stage of a national revolution. Indeed, some of them claimed that the mass of the white workers were about to desert the Labour Party in disillusion and turn to the CPSA. At the party's sixth conference in December 1927, Bunting openly voiced the scepticism of the majority of the Executive about the slogan again. While acknowledging that it was based on Lenin's theses on the national and colonial question from 1920, he argued that national liberation movements "usually become a prey to imperialist and capitalist corruption" and that Africans were in effect not aspiring at secession from British rule, which they generally preferred to "Dutch rule". Although white workers had to be accustomed to "a prospect of black power", the slogan was unjustly directed "against the whites as such, against large numbers of workers and peasants because they are white".[66]

The argument between opponents and supporters of the black republic line was carried on until the Sixth Comintern Congress held in July to September 1928. The Executive appointed Bunting, his wife Rebecca and Eddie Roux, all of them whites and opponents of the slogan, as the party's delegates to Moscow to defend the dominant view on the basis of a "majority report". During the first half of 1928 another white communist couple, Douglas G. Wolton and his wife Molly (both recent immigrants to South Africa), had come to the fore as strong supporters of the black republic slogan. At the CPSA's sixth conference, indeed, the rising star Wolton had been made party secretary. In 1928 the Woltons sent a "minority report" to Moscow which, together with La Guma's missives prior to the congress, undoubtedly contributed to the cool reception the South African delegates received from the ECCI and the "Negro sub-committee" upon their arrival in the Soviet Union. To their surprise the South Africans were accused by

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[63] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 390-394.

[64] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 89-90. This clearly contradicts Kelley's claim that there was a "conflict of ideology" between African and white communists, if perhaps not his contention that white communists had an "extreme distaste" of African nationalism - Kelley, "The Third International", pp. 106-107.

[65] According to Wilfred Harrison (*Memoirs*, p. 103), rather an old-style socialist who saw no particular reason to "take up the Native question", the Cape Town branch rejected the black republic slogan.

[66] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 394-399; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 31, 33-39; Kelley, "The Third International", p. 112; Nyawuza, "The Road to the 'Black Republic'", p. 45; Musson, *Johnny Gomas*, pp. 47-48.

black American delegates and others of being "white chauvinists".[67] Bunting, who delivered three speeches to the congress, reasserted his allegedly "exceptionalist" point of view that the "native republic" slogan was a denial of the factual, unique, situation in South Africa, where the working class comprised both black and white. He explained that the majority of the CPSA opposed the new slogan, because on the one hand there was no black bourgeoisie or a movement for an independent African republic and on the other hand there was also a class of white exploited workers and peasants. According to Bunting, in South Africa the class struggle and the national-revolutionary struggle were "practically coincident and simultaneous', while an anti-imperialist movement involving both white workers and African nationalists - as the draft resolution was urging - was impossible. It was the task of the CPSA to take up the cause of black and white workers alike, with a view to harmonising the national and class movements and neutralizing white labour chauvinism. Bunting claimed that the vulnerable African working-class movement found the occasional support, or "even the bare neutrality", of the white trade unions "of incalculable value". White workers were "unquestionably going to be alienated" by the black republic slogan and perhaps going to look for a "Fascist alliance with the bourgeoisie". Bunting's endeavours to convince the Comintern that not the national or the agrarian question but the working-class struggle of black and white against capitalism was the main feature of the South African situation, were all in vain. The ECCI draft resolution was approved by congress and submitted to the "Negro sub-committee" to be definitively drawn up.[68]

Although Bunting regarded the new line as "switching off from class struggle to race struggle", he and his supporters in the CPSA loyally accepted the black republic slogan. In a pamphlet titled "Imperialism in South Africa", Bunting tried to explain the meaning of the new slogan to the party membership. He wrote that the liberation of South Africa involved three major freedoms: independence from British imperialism, the emancipation of Africans from white domination, and freedom for workers and peasants of all races from bourgeois rule. White workers and poor whites had nothing to fear from "native rule"; it was not a matter of destroying the whites, but the regime of white domination and exploitation. In the place of the rule of race over race should come "a workers' and peasants' government, predominantly native in character, based on equality and on the preponderance of the natives' claim to the country". Bunting's explanation sounded as if he tried to reconcile the old and the new line. In a letter to the Johannesburg *Star*, he presented the black republic slogan in terms of racial equality.[69]

The ECCI resolution on South Africa of 19 October, 1928, was the Comintern's most serious

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[67] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 78, 86-92, 101; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 59-65, 92; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 399, 405-406; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 33-39; Nyawuza, "The Road to the 'Black Republic'", p. 47; Obituary of Douglas Wolton, *The African Communist*, No. 112 (1988), pp. 83-84. Roux gives a lively account of the "intolerant" atmosphere in Moscow and the hostile attitude to the South African delegates. See also Endre Sík, *The History of Black Africa*, Vol. 2 (Budapest, 1966), p. 153, who maintains that the South Africans were "racial chauvinists".

[68] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 92-98; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 406-408; Johns, "The Comintern", pp. 222-226. Simons and Simons deny that the Comintern "imposed" the black republic slogan - as argued by Roux - and accuse Roux of being motivated by hostility to the Soviet Union and the Comintern. Lerumo (*Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 64) speaks of "fundamental differences" between the Comintern and the CPSA, which "went to the heart of the ideological approach to the colonial and national question". Bunting (*Moses Kotane*, p. 39) simply says that "the eventual Native Republic slogan flowed from an interchange of views between the Comintern and the CPSA".

[69] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 99-104; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 64-65; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 386, 410; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 311-312. According to Roux, the final version of the black republic slogan read: "A South African Native Republic, as a stage towards a Workers' and Peasants' Government, with full protection and equal rights for all national minorities". See also Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 89. From the ECCI resolution of October 1928 one would gather it read: "An independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic with full, equal rights for all races."

attempt ever to make a fundamental analysis of the South African situation.[70] Although the resolution made some valid observations, it would seem there were three major flaws in it. Firstly, it was stated that the national question, which lay "at the foundation of the revolution in South Africa", was based on the agrarian question, there being an "almost complete" landlessness of the African population. This was essentially true, but the assertion that the black peasantry constituted "the basic moving force" in the revolution - if "under the leadership" of the working class - revealed a gross underestimation of the effective mechanisms of control black peasants and agrarian labourers were subject to. The rural proletariat suffered under much harsher restrictive measures than urban workers, and it is therefore no wonder that the CPSA never succeeded in establishing itself in the countryside.[71] A second point concerned the claim that the bourgeoisie was turning the "negro reformists" of the ANC and ICU into its "agents" and that the CPSA should fight them. The party was also urged to transform the ANC into "a fighting nationalist revolutionary organisation" and develop in it "the leadership of the workers and the Communist Party". But how could the party achieve this if moderate black leaders were to be branded as "agents" of capitalism? Perhaps the most serious flaw in the resolution concerned the assessment of the position of the white workers. The resolution referred to the "profound social contradictions" between the black workers and the whites, who were "corrupted" and "demoralised" by the "imperialist" and racist ideology of the Labour Party. Against all evidence, however, it was claimed - a communist hobbyhorse - that the influence of the SALP was "undermined by the steady worsening of the material conditions of the mass of the white workers". The resolution stated that the CPSA "must explain to the native masses that the black and white workers are not only allies, but are the leaders of the revolutionary struggle of the native masses against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialism. A correct formulation of this task and intensive propagation of the chief slogan of a native republic will result not in the alienation of the white workers from the Communist Party, not in segregation of the natives, but, on the contrary, in the building up of a solid front of all toilers against capitalism and imperialism."[72]

This was really an amazing instance of communist wishful thinking.

