

THE BLOEMFONTEIN RIOTS, 1925:
A STUDY IN COMMUNITY CULTURE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS*

by

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Hence one characteristic paradox of the century:
we have a rebellious traditional culture

- E P Thompson (1)

The history of the popular movement, in its most elemental, crudest, and most visible form, is that of the crowd, or riot, both urban and rural, though it may well be objected that a series of disconnected riots ... in response to immediate and generally unrelated stimuli, can hardly be described as a 'movement'. The difficulty here is that without the riot there is very little left to write about.

- Richard Cobb (2)

There was nothing very unusual about the events which triggered off the riots in Bloemfontein in 1925. There was an attempted arrest, the police were stoned, and the riot had begun. Nor was there anything particularly unusual about the objective of the arrest. Men were drinking illegally brewed beer, and the woman who had prepared the brew was present. When eventually a tally is made of the factors which triggered off riots in the towns of South Africa before the liquor laws were amended to allow relatively free access to wines, spirits and beer, the weekly raids for illegal brewing will figure prominently amongst the causes. The arrival of the kwela-kwela (pick-up van), week after week, the search and the arrests when the brews were unearthed, were a constant source of anger. Inevitably the day arrived when anger and sullenness gave way to defiance, and the gathering crowd turned on the police. Stones were thrown, shots were returned, and a rampaging crowd sought out the "enemy", and left a trail of smashed windows and burning property.

The events in Bloemfontein, on Sunday 19 April, deviated from the usual pattern, and had all the signs of deliberate provocation. Two policemen, one white and one black, were patrolling the streets of Waaihoek location, when they came across a beer party in the open outside a hut in Falck Street. (3) There was no attempt to hide the drink, and no retreat when the police moved in to arrest the revellers. Instead, the group met the police with a volley of stones, and were armed with sticks and pieces of iron.

This act of open defiance came as a surprise. For several weeks the authorities had known that there was rising indignation because momela (sprouted corn) had been prohibited in the location. They also knew that momela, particularly prized because it speeded the brewing process, was being smuggled into Waaihoek. The number of police raids had been increased, and the African police resident in the location had been particularly "diligent" in searching for beer. (4) Householdors who were affected were angry, but there had been no signs of overt resistance.

The two policemen managed to escape and summoned help. They returned with a posse of some 20 mounted police, and behind the police came a body of (white) townsmen, many carrying guns. The mounted police jostled the men, many of whom had gathered after the first confrontation, and a volley of stones was returned from the crowd. The police drew their guns and fired, and an African bystander, who had not been involved in any of the afternoon's events, fell dead.

Precisely who fired the fatal shot was never disclosed. The police claimed that they had fired over the heads of the crowd, and a subsequent report claimed that the fatal bullet could not have fitted the police rifles. There was also a claim by an African witness that he had heard a shot fired by the whites. (5) There were also accounts from both police and civilians of whites appearing at vantage points in Waaihoek, both on Sunday and Monday (when many men were shot), with guns held at the ready, either shooting or prepared to shoot.

Despite the appointment of a Government commission of enquiry into the causes of the riot, we have very little knowledge of those who constituted the "crowd" on Sunday. There was no obvious leader until later in the day, and those who gathered after the first affray melted away. We know even less about the gun-toting crowd that came in with the mounted police. They were seen by the police, and their eagerness to use guns noted, but not one was apprehended. In fact, the police claimed to know why the whites had come. Colonel G S Beer, Deputy Commissioner of Police told the Commission of Enquiry that some came out of animosity "but mostly to 'get their own back' on the Natives". (6) In an earlier statement he was reported as saying:

Quite as troublesome as the Natives were the crowds of people from the town who came to see the happenings for themselves. Many of them were carrying weapons, displayed almost tauntingly to the Natives ... (7)

From the gathered whites came cries of "first" and "skiet", or "yells of delight and cries of 'Come on Colonel, let's get at them'" (8). More will be seen of this "anti-crowd" in the events which follow. Precisely what destruction can be laid at their door is uncertain, but there can be no doubt about the effect they had on relations between the white and black communities. In appearance, "crowd" and "anti-crowd" differed only in the colour of their skins; in action they stood for those who demanded change, and those who demanded even more oppressive measures against the black community.

The shooting created an even more volatile situation, and the crowd was described as "seething with rage and indignation". At this stage new personalities were appearing at the scene: J R Cooper, Superintendent of the Location, and a person of some influence by virtue of his stewardship of the location Advisory Board consisting of elected "blockmen" (who each had charge of specified regions in Waaihoek); Colonel Beer, who eventually took command and directed all operations; and James Mpinda, leading African member of the Advisory Board, and at that time a member of the executive of the local branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) (9), who had returned that Sunday from the annual conference of the ICU in Johannesburg. It is not clear when he intervened in affairs that day, or whether he was the leader who spoke for the crowd that afternoon.

