

BLACK TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1917-1948

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Introduction

In the three decades preceding the coming to power of the National Party (NP) in 1948, black trade union organisations became a prominent feature of the South African political and economic scene.¹ More than that, it was an expression of profound social and cultural changes occurring within the black population and South African society at large, following upon the process of industrialisation and urbanisation which, in the eyes of many people, seemed to rule out the viability of any policy of radical racial segregation. Indeed, the fundamental contradiction in South African society has always been that between increasing economic integration of the different racial groups on the one hand, and the attempts on the part of the dominant white group (or sections of it) to impose various forms of social and political segregation on the other.²

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, it was primarily the English-speaking white working class that sought to resist the black advance on the urban labour market. As white skilled and semi-skilled workers saw their jobs threatened by black labour competition, white trade unions and the South African Labour Party (SALP) began to propagate a policy of industrial segregation, which would have to safeguard the employment position of the white working class and exclude Africans from skilled jobs and specific segments of the labour market. During the second quarter of the century, a militant Afrikaner nationalist movement emerged, which sought to protect the mass of (mainly Afrikaner) "poor whites" who by now numbered a few hundred thousand. The unskilled Afrikaners, who had become redundant on the "platteland" and had moved to the cities to find a living, were in much the same position as the mass of Africans who could not survive in their homelands. Poor whites and Africans competed for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in the expanding urban centres, and Afrikaner nationalist

organisations tried to rescue the former from "sinking down to the level of the kaffirs". To this end, in the 1920s and 1930s, industrial legislation was enacted which purported to create jobs for unemployed whites, protect their wage levels and, in effect, give them an artificial advantage on the labour market over blacks. As a result, black workers who were subjected to various forms of discrimination and social segregation and had no political power to effectively defend their interests, were also confronted with a new policy of deliberate economic discrimination³. Nevertheless, in spite of all handicaps, they saw fit to organise and lay the basis for a black trade union movement.

It must be noted that in the period before 1948, when Apartheid was proclaimed, the official policy of the South African government, the obstacles to black resistance and oppositional activities of various kinds were not as serious, or at least not as "total", as under the regime of the Nationalists. Black workers were faced with many problems which restricted their opportunities to organise and fight for higher wages and better work conditions, but there always remained possibilities to form new unions, which, at times, could develop into powerful organisations. In this respect, the black trade union movement reached its zenith during World War II, when, for the first time in South African history, black trade unions were in a powerful bargaining position vis-a-vis employers and the state. Despite repressive measures, South African governments before 1948 had not tried to outlaw or systematically obliterate black unions; there was a fear of driving them underground. Therefore, there was some room to move for black trade unions. At the same time, black unions were actively assisted by radical and liberal whites and even managed to make use of labour legislation to improve the wages and the work conditions of their members.

The spectacular rise of an "independent" black trade union movement in South Africa during the late 1970s, is not a phenomenon altogether novel. Although this movement seems now more strongly entrenched than ever before, it certainly has its predecessors, who can be said to have established a tradition

which is continued today by COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions) and others. The industrial legislation of 1979 afforded new opportunities for black trade unionism, and is one expression of the type of "controlled reform" that the South African government at present wants to pursue.⁴ In the period between the 1950s and the 1970s however, black trade unionism was at a low ebb, the result of the repressive and racist policies of the NP regime. If the Nationalists did not completely ban all black trade unions, they made it very difficult for them to function, while organisations which were allied with the ANC, such as SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions), were outlawed.

In 1953, the outlook of the NP regime on black trade unionism was clearly worded by Ben Schoeman, the then Minister of Labour, who said:

The Native trade union movement is not a spontaneous movement among Native workers. The Native trade unions that are in existence today came into existence mainly as a result of efforts made by certain European trade unions, and left wing agitators....I feel that the Native has not yet reached that stage of development where trade unionism, through official recognition, can safely be entrusted in his hands. The overwhelming majority of the Native workers are illiterate, and they have no knowledge of and cannot appreciate trade union responsibility and discipline.⁵

In the ideology and political strategy of the NP there was no room for African trade unions in "white South Africa". In the Apartheid ideology Africans were seen as temporary sojourners in the urban areas. They were only there to minister to the needs of the whites, and would be citizens of future independent homelands, where they could exercise political and other civil rights.