6. The CPSA's Influence at Its Peak (1928-1930)

The new policy was officially inaugurated at the CPSA's seventh conference in December 1928, January 1929, which adopted a new constitution modelled on that of the British party and a new programme based on Bunting's anti-imperialist pamphlet. While the conference was attended by twenty blacks and ten whites, the newly elected Executive Bureau (EB) - like the Central Committee (CC) a new party organ - consisted of six whites and three Africans. This was only a slight improvement on the position during the previous year, when the old Central Executive included three to four Africans out of a total of thirteen members. On the other hand the party's membership had notably increased. From some 350 in 1927 (of whom two hundred

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[70] The ECCI resolution, as published in *The Communist International* of 15 December 1928, is reproduced in Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 126-132, and Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 91-97. According to Lerumo (p. 65) it was "a remarkable Marxist-Leninist appraisal of the fundamental structure of the character of South African society", thus overlooking its weak points. See on the resolution also Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 2, pp. 552-553. There are references to the South African situation and the tasks of the CPSA also in the "Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries" adopted by the Sixth Comintern Congress and in the ECCI "Resolution on the Negro Question" of 26 October, 1928. See *ibid.*, pp. 546-547, 555; Johns, "The Comintern", pp. 228-231; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 90-91; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 31-32.

[71] According to Brian Bunting (*South African Communists Speak*, p. 138), party officials "constantly complained" that their work and influence in the rural areas were far less than they should have been.

[72] Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 130-131.

were black) it rose to 1,750 in mid-1928 (of whom 1,600 were black) and nearly 3,000 in 1929.[73] The new party programme demanded the "complete equality of races", "self-determination of the African peoples" and independence from the British Empire, while white workers were called upon to abandon their role as a "tinsel aristocracy". "Real labour unity can only be achieved by first removing the unequal status of the native people", the programme said. In contrast to the CPSA's former position, indeed, the smashing of racial discrimination and the democratic revolution were now seen as a pre-condition to the building of a classless society. Nevertheless, the majority of delegates accepted the new programme on the apparent understanding that racial or national emancipation and class emancipation overlapped and that the black republic implied a workers' and peasants' republic, "for practically all natives are workers and peasants" and "probably only a workers' and peasants' victory can achieve such a republic".[74] It appears that the aim of a black republic was interpreted as an "Africanised" version of the struggle for socialism, rather than a national-democratic stage preceding it. Some days after the party conference Bunting wrote to Roux (then in Britain): "We agreed on interpreting the slogan as meaning much the same as a (predominantly and characteristically Native) workers' and peasants' republic, and not meaning a black dictatorship".[75] The CPSA was as yet flexible enough to ensure that the new slogan would not mean a complete break with past practices or lead to sectarianism. Indeed, the slogan *itself* was not the main cause of the crisis that lay ahead.

Despite the controversy inside the party over the black republic slogan during 1927-1928, it was going from strength to strength. New black cadres were trained, the number of party members increased substantially, African trade unions organised by communists continued to grow, and the impact of party propaganda and the party press on the black population was ever more widely felt. "At last the masses of South Africa are turning to the CP for help from their terrible conditions", the *South African Worker* wrote in February 1928; the paper spoke of the party's "mushroom-like growth".[76] Most of the new adherents were semi-literate urban Africans. The CPSA also won some African intellectuals, but many of these were nationalists who did not feel at home in a party in which whites still played a leading role. The party even

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[73] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 95, 101, 104; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p. 217; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 406, 410, 660 (note 58); Johns, "The Comintern", p. 203; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", p. 98; Harrison, *Memoirs*, p. 104; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 30; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 97, 99. Cf. Kelley ("The Third International", p. 110), who writes that the party had only fifty African members in January 1927 and that the whites were not prepared to accept Africans to lead it. Elsewhere Roux writes that by 1929 the party had 2,000 members: Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 69. Although a report submitted by Wolton to the ECCI in September 1929 stated that out of a membership of 3,000 only 300 were in financial standing, it meant that by 1929-1930 the CPSA was about as big - or as small - as the British party, while it probably had a greater influence - see CPGB membership figures in Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21: The Origins of British Communism* (London, 1969), p. 312; Paul-Wolfgang Herrmann, *Die Communist Party of Great Britain. Untersuchungen zur geschichtlichen Entwicklung, Organisation, Ideologie und Politik der CPGB von 1920-1970* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1976), p. 417.

[74] A report on the seventh party conference in the *South African Worker* and the new party programme are published in Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 97-106. See further Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 104-105; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 352, 410-411.

[75] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 105. The confusion about the political status of the black republic would become even greater when it is realised that, strictly speaking, it figured in a three-stage model: first a national democratic revolution, then a "workers' and peasants' government", finally a socialist or classless society. See on this Nyawuza, "Left, Right on the Road to the Black Republic", pp. 54-55; Meli, "Nationalism and Internationalism", p. 48; Meli, *South Africa belongs to us*, p. 73. As will be shown below, the confusion never disappeared. In the 1940s, although the black republic slogan had been dropped, party members were still wondering what "the next stage" was to be. See I. Edwards, "Recollections: the Communist Party and worker militancy in Durban, early 1940s", *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (February/March 1986), p. 69.

[76] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 399.

gained substantial support in African locations in small Transvaal towns like Potchefstroom and Vereeniging. With the ICU falling apart and the ANC unable or unwilling to develop into a real mass organisation, the CPSA stepped in as militancy among Africans was again on the increase. At the same time, the party participated in joint action with other organisations, like in the "free speech" movement launched in the first half of 1928. Of this united front organisation Gumede was president and Wolton secretary, so that the party was in a good position to increase its influence within a broad political spectrum. On the other hand, the position of communists and their sympathisers within the ANC was attacked by conservatives and moderates who saw in the CPSA's revolutionary black republic slogan reason to steer clear of the party.[77]

In the general election of 1929, Bunting campaigned as a communist candidate in the Transkei (an African "Reserve" that was part of the Cape Province and enjoying its non-racial franchise) and Wolton in a predominantly coloured district near Cape Town. Although Bunting in particular was campaigning bravely, against overwhelming odds, for "national independence" and democratic rights, both men were heavily defeated. Wolton used this opportunity to again accuse Bunting of "chauvinistic errors" like discouraging the growth of an African party leadership, patronizing the black man and trying to ensure that the whites would continue to direct party affairs.[78] The Woltons' departure for the Soviet Union in the middle of 1929 to study at the Lenin School, meant that the party's assistant secretary Albert Nzula, a disciple of Wolton, took over as general secretary, the first African to hold this post.[79] Bunting however remained the party's major strategist.

In August 1929, Bunting arranged a conference in Johannesburg to form a broad organisation with a limited but militant "national-revolutionary" objective. From this emerged the League of African Rights (LAR), whose leadership included prominent members of the CPSA, ANC, ICU fractions and FNETU. In fact, Bunting acted on suggestions made at the Sixth Comintern Congress and in discussions with the colonial commission of the CPGB. The Comintern felt that instead of massive recruiting of Africans who had no real understanding of Marxist principles, the party should be a select organisation of trained revolutionaries working through a larger mass organisation under communist guidance. The LAR planned to organise a mass petition for African democratic rights and demonstrations against the pass laws, and quickly developed into a major instrument for the CPSA to mobilise the masses. The communists were preparing for strikes and demonstrations on December 16 under the slogan of "Long Live the Native Republic", when the party received a telegram from the ECCI ordering "the immediate dissolution" of the LAR. Shortly afterwards a letter arrived from Moscow in which the League was denounced as a "reformist" organisation that was putting forward reformist demands and bolstering up "reformist leaders" like Gumede (who acted as the LAR's president). It was now maintained that the party would not be able to "control" the LAR and the communists were ordered to take distance from "petty-bourgeois" reformist bodies like the ANC. The organizers of the most successful front organisation the party had ever set up were "dumbfounded" - the more so since they had started it on the instigation of the Comintern itself - but nonetheless they loyally

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[77] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 79-82; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 402-404; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 204-207, 214-216; Johns, "Marxism-Leninism in a Multi-Racial Environment", p. 378.