Cooper later told the Friend reporter that the Africans were demanding the surrender of the policeman who had killed one of their companions, and, drawn up in threatening formation, were prepared to rush the police. (10) He parleyed with the (unnamed) "ringleaders", who promised to disperse their followers if the police and "armed citizens" left. Colonel Beer took over and refused to withdraw, because, he said later, "the Natives were quarrelsome".

An autumn thunderstorm intervened, and this gave the Friend's reporter the opportunity to insert a scarlet patch in his story. Despite some very obvious exaggerations, he probably caught some of the atmosphere in his account:

An unexpected clap of thunder set the Native women jarringly screeching once again. They threw their hands up as though expecting super-natural help, emitting unacnmy noises all the while ... the Railways and Harbour Brigade put in an appearance shortly afterwards ... A few minutes passed, and then the rain came down in torrents ... A hail storm followed and people fled for shelter. The square was cleared save for a few females who, in their drunken frenzy executed a dance in the face of the storm. (11)

And then, when thoroughly doused, he reported, they sobered and dispersed. How he measured their "drunken frenzy", or the sobering process, was not disclosed, but the ululating and the dance of defiance rings true.

Eventually even Colonel Beer recognized the extent of the defiance, and "the undisguised hostility to the police". (12) He said that the police would withdraw from the location, and promised that there would be no police patrols in Waaihoek that night. They would instead take up positions in the town outside the location, "ready to check the mob if they tried to break through into the town", as The Friend assured its readers.

The location, free of white intrusion, was transformed. James Mpinde and other top officials of the local ICU branch, emerged as the leaders of the township. It is not clear whether they were the "ringleaders" with whom Cooper and Col Beer had parleyed, but from all accounts they were in control of the situation that night and all next day. In the process the riot of 19 April was transformed into a political demonstration with strong proletarian overtones.

If Richard Cobb was correct (in the passage cited at the head of this paper) that "without the riot there was very little left to write about" in the 18th century, that was obviously not the case in 20th century South Africa. Riots were a frequent occurrence, but were not the only manifestation of African discontent, and furthermore could be transformed into political demonstrations, at least partly directed by political leaders. In like fashion political demonstrations could revert to typical "crowd" action under conditions of great stress. (13)

In Bloemfontein, that day, the crowd was marshalled, and transformed, into a disciplined "urban community" under political leadership, although (as will be seen) the change was uneven and incomplete.

There were also changes in the (white) town, and particularly in the suburbs bordering Waaihoek. One resident who lived near the location told the Commission of Enquiry of "threatening behaviour" by Africans, of stones being thrown, and of shouting and swearing. Whether true or false, some 30 (white) families fled the area on Sunday night. Other witnesses claimed that they had heard speakers, in

English (sic) call for equal wages with whites, and the right to live alongside whites. Another said that he had heard complaints (also in those speeches, in English) complaining about high rents. There was also the account from a Sub-Inspector of the Railway Police who said that he had heard the women urging the men to attack the police, and "they [the women] would sleep in the white women's beds that night". (14)

The Stay-at-Home

The events inside Waaihoek on Sunday night have to be pieced together from widely divergent stories told by persons in court. Some stood accused of Public Violence, others appeared as witnesses for the defence or the crown. Even evidence given at the Commission of Enquiry was coloured by the fact that men and women were already under arrest under these charges, and all stories were tailored to meet the circumstances.

None the less, some issues were not disputed. It was agreed that James Mpinda was the leading speaker that night and on the Monday morning. On Sunday he led a perambulating march round the location, stopping at street corners to address crowds of between 100 and 250. There he called on people to stay at home on Monday, and all the evidence indicated that no person opposed the call. At about 9.00 p.m. he led the march to the house of the dead man, and everyone sang hymns. (15)

There was little agreement on other aspects of Mpinda's statements. Some witnesses claimed that he threatened mayhem against anyone who went to work. Others argued that he issued no threats, and that he even urged that workers secure permission from their employers. It was also stated that several attempts by Mpinda to secure some measure of co-operation with the authorities were rejected by his audience. Mpinda himself said that his suggestion on Monday morning that a deputation be appointed by the community to meet the Superintendent was brushed aside and "his life was in grave danger". (16)

At this distance the details cannot be unravelled, but they are perhaps less important than the fact that Mpinda, with the support of the ICU and other leaders, was able to call the one-day general strike because a member of the community had been shot. (17)

On Monday 20 April 1925 the overwhelming majority of Waaihoek's 23,000 inhabitants refused to leave the location, and Bloemfontein found itself without a black work force. This was a remarkable achievement, even for a town which had seen the unprecedented struggle against the passes by the women of the town in 1913.