But Schoeman also contended that African unions would be used as a political weapon, that to recognise them would mean "the end of all industrial colour bars in South Africa" and that their influence would be "detrimental to the interests of the European workers".⁶ Hereby he conceded that black trade unions

were, in effect, a viable force in society, and, moreover, a menace to the system of white supremacy and economic discrimination. These fears were not surprising at all and in fact well-founded. Only a few years before, African trade unions had achieved a powerful position, although this did not last long. At the end of World War II, the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU), predecessor to the much less successful SACTU, comprised 119 unions and 158.000 organised workers.⁷ This represented a peak in the number of organised black workers which would not be equalled for long. Although during the years of recession after the war their numbers dwindled, the potential power of an African organised labour movement had been clearly demonstrated. To halt this development, and "show the kaffir his place", was one of the objectives of the NP.

Birth of the Trade Unions

Black trade unionism had begun during the last phase of World War I, and the years immediately afterwards. Before World War I, there had been sporadic attempts at strike action, as in July 1913, when black mine workers on the Witwatersrand gold mines ceased work in an endeavour to get higher wages and more opportunity to do a better class of work. A long and bitter strike of white mine workers had just been concluded, and the Africans had shown their willingness to back them up. But when the latter struck work in their turn, the white workers refused to support them and in fact assisted the mine bosses and the police in breaking the strike.⁸ For black workers, this was one disillusion in a long row to follow, demonstrating that white workers did not consider their own interests identical to theirs. The only whites who supported them at the time were a small group of members of the International Socialist League (ISL), a radical socialist organisation in Johannesburg, which had split off from the SALP in 1915 over the issue whether or not to support South Africa's participation in the war. The anti-warites of the ISL, indeed, were the first whites to bridge the colour divide. They

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Clements Kadalie (c.1896-1951), trade union leader ICU (courtesy of AABN)

organised evening classes for black workers to instruct them in the aims of trade unionism and the meaning of socialism. They were also instrumental in initiating, in 1917, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), which may be regarded as the first black trade union ever formed in South Africa.⁹

The years 1917-20 formed a period of serious labour unrest in South Africa (as well as elsewhere in the world). Both white and non-white workers became victims of the steadily rising cost of living which marked this period. The fact that, simultaneously, South Africa went through a boom, entailing a large demand for labour, meant that workers were in a strong position vis-a-vis employers to resist the trend of declining real wages and to demand better terms of employment. During the years 1918-20 there were, for the first time, a series of strikes of black workers, embracing mine workers, municipal workers and others. These strikes were largely of a spontaneous nature and, it would seem, not necessarily inspired by the IWA. In the early part of 1919, however, another, and more successful black trade union was established, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU). The ICU was formed in Cape Town, where a considerable number of Africans were working as stevedores in the docks. Also in this case, the active support of white socialists played an important part in initiating the organisation. The ICU developed speedily into a successful trade union which, without much white assistance, enrolled large numbers of black and "coloured" dock workers.

If the general climate of unrest in the years after World War I, the relatively strong bargaining position of black workers (particularly outside the mines) and the active support and propaganda of white socialists were important elements in promoting the rise of a black trade union movement, the emergence of a black trade union leadership was a factor which enabled the movement to keep going. The leader of the ICU in Cape Town was Clements Kadalie, a native of Nyasaland (nowadays Malawi). Kadalie, who could not speak any of the South African languages, of necessity addressed his followers in English, which inevitably became the lingua franca of black trade unionism and