[78] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 105-112; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 217-223; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 410-414. A bizarre feature of the 1929 election campaign was that La Guma rallied to the support of a non-communist candidate opposing Wolton. For this spectacular breach of party discipline he was expelled from the party, although at a later stage he was reinstated.

[79] Nzula was removed as general secretary in 1930 because of his heavy drinking - see Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 118-119. In mid-1931 he went to the Soviet Union to study at Kutvu, the first black South African to do so. Other black communists were to follow suit, including J.B. Marks, Moses Kotane and Edwin Mofutsanyana. See on Nzula, Historicus, "Albert Nzula. Our First African General Secretary", *The African Communist*, No. 65 (1976); Robin Cohen, "Albert Nzula: The road from Rouxville to Russia", in Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest*; Cohen (ed.), "Introduction" to *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*. In the early 1930s Nzula was a prolific writer in the *Negro Worker* (see note 2). For some of his most important articles in this paper, see Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, pp. 178-218. Nzula died in Moscow, and according to Cohen, he may have been killed.

carried out the order and dropped the League of African Rights, which soon ceased to exist.[80] On 16 December, 1929, the CPSA engaged in mass action together with members of other organisations, but the party was now beginning to be affected by the ultra-left sectarianism of the Comintern in its "third period".

In October 1929, Bunting wrote to the British party's colonial commission that in South Africa the revolutionary situation envisaged by the Comintern did not exist, but that they were going through a period of hardening repression. In the circumstances the LAR, with its limited but militant programme, was the best alternative in the way of a broad popular movement to the hesitant leadership of the ANC and others. Neither these arguments, nor a letter by Roux to Moscow (endorsed by the Party's Executive) defending the LAR against the dissolution order, could change the ECCI's mind. The party nevertheless tried to avoid a sectarian stance and to carry on a broad resistance campaign in the face of growing repression, white mob violence and anti-communist propaganda. The eighth party conference in December 1929 noted that a year of "unprecedentedly strenuous" struggle against "an ever more ferocious oppressor" lay ahead and that it would be the party's task to mobilize the people on a national scale for a "native republic". The same month *Inprecorr* reported "a tremendous advance in the development of the revolutionary native movement" in South Africa, as "the *native workers* are heading the struggle *under the leadership of the CP*".[81] However, the truth was that the CPSA became ever more isolated.

Another all-in-conference called by the party in January 1930, to consider methods of struggle against discriminatory legislation and police repression, did not meet with the same response from other organisations as five month ago. Suggestions made at a conference of black organisations, held in the same month, to "adopt the principles" of the CPSA and organise passive resistance or a general strike, were rejected. When the party itself sent out a call for a general strike, this did not meet with success. More successful was the party's new journal *Umsebenzi* (The Worker), edited by Roux in Cape Town. It was probably the principal factor in maintaining the influence of the CPSA during 1930. As against this, anti-communism in the ANC was again on the increase. At the ANC's annual conference in April 1930, the moderate and conservative elements triumphed over the radicals and pro-communists, whose spokesman Josiah Gumede rather tactlessly urged the conference to demand a "South African Native Republic", defend the Soviet Union and rely on their own "fighting strength" and that of the "revolutionary masses of white workers the world over". Such communist phraseology was strongly resisted by the majority of delegates. Gumede was ousted from the presidency and an executive of old-style moderates ("good boys") took over who set out to reassert the ANC's long-standing ideology of consultation and equality of opportunity instead of a militant programme of mass action and the building of African power. The ANC's new president-general declared he was determined to get rid of communist influences. The resultant renewed attacks by the CPSA on ANC leaders ("tools of the white exploiters"), black ministers of religion ("tools of the dominant race and class") and other "reactionaries" led to a long-lasting estrangement between the two organisations. Only in the Western Cape ANC radicals seemed strong enough to sustain a policy of co-operation with the communists. When in November 1930 the conservatives took over in Cape Town too, the radicals formed the Independent ANC, but this did not prove a permanent alternative. Like Kadalie in 1926, anti-communists raised the cry of the CPSA being a "white man's party" in order to brush the "bolshevist elements" in the ANC aside. In December 1930, communist attempts to mobilize the African masses in another pass-burning campaign heralded the end of an era of communist influence. "Let us free our country from white imperialism", the party declared, but it got little support from other organisations. Only in Durban the campaign had some initial success, but it was smashed by a new wave of repression and intimidation that virtually destroyed the CPSA in Natal.[82]

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[80] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 113-115; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 226-227; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 417-421, 439; Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, pp. 177-178; Benson, *The Struggle for a Birthright*, p. 54; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 52, who suggests that the ECCI order to dissolve the LAR may have been taken on the advice of Wolton and prompted by the fact that the black republic slogan was absent from its programme.

[81] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 115-116; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 421-424, 661 (note 22).

[82] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 424-436; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 116-121; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 232, 237-255; Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, pp. 176-183; Benson, *The Struggle for a Birthright*, pp. 55-59; Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to*

Despite growing sectarianism, the party had thus far retained a degree of flexibility in accommodating to the new Comintern line. Under Roux's editorship *Umsebenzi* continued to raise the old battle cry of the LAR "Mayibuye i Afrika" ("Come back Africa"), sometimes supplemented by the slogan of a "democratic Native republic, with equal rights for all races". When at one point Roux had to yield to a RILU emissary who insisted that the paper publish a tedious article, full of Comintern jargon, on party policy with regard to the black republic, he did not hide his dislike of it. The Comintern on its part was not slow to criticise the party for not being revolutionary enough or failing to understand the significance of the black republic slogan. In May 1930, the ECCI presidium released a lengthy memorandum - published in *Umsebenzi* only in December - accusing the CPSA of "tailism", "committing serious mistakes of a Right opportunist character" and so on. It was basically maintained that, while the South African revolution was a national and democratic one, it should be led by the CPSA only, which was accused of having abandoned its independent role and indulging in reformist methods of struggle. White party members were accused of having not yet cast off "the remnants of white chauvinism" and not understanding "the nationalist tasks" of the revolution, while African members, "still influenced by petty-bourgeois nationalism", did not understand the need for the hegemony of the proletariat in the national-revolutionary movement. One suspects that the Woltons were at least partly responsible for this destructive criticism. But apart from that, the Comintern in its "third period" had its own bizarre dynamics. In its memorandum the ECCI urged the CPSA to employ a core of full-time professional revolutionaries, form cells in streets and factories, organise revolutionary trade unions, launch a peasants' movement for the seizure of land, extend its activities to Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland, establish close contact with the "revolutionary masses" of Rhodesia, Kenya and Portuguese Africa, become the "ideological leader" of communists also in other parts of the continent, and strive for the establishment of "independent native workers' and peasants' republics as a transitory stage towards the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Africa" - indeed nothing less than that.[83]

7. "Right-Wing Danger", Bolshevisation and the Demise of the Party (1930-1935)

During 1930, then, the stage was set for the struggle against the "right-wing danger" that would prove to be fatal to South African communism. In May 1930, probably in response to the ECCI memorandum and to reassure the Comintern leadership, the CPSA's Executive Bureau announced that party discipline would be strengthened and that the party's ranks would be purged of inactive or "unreliable" elements, including die-hard opponents of the black republic slogan. However, the real "Bolshevisation" of the party only began with the return to South Africa of Douglas Wolton in November 1930. Wolton, who claimed he had been

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Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964, Vol. 1: *Protest and Hope 1882-1934* (Stanford, 1972), pp. 153-154, 270, 272, 308-310; Lodge, *Black Politics*, p. 9, who says that Gumede was almost totally isolated from the ANC Executive already by late 1929. Elsewhere Lodge claims that the CPSA's pass-burning campaign in 1930 was also quite successful in Pretoria - see his "Political Organisations in Pretoria's African Townships, 1940-1963", in Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg, 1987), p. 403. See Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 80-92, for an interesting account of the manifold problems (such as coining new terms and phrases) involved in editing a communist newspaper in the native African languages. See Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A history of South African 'Coloured' politics* (Cape Town, 1987), pp. 107-108, 116-118, for the communists' position in the Western Cape.