The organization inside the location, according to The Friend, sounded impressive. The squares were filled with men and women ... and "at every street pickets were stationed, armed with staves ..." There was no longer "the sullen indignation of Sunday night, but an openly displayed hostility". (18)

During the morning the focus shifted to the Town Hall. James Mpinda and other leading Africans met the mayor and his councillors, Colonel Beer, the magistrate, P C Cochran, and the Attorney General, S J de Jager. Precisely what the African leaders hoped to achieve is not clear. They maintained that the main grievance in Waaihoek was over the action of the African police. Although the regulations in Bloemfontein allowed every family to brew 4 gallons of beer for family consumption, these police would confiscate small quantities and make exaggerated reports to magistrates. The people felt that they were being persecuted, and complained that the police interfered with their domestic affairs. (19)

Thereafter, the discussion seems to have centred on two issues: the matter of sprouted corn and the activities of outside speakers in the location. On the first matter, the mayor claimed that the regulation was introduced at the express request of the Advisory Board (to which most of the deputation belonged), and other prominent members of the location. The leader of the delegation, who appears to have been Mpinda, stated in reply that this regulation was the "best thing the Council had passed", and on being challenged the rest of the deputation agreed.

Speakers also confirmed that "a coloured man" had spoken to meetings, but denied that any attempt had ever been made to rally the township on any particular issue. The "visitor" had raised the question of wages, and had suggested that all workers should go to their masters and say they were worth more than 1s 3d per day.

Nothing else is reported of the meeting, except that the deputation assured the meeting that they would return to Waaihoek and tell the people to go back to work.

Perhaps they did suggest a return to work when they returned to their constituents in Waaihoek. On this the newspapers are silent, but if they did so recommend their audience was in no mood to comply. They had been offered nothing except a return to the status quo ante, and events later in the day suggest that Mpinda and his colleagues had lost part of their grip on the situation. None the less they were back on "home territory", and were still the "leaders", although the direction was now being dictated by the assembled community.

Meanwhile a large body of whites had gathered outside the location. There were the police armed with rifles, volunteers from the local Rifle Association, and members of the Railways and Harbours Rifles, with bayonets fixed. There was also a large number of civilians, and citizens in cars, who had come to watch the sport. (20) The civilians were not sent packing. One hundred and sixty of them were enrolled as "special police" and equipped with pick-handles. The anti-crowd of Sunday had been transformed, and were now incorporated in the forces of law and order. The reporter on The Friend put his own gloss on what had happened, and stated in the language his readers could understand:

... not one African policeman was used - and this was a wise decision ... It was a White man's authority which was being upheld, and it was the White man's job to maintain it ... (21)

The civic authorities were understandably impatient. The African leaders had not ended the stay-at-home, and reports had filtered out of Waaihoek that African police had been attacked, and their homes in the location gutted. Consequently, the magistrate and police officers had gone into the township to parley with Mpinda and company. Facing deadlock, they had retreated (walking backward), and given the order that the crowd disperse by 3.00 p.m. And, indeed, once again the community had become a "crowd". Stones were thrown, and when police advanced to arrest the leaders they were met with another volley. And then the firing started in earnest. (22)

Once again there is a dispute about the shooting. Partly this was an attempt by the police to exonerate themselves, but it does seem to have been the case that civilians (special police?) were heard to give the command to "shoot", and Major Clark-Kennedy, who was to lead the subsequent advance through the streets of Waaihoek, stated that on the skyline he had seen two horsemen firing, and also that he had hit one white on the head with his baton, as he was kneeling down to fire. (23)

The immediate resistance was over. The column of police, volunteers, and special police marched through the streets of Waaihoek, led by the magistrate, the police chief, and the location inspector. Five dead were found, and some 18 injured were reported (but many were locally treated). Fifty "ringleaders" were also arrested, and many of these were "kicked and booted ... and knocked about" by civilians as they were taken away, according to the location superintendent. (24) Two whites were injured during the day, and one was hit over the head by the police chief. None were arrested.

The story of this phase must be closed with a brief note on ICU and ANC reactions. On Monday night ICU members from Port Elizabeth, returning from the Johannesburg conference, stopped at the location and stayed on during Tuesday. The Friend only reported that their visit was peaceful. I have not traced other comments. Meanwhile the ANC conference was in session on Tuesday 21 April, and, after hearing a report on Monday's happenings, delegated L J Mvubuza as their representative to proceed to Bloemfontein "on a peace mission". (25)

On Wednesday Mvubuza, together with two officials of the ICU, met the civic and police officials at the Town Hall. After expressions of regret at the bloodshed, Mvubuza made a lengthy statement, in which he said that the ANC was waiting to see the law take its course and that his organization would arrange for the defence of those arrested. He also declared that:

It is not their intention to go against the law, but to assist the people to live peaceably with those in authority. They had specially been sent to assist in restoring peace and preventing bloodshed, and they were very happy that the trouble was now over. (26)

Mvubuza had been sent on a "peace mission", and his statement was in accord with his credentials. But in the broader sense of what had occurred in Waaihoek, the trouble(s) were far from over. The immediate protest was over brewing, beer raids, and sprouted corn. That had not changed, and would not change, and was closely tied to the position of women in town, which was, if anything, to worsen in the coming months. The trouble was also closely related to low wages, high taxes, and the insecurity of Africans in the towns. (27) All these matters were put to the Commission of Enquiry in August, by both white officials and location leaders. Little or nothing was derived from that hearing, but one quite remarkable sequel did follow. In February 1926 a Wages Commission, consisting of an equal number of blacks and whites, was appointed by the Town Council, and it recommended the introduction of a minimum wage of 3s per day for all unskilled labour. That will be discussed below, but it is the issue of women's position in the towns which requires further attention now.