the means to bridge the gap between the different black ethnic groups. Kadalie had a petty-bourgeois background and was a relative outsider in Cape Town, but his charismatic personality and oratory inspired his worker audience and got them into action when necessary. In December 1919, the ICU organised a strike in Cape Town harbour in which most black and "coloured" dock workers participated. The white-dominated Cape Federation of Labour Unions (CFLU) had called upon dock workers not to handle food exports (in connection with the campaign against high food prices), and the ICU answered the call. But white workers who worked for the Railways and Harbours, and whose union was not affiliated to the CFLU, scabbed on them, so that the strike was lost. The ICU had also put forward a demand for a (very modest) rise in wages for black dock workers, and shortly afterwards an increase was granted by the stevedoring companies. In 1920 the ICU demanded another increase, which was granted as well. These successes enhanced the prestige of the union and Kadalie and laid the basis for a further extension of the ICU organisational network in South Africa.

During the 1920s, indeed, the ICU expanded over the whole of South Africa, and even South West Africa. Branches were established in practically all centres of importance, and also on the platteland, where groups of agricultural labourers were enrolled. In 1925, the headquarters of the union was transferred from Cape Town to Johannesburg, the main industrial centre of the country. The spectacular rise of the ICU brought great expectations amongst the black population, but also brought to light serious weaknesses. The union developed into a broad mass movement which agitated over general political issues. Now, for black workers the question of (the absence of) full political rights was often difficult to separate from economic and shop-floor issues, but, increasingly, the former seemed to be addressed to the negligence of the latter. As the ICU became more and more a general protest movement, and, in this respect, even a competitor to the ANC, its trade union function receded to the background. Instead of there being built up a solid trade union organisation, there evolved a mass movement around Kadalie,

who, moreover, was not very consistent in his political stance and first supported the Smuts government against the discriminatory demands of organised white labour, then, after 1924, backed the Pact government of Afrikaner nationalists and the Labour Party. When political and personal vendettas between Kadalie and other ICU leaders broke out, the ICU went downhill. In 1926, the organisation claimed a membership of more than 100.000, in 1928 a quarter of a million. These were great and unprecedented accomplishments, but it was not always clear what it actually meant to be a member. In the late 1920s the union went through a series of splits and breakaways and fell apart in a number of groups which fought each other and did not survive for long. The fall of the ICU was as spectacular as its rise.¹⁰

From the experience of the ICU in the 1920s, two issues emerged. The first was the question of the relationship between trade unionism and political protest, and the necessity to distinguish between them. The other question was that of the relationship between black workers and their white supporters, the communists and liberals who, each in their own way, had helped the ICU but also tried to influence it and, it seemed, to use it for their own ends. The two issues were often closely linked. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA -established in 1921 as the successor to the ISL and a few other socialist groups) in particular, actively supported the formation of genuine black trade unions, which would have to be built up in specific industries and, in principle, have an autonomous character. At the same time, the communists introduced a particular ideology which was seen by not a few blacks as a typical white political philosophy, especially since the communists propagated the idea of inter-racial working class solidarity, in the eyes of many black workers a rather unrealistic vision. For good reasons, many blacks were suspicious about the motives and designs of whites, even if they seemed sincerely willing to come to their support. The communists, however were good and enthusiastic organisers, and from the late 1920s an increasing number of blacks joined the CPSA. Moreover, their opposition to Kadalie's megalomania (he soon came into conflict with them and for most of his