[83] Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 89-90; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 231-232; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 126-127; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 414, 438-442, 662 (note 1). Bunting (*Moses Kotane*, p. 56) says about the years 1929-30 that the words of the ECCI resolution of October 1928 were repeated by the party, but "in some strange way the general drift of Party policy remained the same". Extracts from the ECCI memorandum of 1930 (entitled "How to build a Revolutionary Mass Party in South Africa") are quoted in Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 112-113. Apparently, during 1930 the FNETU also received detailed instructions from the Executive Committee of the RILU - see Italiaander, *Schwarze Haut im roten Griff*, p. 211.

instructed by the ECCI to engage in full-time party work,[84] was armed with two new ECCI resolutions on South Africa. One was on the black republic slogan, the other dealt with organisational problems and included attacks on leading party members - it seems that Wolton and his wife had in fact helped to draft them. Wolton, claiming the authority of a "Comintern representative", resumed the position of general secretary and brought *Umsebenzi*, which he said was not run on "correct bolshevik lines", under direct control of the Executive Bureau and himself. The ECCI resolutions, which were published in *Umsebenzi* in preparation for the ninth party conference, warned of a serious "right-wing danger" and attacked Bunting and others for being "chauvinists", "social-democrats", etc. Bunting and Roux were charged with "attempting to revive the theory of South African exceptionalism" and rejecting the colonial theses of the Sixth Comintern Congress "as inapplicable to South Africa". Bunting was said to be trying to "skip the bourgeois-democratic stage of the revolution" and reduce the African movement for national independence to a mere reformist struggle for equal rights. From all this flowed "the opportunist tactical line" of the LAR, it was maintained. The accusations caused bitter political as well as personal divisions within the party leadership, which were exacerbated when the EB - now controlled by Wolton and his followers - began to issue one indictment after the other of the "right wing" within the party.[85]

Even before the ninth party conference convened in late December 1930, Wolton had succeeded in installing himself as virtual party dictator. The conference, also attended by the American communist James Ford and G. Safarov, elected a CC without Bunting and other "politically dangerous elements" and was run on totally new lines. Wolton explained that the party should be a "monolithic" organisation and that the old "social-democratic" methods of electing officials had to go. He submitted a list of names for the new CC and insisted they should be voted for *en bloc*, hinting that voting against the list amounted to disloyalty to the party and the Comintern. Stalinism triumphed and the tradition of internal democracy in the South African communist movement came to an end. Of the twenty-three members of the new CC, nineteen were African disciples of Wolton - it was his way of "Africanising" the party. According to a resolution drawn up by Wolton, the conference marked a "decisive turning point in the class struggle", away from the dangers of "white chauvinism" and "opportunism", into the path of the party's "independent leadership in the national revolution towards the dictatorship of the proletariat". Another resolution called for the transformation of the African Federation of Trade Unions (AFTU), as the FNETU had been renamed, into a broad revolutionary movement. Last but not least, CPSA branches were instructed to reorganise their members in party cells in factories, streets, trade unions and other "mass organisations".[86]

Wolton's "bolshevist" leadership led to a hopeless isolation of the CPSA in all fields of political work, in addition to extreme intolerance within the party itself. Thus, the AFTU should not only fight on economic issues but participate in demonstrations of the unemployed, pass-burning campaigns, etc. According to Wolton African trade unions had to take the struggle to a "higher political level" and guarantee the leading role of the working class in the national liberation movement. As a result of this ultra-leftist tactical line the unions, already badly affected by the depression, were seriously weakened. By 1932-1933, the AFTU had virtually collapsed, and the surviving unions were breaking with the communists. Another attempt at building a communist-controlled mass organisation was made through the formation in January 1931 of *Ikaka Labasebenzi* (The Workers' Shield), affiliated to the International Red Aid/Labour Defence. It was to assist political prisoners and organise mass campaigns against racial oppression, but it "failed to

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[84] Roux writes: "how detailed these directives were we were never able to discover" - Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 93.

[85] See note 86.

[86] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 442-443; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 122-125; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 92-94; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 53-54, who writes that the minutes of the ninth party conference repeated the claim of a membership of 3,000; Nyawuza, "Left, Right on the Road to the Black Republic", p. 56. According to Nyawuza, during 1929-1932 the German Paul Merker acted as Comintern representative in South Africa (*ibid.*, p. 59). See Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 113-115, for a report on the ninth party conference in *Umsebenzi*. The party programme of 1928-1929 had already announced the formation of factory committees, etc. (see Bunting, p. 106), but it is not clear if this policy was actually carried out during the years 1929-1930.

stimulate any widespread support amongst the Bantu people", as Wolton later admitted.[87] The ANC was further alienated by the CC declaring in July 1931 that it was now "openly a servant of the imperialist bourgeoisie". The only area of activity in the early 1930s where the party had some limited but volatile success was the organisation of demonstrations of the unemployed. On one occasion the communists managed to unite a black and white procession of unemployed in Johannesburg into one mass demonstration, but this was not more than a brief incident. Wolton nevertheless continued to believe that workers of all races were ripe for revolution and would lead the peasants "in the national revolution for a Native Republic towards a Workers' and Peasants' Government in defence of the Soviet Union".[88] Only the influence of reformist leaders was holding them back - and of course the errors of the right-wing deviators within the party.

Inspired by the declaration of the Eleventh Plenum of the ECCI in April 1931, Wolton attributed the CPSA's apparent inability to promote the revolution to the "right danger which consists of opportunism, white chauvinism and passivity". In March 1931 Sam Malkinson, the popular party leader in Bloemfontein, had already been expelled for "fractional activities", which resulted in a collapse of the Bloemfontein branch from which it never fully recovered. Then, in September 1931, the Political Bureau (PB) - as the Executive was now called - decided to "liquidate the Right Danger", announcing in a 1,500 words statement written by Wolton the expulsion of Sidney Bunting and five prominent white trade unionists, including Bill Andrews. In fact, the PB did not even meet to discuss the expulsions; only Wolton and his new doctrinaire aid Lazar Bach, a recent immigrant from Latvia, were responsible. Not only in Johannesburg, but also in Cape Town a half dozen or so "right-wing elements" were expelled, including Jimmy La Guma, who had not long ago been reinstated but was now expelled for the second time because of his criticism of the party's sectarian trade union policy. However, the most tragic case of all was undoubtedly that of Bunting, the driving force behind the real Africanisation of the South African communist movement after 1924. Bunting protested against the campaign of vilification conducted against him by a "small dictatorship" whose actions had resulted in the party having "shrivelled almost to a skeleton", as he put it. His fight for reinstatement was supported by a group of Africans including Gana Makabeni, the secretary of the important African Clothing Workers' Union who was himself expelled in March 1932. Bunting called on party members to insist that the expulsions be discussed at the next party conference, but this only led to the PB attacking the "imperialist bloodsucker" Bunting in ever more vicious terms. Within the CPSA, the Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club (largely consisting of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe who were absolutely loyal to the Comintern), the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) and other pro-communist organisations, "Buntingism" became a label of the same abuse as "Trotskyism" or "social-fascism". Wolton and Bach insisted on an African majority on the CC and PB. However, according to Moses Kotane, real power was exercised only by the two white party bosses, while most of the Africans on the CC were "dummies". The party leadership was dominated by whites at least as much as before.[89]

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[87] Douglas G. Wolton, *Whither South Africa?* (London, 1947), p. 73. In this book Wolton does not mention his former role in the CPSA at all. Indeed, he speaks of "the Bantu paper *Umsebenzi*" (p. 85), without mentioning it was the official party organ. On *Ikaka Labasebenzi* see further Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 112; Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, pp. 187-189: Speech by Nzula at the International Labour Defence Conference, 1933.