Women in Town

But what of the denizens of 'Satans strongholds', the harlots and publicans and thieves whose souls the evangelists wrestled for?

- E P Thompson (28)

She turned our house into a shebeen, worked ten hours a day brewing and pressing home brew called skokiaan and barberton, and from the proceeds she educated me to high school level and the two girls to primary school level ...

- Bloke Modisane (29)

There were few openings for African women in the 1920s, except for domestic service. There were certainly no jobs in industry, and few, if any, in (white) commercial firms. Some were forced to take in the weekly washing of white families to earn a few shillings; others engaged in beer brewing or prostitution. Some tried several of these methods in order to survive, or supplement the family's subsistence level income. A few thrived, but the vast majority lived precariously, and many served spells in the local lock-up.

There were no Municipal beer halls in Bloemfontein, and every woman was allowed to engage in the "traditional practice" of home brewing, provided that no more than four gallons was prepared at a time. But there were always men, from compounds or elsewhere, who wanted a drink, and, as elsewhere in towns and locations, women in need brewed concoctions for sale. This was not quite a "rebellious traditional culture", but was certainly a "traditional culture" turned rebellious.

To many civic authorities the women were a curse. Their presence in town was a burden on the rates, and the need for more housing and a larger administrative staff was a source of constant complaint. Furthermore, the women were inherently evil: they introduced sex into the towns, and in its wake came unwanted children and VD. Obviously they had to be repatriated. And those who would be allowed to stay had to be rigorously controlled.

These "loose" women were as much despised by priests and missionaries as by the administrators. In the words of one forthright publicist, the women not only brought their (unmentionable) "native customs" but were also "exposed to the [even more unmentionable?] temptations of town life". They were "driven to sin", roamed the streets, "became dissolute, and ... in turn demoralise decent boys". This article by Jessie Hertslet, which attracted considerable attention at the time, and was severely criticized in an editorial in Ilanga, was printed in the liberal South African Quarterly, edited by Rheinallt Jones. (30)

Mrs Hertslet called for "drastic action" and measures that "would be thought reasonable in a state of war", to cleanse the towns "of loafing women and prostitutes", followed by "an adaptation of the Natal travelling pass laws for women" to keep them away. Thereafter, there should be labour bureaux, and licenses to employ, and to be employed in domestic service. Only then would the women be protected from their own evil propensities, and the white families protected from the dread diseases which otherwise threatened them. (31)

Through the inter-war years this view persisted, as missionaries campaigned against vice and prostitution in the servant quarters on the Witwatersrand. (32) In the wake of this campaign African leaders either denied that there was any prostitution (33) or made the counter-claim that white women were more immoral than blacks. (34) Where, however, Africans served on Advisory Boards, or attended conferences organized by whites, they voiced their condemnation of brewing in no uncertain terms. We had occasion to quote James Mpinda on the subject of sprouted corn above. But these were all men; the women were more understanding, even if they sometimes exaggerated. Ray Phillips reports a Christian woman as saying:

The temptation to sell the stuff is almost too strong.
All the women around here are making a lot of money;
buying pianos and gramophones and silk dresses.
Because I am a Christian and try to go straight, I
have to stand here day after day and kill myself
washing. (35)

Until 1924 there was divided counsel in administrative quarters. The Native Affairs Commission declared in August 1921 that African women were basically

evil, and, like men, should be compelled to live in prescribed places. (36) They also believed that all domestic workers should be required to undergo a mandatory medical examination. (37) However, there was no national directive, and local authorities imposed their own regulations. In the Orange Free State several towns tried, as in 1913, to issue passes to women, and, when the local police demurred because it was not government policy, civilians threatened to enforce the passes themselves. (38)

In Durban the authorities aimed to rid the town of a large number of its women by stopping all brewing. The police apparently drew up a list of all African women living with men in the poorer areas, and forced an acknowledgement that they were not married. These were required to leave the town, and by 1923 most of these women, characterized as "prostitutes, spongers, and illicit brewers", had been removed. (39) The Municipal authority set up its own beer hall, and it was the boycott of this establishment which led to the riot of 1929 - but that is another story. (40)

The first national move to apply passes to women came in 1924, shortly after the formation of the Pact Government. The police were ordered to arrest, imprison and deport to the rural areas any woman found in the streets at night without a "night-pass". A deputation to the Prime Minister, led by Rheinallt Jones of the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives, secured a suspension of the order for six months, during which time proposals were to be produced. (41) The Joint Councils subsequently convened a conference, and invited churches, municipalities, and government officials to attend. Both the ANC and the ICU were invited, but, acting in concert, they rejected the gathering. W G Champion, recently invited to take a leading part in the ICU, did attend, and this was to lead to a bitter wrangle between the ANC and ICU - but that was soon overshadowed by the Bloemfontein riot.

The Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg chaired the conference, and after due deliberation it was suggested to the Prime Minister that no new regulations were required, and that the problem of "loose women" could be dealt with adequately under the provisions of the Urban Areas Act of 1923. Any other regulation, they added, would penalize respectable women. (42)

This was not acceptable to the government, and in mid-1925 the regulation was again introduced. Once again, the position of women in the towns was at risk, and it was only a court finding in 1926 that the regulation was ultra vires (after a test case had been fought by women who courted arrest) which lifted the immediate threat.

Many women lost their right to stay in the towns in the inter-war period because of one or other of the regulations introduced by local authorities, and only where women were able to organize an effective resistance to pass laws, or the enforcement of lodger permits (43), or found the means to continue brewing beer, were they able to survive in the towns. For the brewers, in particular, it was an issue of survival, and the many riots accompanying beer raids reflected their desperation.

Quite remarkably, entire townships rallied around the brewers, despite the antagonisms felt by many women against those who trapped their men into week-end carousals. For some, this was associated with a defence of the traditional practice of brewing beer; for others, the prohibitions were "regarded as an infringement of their personal liberty" (44), or perhaps just an act of solidarity against the administration. Those men and women in the township for whom the brewers' art was insupportable were generally forced by community pressure to remain silent during outbreaks of violence.

The riot of 1925 brought one additional factor to the fore. Some of the sprouted corn was supplied by white merchants (45), but most of the illegal trade was conducted by women from Basutoland who made weekly trips to towns in the Free State. Writing in 1932, Leonard Barnes noted that the extreme poverty of Basutoland encouraged this smuggling. (46) In somewhat cruder terms this was also asserted by Colonel Beer in his evidence to the Commission of Enquiry: "Native prostitutes from Basutoland", he said, "brought the beer and ingredients into Bloemfontein." (47)

Quite evidently the brewing of beer, and the many covert activities associated with its making and its dispensing, cannot be divorced from the conditions of poverty which governed the lives of men and women in both urban and rural areas. The tragedy lay not so much in the incidence of drink, bad as that was, but in the need of the impoverished to batten on the poor in order to survive.

A Matter of Wages

When a 'boy' is paid 2s. a day it spells trouble, and in the witness's opinion this was at the bottom of the cause of the riots.

- James Patterson Logan, Town Clerk (48)

I myself often wonder whether the town is run for the location or the location for the town. They have everything done for them. And I wish, gentlemen, that you could know of the indignation existing among Europeans because out of 20,000 Natives, they can't get a decent servant.

- Colonel Beer (49)

On the first day of the Bloemfontein riots, the Location Superintendent had informed the reporter of The Friend that discontent had been building up over the past year, and that the "new regulation on sale of sprouted corn was [only] the match that started the fire". (50) It also seemed to have been widely acknowledged that the most contentious issue was the low wages paid by employers in the town. (51)

The African workers in Bloemfontein had always been underemployed and underpaid. There were always more men and women flowing in from the farms and from Basutoland than jobs, in this mainly administrative centre. There must have been approximately 4,000 workers employed in industry, commercial firms, and government or municipal service in 1925. Few, if any, of these were women, and the men either worked for the railway or the building trade (the largest employers), or the municipality (with over 700 workers), or the commercial and manufacturing firms of the town. There is some doubt about the average wage paid to labourers at the time, and estimates range between 2s and 3s per day. Railway workers started at 1s 10d, rising to 2s 9d after 15 months, and 3s 6d after 11 years' continuous service. Those who did not receive rations got 5d per day extra. The average paid by the municipality was just over 3s per day, and they were reckoned to be the highest payers in the town. (52)

These low wages had been achieved only as a consequence of bitter agitation and demonstration in 1919, led by H Selby Msimang. For a brief period Msimang and Kadalie were united in one trade union organization, but Kadalie had broken away and Msimang had moved to other political pastures. (53) The Bloemfontein organization seems to have collapsed, and later revived by the ICU in 1923. We know little as yet about its membership, and only a few of its leaders - like Keable Mote and Alexander Maduna - appear in published histories.