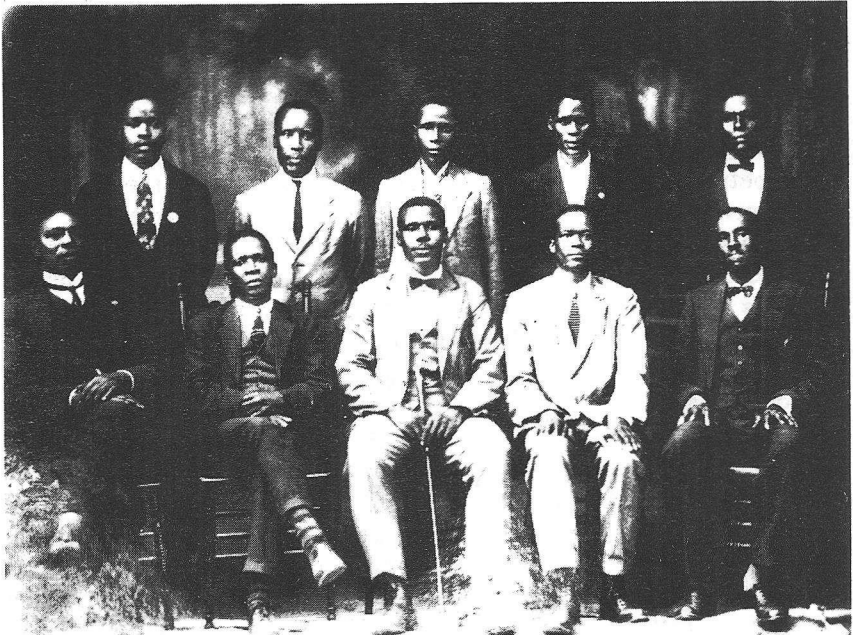


INDUSTRIAL & COMMERCIAL WORKERS UNION OF AFRICA.

Established January, 1910.
Branches throughout the
Union of South Africa and
South-West Protectorate.
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addressed to the General
Secretary.

HEAD OFFICE
24 LOOP STREET, CAPE TOWN.

PHONE NO. 5320 CENTRAL.
TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS "ISEEYOU" CAPE TOWN.



THERE IS FIRE HERE "I.C.U. Chiefs"

(top) The letterhead of the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union. (bottom half) The leaders of the ICU. (reprinted from: Luli Callinicos, *Gold and Workers, 1886 - 1924*. (Johannesburg, 1980).

political career opposed them) was shared by many down-to-earth black trade unionists, who clearly saw the shortcomings of the ICU and the need to build genuine trade unions. Nevertheless, the relationship to white communists and liberals, as well as the position of the black trade union movement within the wider struggle for black liberation and emancipation, remained controversial issues with black workers.¹¹

Division and re-alignment

In the late 1920s, while the ICU was on its way down, but industrial militancy among black workers was on the rise, a number of black trade unions were formed which were clearly distinct from the concept of "one big union" and the rather amorphous and somewhat messianistic ICU. These unions were organised in the rising manufacturing industries of Johannesburg and other urban centres, and were in most cases initiated by communists. The manufacturing industry drew its labour force from the growing group of permanently urbanised blacks, who, in many cases, performed work of a semi-skilled nature and were the most educated and stable section of the black working class and therefore the easiest to organise. The mining industry, in contrast, relied upon migrant labour, which was housed in closed compounds and difficult to organise (a black mine workers' union was only formed in the 1940s). In 1928, unions of workers in the clothing, laundry, baking and furniture industries combined to form the South African Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU), the first genuine black trade union federation in South Africa, which claimed to represent 10,000 workers on the Witwatersrand alone. Subsequently, more unions were formed, but the movement suffered a setback as a result of trouble within the CPSA, which badly affected the leadership of FNETU. In 1930, a new trade union federation was established, the African Federation of Trade Unions (AFTU). Although the depression of 1930-33 caused a further set-back in the number of organised workers, several black trade unions survived.

In the second half of the 1930s black trade unionism went through a new period of growth, and a re-alignment of forces took place. At a conference in 1938, a Non-European Trade Union Co-ordinating Committee (NETUCC) was formed, with Gana Makabeni, an able black organiser who had been expelled from the CPSA, as the chairman. The idea behind the NETUCC was to bring together all the existing black trade unions, both the communist-inspired and others, in an autonomous black trade union centre. The delegates to the conference agreed to bar all whites from office (though not from the executive). It would seem that this step was induced by a certain fear of dominance by whites, and it is not impossible that bad experiences with the authoritarianism of the CPSA was behind this decision as well. However, the introduction of the racial barrier caused a split, as a result of which a number of unions which had been formed by Max Gordon, a white trade unionist with Trotskyist leanings, withdrew. Gordon was a successful organiser of black trade unions (he kept his political views separate from his organising work). In the years 1937-38 he initiated unions of, inter alia, commercial, printing and chemical workers, which were brought together in a Joint Committee. He also seems to have had easy access to officials of the Labour Department, some of whom were not unsympathetic to the aspirations of African workers to improve their wages and conditions.¹²