[88] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 444-445, 457; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 256-257, 269-274, 327-329; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 130-131; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 115; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 56, 68; Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, p. 40. See Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, pp. 131-137, 150-151, for a communist account of the position of the AFTU in the early 1930s. Here it is admitted that the AFTU had less than 1,000 members by April 1933. Mention is also made of a "League of Agricultural Workers", but obviously it did not develop into a serious organisation.

[89] See Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 126-142, where numerous details are given regarding Bunting's expulsion; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 98-105; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 55-58, 61; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 320-322; Taffy Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora: The Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, 1928-1948", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1979), pp. 91-92; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 446-451. The Simons claim that Wolton's "fervent faith in the revolutionary mood of African workers and peasants convinced most party members that his drastic measures were justified". In 1989, Sidney P. Bunting

In late 1931, the ECCI sent a letter to South Africa endorsing the expulsion of the "Right opportunist chauvinist Bunting clique". The CPSA was called upon to "continue and intensify the struggle against Right opportunism and all remnants of Buntingism". The ECCI spoke again of an imminent revolutionary upsurge and reproached the CPSA for its failure to take revolutionary action, thus completely ignoring the fact that at this juncture the situation in South Africa was far from revolutionary and the CPSA only a shadow of its former self. According to Roux, "the expulsions did more than anything else to alienate party sympathisers and fellow travellers and to lower the prestige of the party", while official party historian Lerumo asserts that the "ultra-left period [...] cost the Party untold damage in membership and influence".[90] Had *Umsebenzi* been a success in 1930, after it had been brought under the control of Wolton and his PB the paper began to use unreadable "inprecorr language", so that it soon lost most of its African readers. African party members knew Wolton by the nickname "Deepening Economic Crisis", as almost all of his writings began with this phrase. The American Eugene Dennis, Comintern representative in South Africa during 1932-1933, maintained that "Instead of a white chauvinist Party of white shopkeepers, lawyers and petty bourgeois intellectuals, as under Bunting's regime, we have become a Party of Native, Coloured and white proletarians". The reality was that the proletariat was mystified by the party's sectarian crusade against "social-fascists", "national reformists" and "right deviators", and by Dennis's paranoid campaign against "counter-revolutionary Trotskyism". At one point Dennis went so far as to claim that the party's membership had increased eightfold, whereas the exact opposite was true. The party had been wrecked and its influence over the African masses destroyed. Had the CPSA some three thousand members in the years 1929-1930, thereafter almost all Africans drifted away. By 1933, the total membership was probably not more than 150, and during the whole period up to 1941 it did never exceed a few hundred.[91]

In September 1933, after having spent three months in prison, Douglas and Molly Wolton hurriedly left South Africa for Britain, without even obtaining the official permission of the PB. They disappeared from the CPSA's history for good. The PB was infused with some new blood, which led the party slowly to adopt a somewhat more realistic policy, if without any explicit change of line. *Umsebenzi* was made more readable again; anti-religious propaganda for example was wisely moderated. A communist suggestion to form a united front against unemployment, fascism and racial discrimination was ignored by black organisations. However, in March 1934 the communists formed a League against Fascism and War in collaboration with a number of progressive whites. Through the FSU and a new Afrikaans monthly, *Die Arbeider en Arme Boer* (The Worker and Poor Farmer) started in January 1935, the party tried to win sympathy for the anti-fascist cause among Afrikaner workers and poor whites. To Africans, the Eurocentric call for a united front against fascism and Nazism sounded as outlandish as communist slogans like a black republic. As against this, the invasion of Ethiopia by the Italians in the first half of 1935 evoked a strong African response. The CPSA's "Hands off Ethiopia" campaign aroused enthusiasm, with black dockworkers in Cape Town and Durban refusing to handle Italian ships, but it was only a brief episode followed by disillusion.[92]

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was "rehabilitated" by the SACP as a "Hero of the South African Revolution" - see *The African Communist*, No. 119 (1989), pp. 19-20.

[90] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, p. 135; Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 72. Lerumo admits that the expulsions were "arbitrary in the extreme". See also Terence Africanus, "The First International: 100 years after", *The African Communist*, No. 18 (1964). Here it is stated that the ultra-left party leadership, backed by the ECCI, all but wrecked the party and "left a scar which will not soon be forgotten" (p. 89).

[91] Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 88, 115, 128, 132, 143-146, 153; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 256, 269; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 97, 101, 110-111; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 451-453; Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 72-73; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 55-57, 61-64, who writes that when Kotane returned from the Soviet Union in early 1933 he found the party had dwindled to almost nothing. Kotane called the years 1931-1932 "years of destruction". See also Mde Ngentonga, "Our national struggle in its international context", *The African Communist*, No. 85 (1981), p. 58.

[92] Roux, S.P. Bunting, pp. 147-149; Roux, Time Longer than Rope, pp. 275-277, 279; Roux and Roux, Rebel Pity, pp. 130-131, 135-136, 141-142; Simons and Simons, Class and Colour, pp. 465-466, 471, 474; Bunting, Moses Kotane, pp. 64-65.

Nevertheless, even before the Seventh Comintern Congress in July/August 1935, there had emerged a tendency with (some) South African communists to move away from the sectarian line which had made the party so unattractive to Africans. Moses Kotane, who became general secretary in 1933, asserted that the CPSA tended to ruin every mass organisation by trying to dominate it, and that a genuine black united front could only be built if the communists were willing to share power with others. According to the die-hard ultra-leftist Bach, however, this was "petit bourgeois national reformism". Bach defended the strategy of a "united front from below" which would leave the party free to preserve an independent line of action in the fight for a black republic. In 1934-1935, indeed, the struggle over the correct interpretation of the black republic slogan, which had been controversial from the start, flared up again.[93] Bach and J.B. Marks maintained that the African bourgeoisie and the "national reformist" movement (the ANC) would fight for democratic freedom, but turn against the struggle of the workers. Therefore, the workers and peasants should take control in the national revolution and move towards socialism. This practically meant that the "independent native republic" and the "workers' and peasants' government" were synonymous and the national democratic and socialist stages in the revolution synchronous.[94] On the other side, Kotane and others argued that there hardly existed an African bourgeois class at all, but nevertheless the correct interpretation of the black republic slogan implied there were two stages in the revolution, the first leading to a democratic state under African majority rule, the second to socialism. To the extent that there were any African middle-class elements, they suffered from the same disabilities as the masses and would therefore make common cause with them. Kotane, therefore, advocated close collaboration with the ANC, although the ECCI declared in March 1934 that the "national reformist" ANC was "following in the footsteps of the Kuomintang".[95]

At a special party meeting held in Johannesburg in May/June 1934 to discuss the black republic controversy, the number of Africans among the forty delegates present could be counted on one hand - a more open party strategy was clearly imperative if the CPSA was to break out of its hopeless situation. Yet the ultra-leftists remained in control of the party until after the Seventh Comintern Congress. In July and September 1935 another series of expulsions occurred of "Right deviators" and "reformists", one black party member being expelled for "attempting to inaugurate a new counter-revolutionary Nationalist Political Party among Africans". When Kotane, Roux and others protested and were dropped from the PB, they requested the Comintern to intervene, whereupon the sectarian party leadership appealed to Moscow as well. The result was that both factions were invited to send representatives to the Soviet Union in order to settle the question, Kotane going on behalf of the opposition and Bach and his comrade M. Richter for the PB. The Comintern's control commission sided with Kotane - whose views were in consonance with the new "Popular Front" line - and expelled Bach and Richter from the party. They were subsequently charged with "fractional activities" and "Trotskyism" and put on trial. It seems that Richter was shot in 1938 and that Bach died in a

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[93] A painful and ironical feature of the dispute was the confusion, particularly with the ultra-leftists, over what constituted a "nation" in the South African context. At a meeting of the CC in December 1931, Molly Wolton proposed to substitute the slogan of a "Federation of Independent Native Republics" for the old native republic slogan. It would appear this was adopted as official party policy. In an article in the *Negro Worker* in June 1932, indeed, Nzula used the slogan "Federation of Independent South African Native Republics" - see Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, p. 187. In keeping with this, Lazar Bach wrote in May 1934, that the party's goal was to bring about a "voluntary association" of national republics - Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Zulu, Xhosa - in a federation of independent native republics (see Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 473; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 41-42). With good reason, Alex Callinicos and John Rogers, *Southern Africa after Soweto* (London, 1977), p. 45, call this the "low point" in the party's ultra-left career.