Some time in the months preceding the riots of 1925, Kadalie had visited Bloemfontein and urged a campaign for higher wages. This, according to Zacharia Makosi, gave shape to the general unrest in Waaihoek. (54) The riots prompted a fresh look by the official Native Affairs Committee, but they decided (in April 1925) that this was an issue for the government, to whom the matter should be referred. (55) The initiative passed thereafter into the hands of the ICU, which advocated a minimum wage of 6s 6d per day, with a sliding scale to take into account experience, ability, and the needs of each individual. (56) The exact details of what followed are not clear, but in a series of meetings the ICU got the approval of members of the Advisory Board for a demand for 3s 6d, only to find that at a subsequent meeting in September the Native Affairs Committee had persuaded the Advisory Board to lower its sights to 3s per day. (57)

And so week by week, month by month, the talking continued, the workers grew more restive, but the wages remained stationary. The ICU claimed a membership of 3,000, but it is doubtful whether this represented a firm, organized work force. Yet by February 1926 their organizers were talking of bringing the railway workers out on strike. (58) The railways administration was not moved, but other employers and some municipal officials thought it time to take the initiative out of the hands of "agitators", and planned the appointment of a Native Wages Commission for the town.

In trying to piece together this history, it has been necessary to use the accounts printed in The Friend, and this presents obvious difficulties. However, as the editor of the paper, T W Mackenzie, was to be asked to chair the commission, and as the Friend's reports during 1925/6 are fuller than any others, this does seem justified. The editorials in the paper also provide some insight into Mr Mackenzie's thinking, and perhaps one of the more intriguing items that appeared at the end of 1925 was a panegyric on the visit to South Africa of the industrialist and social reformer Seebom Rowntree.

Rowntree came to South Africa in 1925, both for the purpose of visiting subsidiaries to his British firm and also to lecture on the "cause and cure of present day industrial strife". (59) His name was well known as a social reformer, based in part on his work, published in 1901, on poverty in York, and on his investigations into the Poverty Datum Line for working-class families.

These early investigations by Rowntree were to become the basis on which members of the Johannesburg Joint Councils of Europeans and Natives were to launch their investigations into urban African poverty in South Africa, and men like Mackenzie in Bloemfontein were obviously impressed by what he had to say. In an editorial on the tour, he had nothing but praise for the ideas expressed by the lecturer. Rowntree, he wrote, believed in the right to a fair living wage; the right of reasonable hours of labour; and the right of the worker to economic security. Furthermore, he believed in the democratization of industrialism, and in the community of interest between employers and workers. (60) Who, then, was better placed to act as champion of the African workers than Mr Mackenzie? His choice as chairman of the Wage Commission seemed most natural.

The setting up of the Wages Commission was accompanied by signs of uneasiness on the part of both employers and workers. The railway's administration stated that they would not accept any recommendation for an increase of wages, and the Master Builders Association declared that they would not accept any decision in which they did not have a say. (61) The Location Superintendent argued for a minimum wage of 3s 6d, and the Town Clerk countered with a suggestion of 3s. (62)

Meanwhile, Maduna and James La Guma led a perambulating meeting of over a thousand followers through Waaihoek and its satellite locations, demanding 5s per day (63), and Bishop Carey addressed a meeting under the aegis of the ICU, where

he urged the need for higher wages, and also the right to form trade unions - but not the right to strike (because they could not guarantee that strikes would be peaceful, and he stood for peace). (64)

In one final move before the Wages Commission was set up, the town council met with members of the Advisory Board and the ICU. James Mpinda had apparently broken with the ICU and was present as a representative only of the former body. The meeting was aimed at securing a concession from the ICU, and they were urged to accept 3s as the proposed minimum wage. But the ICU held out for 3s 6d, with an immediate rise of 6d, for all those earning 3s 6d and over. (65)

The Wages Commission met in camera and only issued a brief statement on the findings. Mackenzie was in the chair, and J R Cooper acted as secretary. There were eight whites representing the Town Council, Master Builders, Chamber of Commerce, Shopkeepers, and Professional Officers; and there were eight blacks - four from the Advisory Board and four from the ICU. The Chamber of Commerce proposed that the minimum wage be set at 3s 6d, the Master Builders demurred and proposed the sum of 3s, to be paid from 1 May. Maduna and his colleagues urged that the pay be set at 3s 6d, and members of the Advisory Board concurred. There was a break, and the Advisory Board members, meeting separately, accepted the offer of 3s. (66)

The ICU delegates were furious, but could only demand that the matter be referred back to the people - and that members of the Advisory Board put the case for 3s. (67)

The following day, the disciple of Seebohm Rowntree offered his verdict on events at the Commission meeting. In his editorial, Mackenzie wrote about two distinct classes in the location:

... the one tractable, reasonable and peace-loving, the other wholly unreasonable, and violently abusive. It is almost unnecessary to say that the first class is composed of honest workers, while the second class are led and excited to extremes by officials of trade organisations, who see to it, whatever else happens, that they are well paid. A wage settlement on fair terms is almost the last thing that these agitators desire, for if there were industrial peace in the locations they would lose their jobs and their pay ... (67)

It appeared, however, that even "the reasonable and peace-loving" honest workers could not be assured of the 3s per day. Mackenzie now disclosed that the recommendation could not be made compulsory, and could only suggest that the government-appointed Wage Board be approached to give the minimum wage the force of law. (68)

The Aftermath

Some employers did grant an increase of wages on 1 May, and this must be counted as one of the successes of the ICU. Of course, it did not apply to domestic servants or to washerwomen, and their position remained precarious. There were also many firms which did not recognize the Wages Commission, and no way was found to make them raise their wages.