Indeed, beside the help of communists and other white trade union organisers, an important factor which was of assistance to African union was the existence of the Wage Board, a division of the Labour Department which had been established under the Wage Act of 1925. While the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 provided for the establishment of a conciliation apparatus in industries in which white workers were strongly organised, and excluded "pass-bearing natives" from participating in negotiations on Industrial Councils, the Wage Act was meant to cater for workers in unorganised or weakly organised industries (mainly industries with large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers). Upon request by a representative group of workers, the Wage Board could investigate conditions in such industries (in

which Africans were strongly represented) and make determinations fixing minimum rates of wages which did not racially discriminate. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Wage Board was not necessarily a reactionary body, and trade union officials representing African workers were able to submit requests for investigations, resulting in determinations which increased rates of wages of African workers. Thus black workers benefitted by labour legislation which had originally been enacted with a view to protecting sections of the white working class. Thanks to the efforts of men like Max Gordon, unions of black workers were in this way able to attain better conditions for their members, which, of course, enhanced the enthusiasm of black workers to join up and organise.

It must also be noted that, during the 1930s and 1940s, the South African Trades and Labour Council (SATLC), the largest white trade union federation of the country, was a relatively progressive organisation, in whose top communists and other leftist whites played a prominent role.¹³ Although the rank and file of most white trade unions were pretty racist and conservative, some of their leaders were not. To the SATLC, unions with "coloured" and Indian members were affiliated (and at times even African unions), while individual white trade union leaders assisted Africans in organising. Nevertheless, there always remained a divide between the white labour movement and the struggling African trade unions. While "coloured" workers were admitted to most trade unions in Cape Town (the Cape Federation of Labour was explicitly non-racial as far as "coloureds" were concerned) and even to a handful of unions in Johannesburg, Africans as a rule remained apart from the established mainstream labour movement. In certain instances, African unions parallel to those of whites were formed, but it never came to fully integrated organisations. While there were unions of whites and "coloureds", as well as unions of "coloureds" and Africans, the formation of unions which comprised both whites and Africans was apparently one step too far. This had partly to do with the fact that, outside the Cape Province, unions which included "pass-bearing natives" could not be registered under the

Industrial Conciliation Act. But it was also the outcome of racial prejudice on the part of white workers. Unfortunately, it happened that, when African unions supported their white counterparts when the latter went on strike, the white union did not reciprocate solidarity when Africans ceased work. Such betrayal occurred, for instance, in the clothing and furniture industries in Johannesburg in the late 1920s.¹⁴

Thus, although African unions were actively supported by a small number of whites, bad experiences with white workers and frustrations with the unsatisfactory policies of even the more progressive sections of the white trade union movement led to a desire with African trade unionists to form their own trade union centre. The disagreement about the position of whites which had come to the fore at the conference of 1938, was seemingly overcome when in 1941 the NETUCC and Gordon's Joint Committee merged into the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU). Within the new organisation emphasis was laid on the underprivileged position that Africans occupied in South African society. In 1942, Makabeni, who became CNETU's president, declared: "Let us realise that we are oppressed, firstly as a race and secondly as workers."¹⁵

As noted above, CNETU developed into a powerful organisation. During World War II the South African economy boomed, while large numbers of whites joined the armed forces. This created a favourable bargaining position for African workers, whose labour was this time not only demanded to perform unskilled work, but also for semi-skilled and even skilled tasks. Africans in many different industries were organised, and by 1945 their numbers reached the figure of 158.000. Although strikes took place, CNETU used its power in a most restrained fashion. It has been claimed that this was due to the influence and policy of the communists, who were reluctant to disrupt the war effort because of the fact that the Soviet Union had joined the war as an ally of the Western powers.¹⁶ An important success for black trade unionism was the formation, in 1941, of the African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU). The black mine workers on the gold mines, who were migrant labourers and were housed in compounds

which isolated them from the outside world, were notoriously difficult to organise. Therefore, the establishment of this union in South Africa's major industry marks a watershed in the history of South African trade unionism.