[94] This "leftist" interpretation of the black republic slogan which blurred the distinction between the national-democratic and social revolutions was apparent as early as 1932, for instance in *Umsebenzi's* reports on the communist agitation campaign during the Germiston by-election in October that year; see Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 115-118. Of course one could argue that in fact it was much the same as Bunting's earlier attempts to integrate the "national" and "socialist" stages in one revolutionary movement.

[95] Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, 3, p. 319. See further note 96.

labour camp in 1941. Thus ended the "third period" so far as South Africa was concerned.[96]

8. To the Right, to the Left, and Back (1935-1943)

After the resolutions of the Seventh Comintern Congress had been digested by the CPSA leadership, *Umsebenzi*, in an unusual fit of self-criticism, confessed that the party "had suffered from left sectarian tendencies" it should get rid of without delay. Interestingly enough, in February 1934 Kotane had written in a letter to the CC that the party was too "Europeanised" instead of "Africanised". Many party members, especially the whites, were not interested in the reality of South Africa but merely in communist affairs in Europe, he said.[97] Was the CPSA, ironically enough, prone to Eurocentric tendencies even during the black republic period, such tendencies were bound to become even stronger during the period of the People's Front.

After 1935, the party made a remarkable turn to the right, tending to back up any movement seen as "progressive". According to George Hardy, a British communist who acted as Comintern representative in South Africa during 1936 with the instruction to steer the CPSA away from sectarianism, not only workers and "poor farmers" of all races but members of the Labour Party, rank-and-file Afrikaner nationalists and "discontented members" of the middle class were all likely recruits for the struggle against "imperialism". But even the fight against imperialism was no longer a priority for the Comintern, which liquidated the League against Imperialism in 1935, or the RILU, which liquidated its International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. As for the CPSA, although it was still talking of "anti-imperialism", new urgencies made that the black republic policy was silently dropped. In June 1936, the PB declared that "conditions had changed since 1931" - Anglo-Boer imperialism was to be overthrown, but the first objective was now to combat war and fascism. The party became less militant and more "respectable", giving solemn assurances it would loyally support a united front with other organisations. In order to make the party's newspaper more acceptable to "progressive whites", *Umsebenzi* was renamed again the *South African Worker*, with the space given to news in the African languages being severely cut. Some enthusiasts for the new line advocated an "all-white people's front" against fascism and a pragmatic separation of forces along racial lines. The communists also argued that the All-African Convention (AAC) - formed in December 1935 to unite all black organisations against the government's intention of abolishing the Cape African franchise - should be linked to the fight against fascism and "assist in maintaining the higher standards of the white workers", while simultaneously obtaining better wages for blacks. Of course, the hope that a "white united front" and a "black united front" could eventually be brought together could never materialise on the basis of the new party policy. In the elections for the Transvaal Provincial Council in 1936, indeed, the CPSA went so far as to offer support for the candidates of the Labour Party. It was a pity that the SALP stood for racial segregation, the communists said, but it was sincere in its endeavours to improve the lot of the poor. It

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[96] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 475-477, 490-493; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, pp. 142-147; Roux, *S.P. Bunting*, pp. 152-156; Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, pp. 73-74; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 64-74, 291 (note 49); Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora", p. 91; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid*, p. 20; Africanus, "The First International", pp. 88-89, who speaks of "talmudic" disputes over the correct interpretation of the black republic slogan (which was "not a suitable slogan") and of contending groups that were appealing to the ECCI for a ruling "as if it were a sort of supreme court". For Nzula's view on the two stages of the revolution in South Africa, see Cohen (ed.), *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, p. 163. On J.B. Marks, see Z. Nkosi, "The Life of a Revolutionary", *The African Communist*, No. 51 (1972); J.B. Marks, "Breaking the Shackles", *ibid.*; Simons, "Builders of the Communist Party", pp. 36-39. Bach and Richter were posthumously "reinstated": see *The African Communist*, No. 119 (1989), pp. 20-21.

[97] M.M. Kotane, Letter from Cradock (Eastern Cape) to the Central Committee, 23 February 1934. The complete version of this remarkably critical letter is published in Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 120-122. Extracts or compilations are also reproduced in Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 65-67; Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 133. In this connection it is also noteworthy that, in 1942, Kotane wrote an article in the party press in which he criticised the party's failure to produce black leaders and the tendency for black party members "to take back seats" as they felt "inferior to the European comrades" - see Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 173.

sounded as if the party had put the clock back to the early 1920s. For a man like Eddie Roux it was a reason to leave the party for good.[98]

The CPSA's "national conference" in September 1936, attended by eighteen white and twenty-two black delegates, sanctioned the policy of "specialising" forces along colour lines. In an apparent attempt to link the two "united fronts", it was simultaneously suggested that the party should strive for joint action of "the Boer and the Natives for their liberation from the yoke of imperialism", a remarkable idea that would be reiterated some years later. The struggle for African rights was to be carried on through the AAC, while on the other side the party would join with the South African Trades and Labour Council in forming a white "People's Front" to combat fascist propaganda among white, especially Afrikaner, workers. "Any under-estimation of the role of poor whites in the class struggle of this country will result in giving objective support to fascism", a conference resolution observed. At the People's Front's inaugural conference in October 1936, the communists suggested at first that demands be included in the draft programme relating to the rights and interests of Africans, but as other participants objected to this they decided to preserve unity by agreeing that references to "native policy" be left out. It was feared that a non-racial approach might alienate white workers, driving them into the arms of the Greyshirts and other pro-Nazi groups. Indeed, the same white workers who were ready to drive the Greyshirts off the streets refused to assist Africans fighting against racial oppression. Although the SALP was too reactionary even to join the People's Front, in June 1937 the communists proposed another pact with them in municipal elections. In the same year communist participation in the elections for the Native Representative Council - a new segregationist body replacing the Cape African franchise - revealed that the party had landed in a serious crisis. Communist candidates (all of whom were beaten) did not dare to come forward as party members and were hiding behind other organisations, and the party did not seem to come out any longer as an independent political force.[99] It was the exact opposite of the sectarian line of a few years ago, while the result was just as disastrous.