The Wages Commission did approach the Wage Board, but that body was precluded, in terms of its constitution, from considering the application to make any recommendation. It was left to the ICU to make one final attempt to improve the wage level of the Bloemfontein workers.

Maduna and his colleagues never accepted the 3s per day wage, and were not deflected by the message received from the Rev Mahabane, President of the ANC. He had suggested that the wage be accepted "as a temporary expedient" and that attention be focussed on the Smithfield speech (of General Hertzog). He also warned that "in the present state of disorganisation" strike action would be unwise. They applied to the Wage Board for an investigation into conditions in a number of industries, and the Board decided that the application on behalf of labourers in the brick-making industry fell within the scope of the Act. An account of this application by the ICU was given by the Chairman of the Board, F A W Lucas, in an address to the Economic Society in November 1927. (69)

The Wages Commission took some time to agree that the Minister of Labour be requested to refer the matter of a basic minimum wage, for a number of specified industries, to the Wage Board, in terms of the Act. The Minister made no such reference. (70)

The ICU in Bloemfontein soldiered on, agitating for higher wages, but they did not escape from the general malaise affecting the organization throughout the country. Money had been loaned to former members of the Executive and could not be recovered; a cafe opened to augment funds had had to be abandoned as a financial failure; and officials had been expelled for expropriation. (71) Under such conditions, Mahabane was probably correct: in the state of disorganization, strike action would have been disastrous - if such action had ever been considered.

The Minister of Labour finally relented and instructed the Board to investigate wages in Bloemfontein. Consequently, minimum wages for Bloemfontein were set at a minimum of 3s per day from the beginning of 1930. (72) This, rather belatedly, was the final justification of the ICU demands in 1926.

One of the obvious results of these increases was a surge of applicants for work in the town. Between 1928 and 1930 the total number increased by 77 per cent (from 5,349 to 9,473). (73) The authorities were perturbed, and the "liberal" J R Cooper urged in a talk to the Economic Society, in October 1930, that "'Back to the Land', with facilities for settlement thereon, should be our slogan". (74)

Bloemfontein had altered. Wages had improved. But the week-end pattern remained unchanged - beer brewing flourished, and week-end raids were one of those facts of life with which brewers and their customers had to cope.

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Notes

- * There are a number of alterations of detail in this version of the paper, correcting some of the errors that appeared in the original, and altering some of the opinions formerly expressed. These have been made to take into account some of the comments I received from colleagues and friends, the discovery of further papers, and in particular the generosity of Helen Bradford, who sent me copies of her research notes, taken from the Bloemfontein records.

- (1) E P Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: class struggle without class?", Social History, 3, 2, 1978, p 154.
- (2) Richard Cobb, The Police and the People (OUP, 1972), p 92.
- (3) The Friend, 20 April 1925.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Henry Duiker, Evidence at Commission of Enquiry, The Friend, 13 August 1925. Other witnesses gave similar accounts.
- (6) Quoted in The Friend, 10 August 1925.
- (7) The Friend, 20 April 1925.
- (8) Reported in The Friend, 10 August 1925.
- (9) W Keable Mote, evidence at Preparatory Examination of 6 accused of violence, The Friend, 2 May 1925. Mote was expelled from the ICU because he appeared as a State Witness - possibly because of his description of Mpinda's role in events.
- (10) The Friend, 20 April 1925.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) Commission of Enquiry, The Friend, 11 August 1925.
- (13) See, for example, the riotous end of the Defiance Campaign in 1952.
- (14) Witnesses reported in The Friend, 13 August 1925.
- (15) See particularly the evidence of Keable Mote, The Friend, 14 August 1925.
- (16) Report in The Friend, 14 August 1925.
- (17) I have found few accounts of James Mpinda's career. One-time printer on Sol Plaatje's paper, and still (presumably?) an independent printer in the township, he was Chairman of the Advisory Board in April 1925. He seems to have broken with the ICU, and was listed by John Manceo in his Bloemfontein Bantu and Coloured Peoples Directory (1932?) as assistant sargeant-at-arms in the ANC. Documents in the Champion Papers also indicate that at one stage after the split in the national ICU, Manceo and Mpinda led one of the Bloemfontein factions.
- (18) The Friend, 21 April 1925.
- (19) Ibid. The proceedings of the meeting are quoted in extenso in this issue of the paper.
- (20) Ibid.
- (21) Ibid.
- (22) Part of this account is taken from the Manchester Guardian, 21 April.
- (23) The Friend, 12 August 1925.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) The Friend, 22 April 1925.
- (26) The Friend, 23 April 1925.
- (27) Evidence submitted to the Commission of Enquiry, Bloemfontein, 10-14 August. See, for example, reports in The Friend, 11-15 August 1925, and The South African Outlook, 1 September 1925. Also statement issued by the Commission, reprinted in Edward Roux, Time Longer Than Rope (Gollancz, 1949), pp 165-6.
- (28) E P Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Penguin, 1968), p 59.
- (29) Bloke Modisane, Blame Me On History (Thames and Hudson, 1963), p 35.
- (30) Jessie Hertslet, "Native Women and Girls on the Reef", South African Quarterly, June 1920. See also Ilanga Lasa Natal, 1920.
- (31) Hertslet, loc. cit. Although this is a summarized version, the terminology is taken unaltered from the article.