In August 1946, the AMWU organised a strike, which affected 21 mines and nearly 74.000 workers.¹⁷ The union's demands included a minimum wage of 10 shillings a day. CNETU's attempts to mount a strike in sympathy, led to the biggest confrontation between organised black labour and the white power elite that South Africa had seen so far. Massive police intervention thwarted what was to have been a general strike, while leaders of the AMWU and other organisations were arrested.¹⁸ These repressive measures severely emasculated the power of CNETU and the AMWU. The postwar recession further weakened union membership. It was, however, the assuming of power by the National Party in 1948, which gave the most fatal blow and destroyed the effectiveness of the black trade union movement for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Here, black is used as synonymous to African, not as referring to all non-whites and comprising coloured and Indian as well. Today the use of the term black in the scholarly literature (and in the political struggle) as including all non-whites is popular, but is regarded by me as rather indeterminate and confusing. When writing about twentieth-century South African history one does not get away from the fact that contemporaries (not only the authorities or outspoken racists) used to distinguish between Africans (natives), coloureds and Indians, who, in combination, were referred to as non-Europeans or non-whites, while the term black would rather relate to the natives, or Africans.
2. The terms racial and racial group are not meant to refer to the existence of supposedly innate biological differences or racial inequality as between different colour groups (which

would be the perception of racist ideologists), but to the notions of contemporaries, who used to broadly classify people in South Africa (on the basis of physical features, and cultural differences) into the categories mentioned in note 1. Racial is, therefore, a term which relates to a sociological, not a biological phenomenon.

3. See C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa, Social & Economic* (Oxford 1957), for a still unsurpassed analysis of these policies and processes.
4. The 1979 Labour Relations Act, which opened the way to recognition and registration of African unions. For an analysis of the motives and forces behind this new industrial relations system (the "Wiehahn reforms"), see Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910-1986* (Cape Town 1986).
5. Schoeman in the House of Assembly. Quoted in Don Ncube, *The Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa* (Johannesburg 1985) 83.
6. Ncube, *Black Trade Unions*, 83-84.
7. Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Minneapolis 1964) 333.
8. Elaine N. Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy: A History of White Workers in the Transvaal and the General Strike of 1913* (Johannesburg 1976).
9. See on this F.A. Johnstone, "The IWA on the Rand: Socialist Organising among Black Workers on the Rand, 1917-18" in: Belinda Bozzoli ed., *Labour, Townships and Protest: Studies in the Social History of the Witwatersrand* (Johannesburg 1979).
10. On the ICU, see S.W. Johns III, "The Birth of Non-white Trade Unionism in South Africa", *Race* 9,3 (1967); P.L. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (Oxford 1978) Philip Bonner, "The Decline and Fall of the I.C.U. - a Case of Self-Destruction?" in: Eddie Webster ed., *Essays in Southern African Labour History* (Johannesburg 1978). Kadalie later wrote his autobiography under the title

- "My Life and the ICU", which is marked by an unmistakable grandiloquence.
11. The question of the relationship between working class politics and black liberation, and the role of the CPSA, are major themes in H.J. and R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (1969).
 12. On black trade unionism in the late 1920s and 1930s, see Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, ch. XXVI; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, ch. 16-19, 22; Ncube, *Black Trade Unions*, ch. 4. On Max Gordon's involvement, see Mark Stein, "Max Gordon and African Trade Unionism on the Witwatersrand, 1935-1940" in: Webster ed., *Essays*.
 13. See on the SATLC Jon Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa 1924-55: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trade and Labour Council* (Cambridge 1984).
 14. Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*, 378.
 15. Ibidem, 556.
 16. For instance, Ncube, *Black Trade Unions*, 62.
 17. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 341.
 18. Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (Johannesburg 1983) 20.

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