Frustrations and a bad atmosphere caused the party to lapse into virtual inactivity; by 1938 it appeared to have completely lost its direction. The PB met irregularly and rarely issued directives, the *South African Worker* ceased publication and members were complaining that the party had disintegrated. Only in Cape Town the party seemed to be functioning, although local radicals and Trotskyists were criticising it for its "reactionary" and "reformist" policies. At an emergency meeting of the CC in December 1938, the CPSA's general secretary Edwin Mofutsanyana spoke of "a complete betrayal of the African people", explaining that African members did not care about events in Europe which occupied the minds of white communists, but were "mainly concerned with oppression under which they live". He suggested that the party divide into an African and non-African section connected by the CC. The proposal was turned down by a majority of one vote, but in fact the division already existed. The African section, while leaning heavily on the whites, felt that the party had no sense of responsibility for African concerns. Kotane declared that Africans and coloureds would support the "people's front" only if it helped them in their struggle for democratic rights and higher wages. In view of the bad state of affairs in Johannesburg, the CC decided to transfer party headquarters to Cape Town, where they remained until 1950.[100]

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[98] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 475-480, 496; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 76-78; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 125; Roux and Roux, *Rebel Pity*, p. 204. On the disbandment of the League against Imperialism and the ITUC-NW, see Degras (ed.), *The Communist International*, Vol. 3, p. 389; E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York, 1982), pp. 386, 420; Schatten, *Communism in Africa*, pp. 67-68; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", pp. 112, 117; Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, p. 130; Hooker, *Black Revolutionary*, pp. 31-33. See Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (New York, 1958), p. 74, for the winding up of the LAI in Britain.

[99] See note 100.

[100] Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 480-485, 497-499, 503; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 79-80, 84-85, 89-92; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 127-130, 133; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 294-296; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, p. 195. Like African party members, a "coloured" man like John Gomas was alienated by the CPSA's "white people's front" policy, although he remained for some more years a member of the party (see Musson, *Johnny Gomas*, pp. 91, 105). The claim of Ellis and Sechaba (*Comrades against Apartheid*, pp. 21-22) that within the party ideological differences

From 1939, the party began to recover somewhat from the internal crisis, taking advantage of new opportunities to extend its influence. In the field of trade unionism, particularly in Cape Town, the communists resumed a role of some importance. Communist activists were instrumental in forming new unions of black industrial workers, although by now they had to share the field with non-communist or even anti-communist trade union organisers and Trotskyists. The communists continued to stress the need for interracial working-class solidarity, rather in contrast to their "separatism" in political affairs. In a communist pamphlet it was argued that working-class co-operation was "as essential for the preservation of the European worker as much as any". Africans would tend to be substituted for whites in semi-skilled jobs, unless the white worker would help the African to organise and lead him in the fight for equal pay for equal work. On the other hand, at a conference of the SATLC communists proposed a motion to lay down a minimum wage of 10 s. a day for whites and 5 s. for Africans, using the argument that equal wages would result in the opposite effect, viz. displacement of Africans by whites. Also an African communist like Kotane upheld this line of thought. According to Kotane, the slogan of equal pay for equal work, without equal opportunity for all, was a misuse of socialist doctrine that made unity between black and white impossible.[101] At the outbreak of World War II, there were a dozen and a half black trade unions on the Witwatersrand alone, as well as a substantial number in urban centres like Cape Town and Durban. War conditions led to a scarcity of skilled labour and a strong position of black workers in the labour market. This encouraged a further growth of black trade unionism and paved the way for the formation of a new trade union federation in 1941, the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU).

It would seem that only a small number of communists were "confused" by the Soviet-Nazi Pact and the outbreak of war in 1939. Although the war was initially seen as a struggle between fascist and democratic countries, the CPSA, ever loyal to the Soviet Union, soon reversed its call for a war on fascism and defined the war as an imperialist one. When the communists were accused of having made a complete volte-face on instructions of Moscow, they would reply that "not they but world conditions" had changed. The cry was now that the struggle against fascism must start in South Africa itself and that blacks could not be expected to fight as long as the army segregated them, denied them the right to bear arms, limited them to manual labour and paid them less than the whites. Thus, the communists showed a renewed interest in African grievances and started a new paper called *Inkululeko* (Freedom) and a campaign against military recruitment of blacks. That this did not produce spectacular results is shown by the fact that whereas the party had only 280 members in 1940, by 1941 this had increased to no more than 400. Although many black South Africans tended to fall in line with the anti-war attitude, having no trust in the Allied cause as long as the South African army was maintaining the colour bar, the ANC decided to give qualified support to the government, thus preventing the emergence of a united anti-war movement. Since the late 1930s, the CPSA had again been devoting due attention to the ANC, now stressing a democratic non-racial platform rather than the radical slogan of a black republic. But the party's influence was by no means strong enough to get the ANC to line up with communist policy. Another group opposing South Africa's participation in the war were the extreme Afrikaner nationalists, some of whom were openly pro-Nazi. It was remarkable that at the CPSA's national conference in March 1940, leading communists criticised the party's support for government efforts to suppress pro-Nazi elements, as this weakened "the line of struggle against the war".[102] Some delegates suggested it would be possible to appeal to "anti-imperialist" Afrikaner workers, and a white communist like Sam Kahn even felt that the pro-Nazis could be won over to the party.

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often overlapped with racial ones is at least true for these years.

[101] Simons and Simons, Class and Colour, pp. 513-515, 667 (note 14); Hirson, Yours for the Union, pp. 99-100; Roux, Time Longer than Rope, p. 330; Bunting, Moses Kotane, pp. 92-93; Edwards, "Recollections", p. 78. That scepticism about demanding equal wages was widespread among blacks and based on a realistic assessment of the situation in the labour market is shown in Pieter van Duin, "White building workers and coloured competition in the South African labour market, c. 1890-1940", International Review of Social History, 1992 (forthcoming).

[102] J. Morkel, who delivered a report on "The War and South Africa", called it a "fallacy" to think that "any war against a fascist state would be progressive, and that the defeat of Nazi Germany would aid the revolutionary movement and eliminate an enemy of the Soviet Union". See Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, p. 150.

Nevertheless, the CPSA managed to prevent such propositions from becoming official party policy and stuck to its anti-Nazi and anti-Nationalist Party position.[103]

After the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June, 1941, all arguments were inverted once again. The propaganda against the recruitment of blacks was dropped and replaced by the slogans "Support the Soviet Union" and "Arm the Non-European soldiers". Now the government was to be supported in the great fight against fascism, which "would create conditions that would be favourable for a successful struggle against race and national oppression" in South Africa. In August 1941, the CC again complained of the government's refusal to arm Africans, coloureds and Indians, but this time the argument was that it hampered the war effort. A CPSA statement issued in January 1942 called for complete mobilization, the rapid training of blacks for skilled work and the creation of a national army in which men of all races would receive the same treatment. Thus the party's new pro-war policy was being situated in a democratic non-racial perspective, but this did not suffice to convince black South Africans to change their attitude to the war. Indeed, the party found it necessary to warn blacks not to put their trust in "non-white" Japan, whose victories inspired many with the hope they might be liberated by a Japanese invasion. Kotane wrote a pamphlet titled *Japan - Friend or Foe?*, in which he tried to convince blacks that Japan was not the sympathetic power that some held it to be.[104] In order to counter such "illusions", the party started a "Defend South Africa" campaign, pouring out a steady flow of pro-war propaganda directed at Africans, Afrikaners and others. Although the communists claimed that, after initial difficulties, they succeeded in creating enthusiasm for the "Soviet cause" among blacks also, it would appear that their campaign was most successful with whites. Many blacks would not appreciate the change in party line or the argument that everything now depended on the defence of the Soviet Union. The party's membership tripled from 400 in 1941 to over 1,200 in March 1943, but it is a moot question how far Kotane's claim that the new membership comprised "representatives of every race group" was true. Although the party gained a larger following among blacks as well, it would seem that a disproportionate number of the new adherents were white. In 1943, white communists were elected to the City Councils of Cape Town, East London and Johannesburg, the first electoral successes in the history of the CPSA. Indeed, the party became so respectable that the Minister of Justice came to act as a patron of the Friends of the Soviet Union, which flourished among white South Africans as never before. On May Day, 1942, Bill Andrews (who had rejoined the party) was allowed "to address the workers of the country" on radio.[105]

During the war years the CPSA continued to fight on a democratic platform and protest against racial discrimination, but there was another side to the picture too. This was particularly evident in the field of industrial action. The early 1940s witnessed a great strike wave among African workers, who tried to take advantage of their strong bargaining position to press for higher wages, ignoring considerations relating to the war situation. The CPSA's attitude to African strikes after June 1941 was ambiguous: there was support

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[103] Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp. 78-82; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 300, 308-309; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 528-530, 538; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 82-83, 96-106; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 147-162; Alan K. Brooks, "From class struggle to national liberation: the Communist Party of South Africa, 1940 to 1950" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Sussex, 1967), p. 25; Kanet, "The Comintern and the 'Negro Question'", p. 118; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, pp. 331-332; Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, pp. 186, 367; Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964*, Vol. 2: *Hope and Challenge 1935-1952* (Stanford, 1973), p. 82; Edwards, "Recollections", p. 69. It should be noted that Simons and Simons do not mention the Soviet-German Pact at all and tend to be rather partisan in their account of the party's role during the war. Perhaps this is because by that time they played a leading role in the party themselves.