- (32) See, for example, Mrs F B Bridgman, "Social and Medical Work for Native Women and Girls in Urban Areas", in Report of the Proceedings of the Seventh General Missionary Conference of South Africa (Lovedale, 1928), pp 64-5.
- (33) This was the attitude adopted by A B Xuma.
- (34) S M Makgatho, President of the ANC, speaking about women's passes at the 1925 annual conference, said that "in his opinion European women were the worst prostitutes". Report of Conference in Dept of Justice files, 3/1064/18, dated 25 April 1925.
- (35) Ray E Phillips, The Bantu Are Coming: phases of South Africa's Race Problem (SCM Press, 1930), p 126.
- (36) Julia C Wells, "The History of Black Woman's Struggle Against Pass Laws in South Africa", unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1982, p 197.
- (37) Ibid., p 161.
- (38) Ibid., pp 201-10.
- (39) David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: dock workers of Durban", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1979, pp 193-5.
- (40) See ibid., pp 207-17.
- (41) J W Horton, "The South African Joint Councils: black-white co-operation between two world wars", South African Historical Journal, No 4, November 1972.
- (42) Ibid.
- (43) Wells, op. cit., Ch 7.
- (44) Evidence by Sub-Inspector Mitchell, Commission of Enquiry, The Friend, 11 August 1925.
- (45) Deputation of 20 April, reported in The Friend, 21 April 1925.
- (46) Leonard Barnes, The New Boer War (Hogarth, 1932), pp 58-9. F B Bridgman noted that "Women make particularly effective runners in connection with the illicit liquor trade, not being subjected to pass laws", "Social Conditions in Johannesburg", International Revue of Missions, July 1926.
- (47) The Friend, 11 August 1925.
- (48) Evidence to Commission of Enquiry, The Friend, 15 August 1925.
- (49) Ibid., 11 August 1925.
- (50) The Friend, 20 April 1925.
- (51) See, for example, evidence of John Lebitsa (African detective) on meetings he had attended, at Commission of Enquiry, The Friend, 13 August 1925.
- (52) See The Friend, 4, 10, 11 February 1926. The industrial census for 1935/6 gave the total employment in all OFS towns as 5,252 males and 86 females. Their average wage was £36 per annum - the lowest in the Union.
- (53) See Wells, op. cit., pp 175-8; and "H Selby Msimang: masterpieces in bronze", Drum, June 1954.
- (54) Evidence to Commission of Enquiry, as reported in South African Outlook.
- (55) Account by J R Cooper in The Friend, 10 February 1926.
- (56) The Friend, 10 February 1926.
- (57) Ibid.
- (58) The Friend, 4 February 1926.
- (59) The Friend, 23 November 1925.
- (60) Ibid. This brief summary cannot do justice to the enthusiasm expressed in the editorial.
- (61) The Friend, 11 February 1926.
- (62) The Friend, 10 February 1926.

- (63) The Friend, 8 February 1926. J La Guma was Assistant National Secretary of the ICU; Alexander P Maduna was the first provincial secretary of the ICU in Natal (recommended to Kadalie by J T Gumede), but then moved to the OFS as provincial secretary, when Champion assumed the leadership of the Natal section. In 1927 he was secretary for the Eastern Province, and after the split he remained loyal to Kadalie.
- (64) The Friend, 5 February 1926. Bishop Carey also attacked the "wild threat" of the ICU leaders. What was needed, he confided, was men of the calibre of Booker T Washington. He attacked drunkenness as a "curse", and referred to J La Guma's strictures on drink.
- (65) The Friend, 9 February 1926. (Mpinda seems to have left the ICU.)
- (66) The Friend, 25 February 1926.
- (67) The Friend, 26 February 1926.
- (68) Ibid.
- (69) Reprinted in three instalments in The Star, 24, 26, 28 November 1927. This case appears in the second instalment.
- (70) Ibid.
- (71) Report on ICU by J La Guma, 1926. Dept of Justice file 3/1064/18.
- (72) J R Cooper, "The Urban Native Problem", The Journal of the Economic Society of South Africa, 4 (part 1), 7, 1931.
- (73) Ibid.
- (74) Ibid.