[104] In Durban, the police took the unprecedented step to ask the local party branch to call a meeting to explain to blacks why it was wrong to support the Japanese, after pro-Japanese pamphlets had been spread among blacks in the city; the party acceded to the request. See Edwards, "Recollections", p. 68.

[105] Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp. 13, 83-85; Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, pp. 309, 353; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, pp. 536-540; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 106-114; Bunting (ed.), *South African Communists Speak*, pp. 162-172; Cope, *Comrade Bill*, p. 336; I.B. Tabata, *The All African Convention: The Awakening of a People* (Johannesburg, 1950), p. 98.

for the workers' claims, but at the same time they were called upon to avoid any stoppage of work that would impede the war effort. On some occasions, the party openly opposed strike action, and acted as a brake on trade unions whose members called for direct action. In a court case against a group of African miners who had gone on strike early in 1943, the defence - two communist lawyers - persuaded the workers to plead guilty to contravening an anti-strike war measure, as this would allow them to immediately return to production. *Inkululeko* claimed that pro-Nazi white miners had incited the Africans to go on strike in an effort to sabotage the war effort. "The Africans' world was being stood on its head", thus Baruch Hirson comments on this communist assertion.[106] Perhaps the enthusiasm for the war and the successes of the Red Army after 1942 made it easier for communists to accept such unusual things. The same must have held true for the dissolution of the Comintern. In June 1943, a writer in *Inkululeko* welcomed this step as an advance to "greater working-class unity".[107]

9. Some conclusions

The history of the communist movement in South Africa during the Comintern era ran undoubtedly parallel to that in other countries of the world. Apart from the fact that many communist parties could only be formed thanks to the leadership and platform provided by the Comintern, all parties were heavily impacted upon by the evolution of this remarkable organisation. At the same time, what was typical of South Africa was the "dualistic" character of its social structure and political system, i.e. the combination of an industrial economy and a colonial society. In 1981, the complications resulting therefrom were summed up by a South African communist as follows: "How can the class aims of the industrial proletariat be integrated with the national aspirations of an oppressed population? And that within a single country? The question is of course not unique to South Africa. In many places where capitalism has developed within a colonial frame the same challenge is to be faced. But in South Africa the issue has been most acute, and the solution most difficult."[108]

The South African communists started their career armed with an orthodox Marxist perspective, as though they were operating in just another capitalist society. They were well aware of the racial peculiarities of South African society and the divisions within the South African working class, and of the system of racial domination and colonial-style oppression, but to them these features were not important enough to warrant an early revision of their analysis. Only when their belief in the revolutionary potential of the white working class reached a low point in 1924, and when they learned to appreciate the black working-class movement as a serious factor in the class struggle, was a decisive move made towards the black proletariat. This reorientation did not mean that the communists fully understood the importance of the "national aspirations" of the Africans as articulated by a movement like the ANC, but they took upon them to fight for the freedom and equality of black South Africans in addition to the class emancipation of the workers. Meanwhile, as good Marxists they continued to pin their hopes on the ultimate possibility of interracial working-class solidarity and a change in attitude on the part of white labour.

When subsequent upon the formation of the League against Imperialism the Comintern began to re-emphasize the strategic importance of the struggle for national liberation of the colonial peoples against imperialism, there also emerged a new interest in South Africa. Until then, the Comintern had basically followed the CPSA in focusing on the white labour movement, despite the adoption of theses on the national and colonial question in 1920 and a resolution on the "Negro question" in 1922. In the aftermath of the Brussels Congress in February 1927, South Africa was redefined as a part of the colonial world, rather than a white settler society (in fact it was both). Some South African communists, whites as well as blacks, began to stress the priority of the national revolution in accordance with the new Comintern view, but it was the

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[106] Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, p. 173. See also Edwards, "Recollections", p. 73, and Vishnu Padayachee, Shahid Vawda and Paul Tichmann, "Trade Unions and the Communist Party in Durban in the 1940s: A Reply to Iain Edwards", *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (1986), pp. 60, 63.

[107] Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp. 85-89, 173; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, p. 556; Brooks, "From class struggle to national liberation", p. 47.

[108] Toussaint, "In Retrospect - 60 Years on", *The African Communist*, No. 86 (1981), p. 27.

ECCI which ultimately forced the slogan of a black republic upon the CPSA. Perhaps the slogan was not a wise one - indeed for the ANC and other black organisations it was far too radical - but it opened the eyes of many a South African communist to the importance of the national struggle particularly of the African population, being not merely a struggle for freedom in the sense of racial equality, but for liberation of the black oppressed "nation" and, perhaps, the creation of a new non-racial South African nation.[109] Initially the party had sufficient latitude left to adjust the new line to its established united front practices. But when the black republic slogan became an instrument of the new ultra-leftist line of the Comintern from late 1929, the party increasingly began to operate as a sectarian body claiming that they alone could lead the black masses in the national revolution. It was left to the controversial figure of Douglas Wolton eventually to "Bolshevise" the party completely and fully impose the Comintern's line. The tragedy that followed not only put an end to the leadership of Sidney P. Bunting, in the eyes of many blacks the greatest communist of all, but precipitated the party into a crisis from which it never fully recovered. In the final analysis it was the Comintern, after it had first provided the platform for a potentially successful South African communist party, that was also responsible for the party's destruction in the early 1930s. Of course, there were always local communists ready to carry out Moscow's directives. In the end it proved their own undoing.

It must be said that the history of the South African communist movement (the party, the communist-led trade unions and the different front organisations) is certainly a relevant study object as far as the 1920s are concerned, but much less so thereafter. Whereas the second half of the 1920s in particular offered the spectacle of a mass movement of working-class struggle and black resistance in which the communists played no mean part, the 1930s and early 1940s evoke feelings of cynicism about the CPSA's role. Of course it must be realised that the ultimate weakness of the black working-class movement, the hesitant policies of the ANC and others and the at times brutal repression by the South African State were all factors setting serious limits to the potential success of any militant movement of resistance, including communism. There were nevertheless certain opportunities to build a viable political opposition. In the late 1920s, indeed, the CPSA took full advantage of this. Although the party never expanded beyond a membership of some three thousand, it enjoyed a brief period of considerable popularity and influence among black South Africans. After 1930 the party, keen to be a loyal section of the Communist International, resumed the character of a sect and became a caricature of its former self and the Comintern. Internal strife, purges and one opportunist change of line after the other reduced the party's significance to near zero. The party's revival in the 1940s was a shaky phenomenon and could hardly restore the CPSA's one-time prestige.

[109] See on this question Ben Molapo, "On the National Question", *The African Communist*, No. 66 (1976); Joe Ngwenya, "A further contribution on the National Question", *The African Communist*, No. 67 (1976).