

# SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNISTS AND ELECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*In South Africa the Communist Party has a one-hundred-year history of contesting elections, making it the oldest electoral campaigner in Africa. South Africa's elections were increasingly racially restrictive and segregated until 1994. Even so, from the mid-1920's the Party began to focus on the concerns of its black membership though it continued to seek support from white workers. This article explores the Party's reasons for continuing to participate in elections, and the circumstances that helped it achieve occasional victories at the polls. It also considers the effects of electoral participation on an ostensibly revolutionary movement.*

**Keywords:** South African Communist Party, white labour, black workers, elections, campaigning, local elections, advisory boards, membership, alliance

## INTRODUCTION

The South African Communist Party is the second oldest political party in Africa (eight years younger than its ally the African National Congress), and it has the longest history of electoral participation, stretching back through a hundred years. Its history offers a useful set of lessons about the effects of electoral campaigning for small organisations with little prospect of winning executive authority. The first of these is that for radical or revolutionary movements – even in politically restricted settings – electoral participation can secure a measure of legal protection. In South Africa lawyers were conspicuous in the Communist Party's leadership from its inception, and the Party would become adept at defending its cause in the courtrooms during and between electoral seasons. Secondly, the search for voter support became a process of learning as the Party sought to identify the geographical location and social character of its most receptive followers, shaping its programme around their concerns and beliefs. Another key feature evident in the Communist Party's electoral history is that, for better or for worse,

electoral participation tends to deradicalise and temper even revolutionary movements as they negotiate their passages through the institutional procedures of representative politics. Finally, well-organised local campaigning, even by small groups, can sometimes achieve modest victories. Throughout their history South African communists would succeed occasionally in winning office and using their positions as electoral representatives to attempt to shift public policy or to build wider support. For followers of democratic causes elsewhere in Africa, these experiences of an organisation so at odds with the dominant political culture may offer encouraging insights.

### CONTESTING WHITE ELECTIONS

At the time of its formation in 1921, the Communist Party brought together a cluster of left-wing groups. The most significant was the Johannesburg-based International Socialist League, a breakaway formation of mainly Marxist socialists who left the Labour Party in 1915 after opposing South Africa's participation in the First World War. The Labour Party was committed to electoral politics, drawing its support mainly from white workers in the Transvaal gold mining communities. Its limited appeal was evident in the 1910 Union elections when Labour won only three out of the thirteen seats it contested (from a total of 121 constituencies).

Overall, the Labour Party drew 12.74% of the vote in the Transvaal and a slightly smaller share in Natal. Subsequent by-elections raised its parliamentary representation to six; its most left-wing representative, Bill Andrews, was the victor in one of the by-elections, in Germiston in 1911, becoming, arguably, South Africa's only socialist parliamentarian. Andrews' biographer and friend, Jack Cope, maintained that as early as 1907 Andrews 'was beginning to doubt the white labour policy', and quoted from his maiden speech in Parliament in 1912, in which he observed that 'the black man will not submit to being herded into a compound and treated like a slave' (Cope 1944, pp. 98 & 129). Unusually among his associates in the ILP, Andrews did not oppose the arrival of Chinese labour, and later would maintain friendly contacts with the local Chinese community. Even so, Andrews' socialism could still be shaped by racial considerations: in another parliamentary intervention one year later, Andrews called upon the authorities 'to substitute white youths for Africans on maintenance of telegraph lines in his constituency' (Simons & Simons 1969, p. 129).

A succession of forcefully contested strikes between 1911 and 1914 helped to swell Labour Party's support. It contested the Transvaal Provincial Council's elections in which the Party won 26 seats, one by Sidney Bunting, a British-born lawyer who was beginning to explore Marxism. Labour's organised followers in 1913 were augmented by a significant expansion of Jewish membership;

Jews joined in considerable numbers that year prompted by fears of enforced deportation triggered by new legislation, and their fresh presence in the Labour Party is likely to have strengthened its left wing. Many of these new followers would join the International Socialist League (ISL) when it established itself in 1915.

Most of Labour's voters would stay loyal, though Colin Wade, a busy dentist, took time off from tooth extractions to win a municipal electoral seat in Germiston as an ISL candidate in November 1915. However, his campaign emphasised local issues and made no reference to the disagreements that had provoked the split with Labour, and indeed both accepted and proposed to extend the existing pattern of residential segregation (Hirson & Williams 1995, p. 152). In the national elections one month earlier, Andrews lost his parliamentary seat, obtaining only 82 votes. At this stage, the League was still represented in the Transvaal Provincial Council by Sydney Bunting and five other ISL members. The League published a manifesto for the November municipal elections in Johannesburg; its proposal for 'strict supervision of White and Native housing' as well as the 'development of Klip Spruit as Native Township' suggested acceptance of existing segregationist policies (*The International* 1915, p. 1). One of the ISL's candidates in Johannesburg, J. Clark, the Boilermakers' trade union secretary, won a municipal seat with 721 votes. He was expelled from the League after introducing a draft ordinance on behalf of shopkeepers that would have extended trading hours (*The International* 1917, p. 3).

Electoral campaigning was an early preoccupation for the ISL, though its membership probably understood its purpose in different ways. Syndicalists within the League were opposed to any electoral participation even if only for propaganda purposes. League leadership generally favoured electoral participation; after all it provided opportunities for publicity as well as a measure of legal protection; 'it [was] "the shield" that protects the organisation' (Gibson 1918, p. 4). Initially, with the ISL contesting national, provincial and municipal elections, electioneering required a major mobilisation of supportive activity and material resources. The results were hardly encouraging. Colin Wade stood in the Troyeville by-election against returning soldier and mine manager Colonel Frederick Creswell in January 1917, collecting 32 votes against Creswell's 800, the ISL's lowest poll to date. This time, Wade campaigned on an anti-capitalist and anti-war manifesto which also reminded voters that 'native workers are here to stay' (*The International* 1917, p. 1). More obliquely, in that year's provincial council elections Andrews defended himself against 'the catchvote alarum that I want to give the vote to kaffirs' by conceding that his opponents were correct and that he did indeed stand for political equality, though he held back from explicitly calling for black enfranchisement (*The International* 1917, p. 4). In any case, as he explained later, political power – voting – was 'quite a secondary matter' compared

to collaborative class action (Andrews 1917, p. 4). Neither he nor Sidney Bunting succeeded in winning seats.

In Cape Town in late 1921 ex-soldier Wilfred Harrison put himself up as a municipal candidate for the newly-formed Communist Party, representing the Party against Abdul Abdurahman in Ward Seven. Abdurahman retained his seat comfortably; but that the communists were trying to secure coloured electoral support in Cape Town suggests the Party's rather different social orientation here from Johannesburg. In Cape Town the Party's weekly public meetings in Adderley Street were generally 'faithfully supported' by 'native and coloured elements', attendance that was evidently valued by the local leadership (Dryburgh 1923).

In April 1923, after the suppression of the 1921 Rand mineworkers' rebellion, the Communist Party would decide to support the electoral pact between the Labour Party and General Herzog's National Party. The support was qualified. As an editorial in *The International* explained, a coalition government constituted by Labour and Afrikaner nationalists would not make much material difference to their rank-and-file supporters who would 'sooner or later' reject bourgeois leaders and opt for a real workers' party. Hence an electoral victory for the Pact government 'would be a spur to working class consciousness'. Most of the key party leaders still viewed white workers as a vanguard group; indeed, recent events only solidified such beliefs.

Throughout 1923 most of the Party's energies were invested in efforts to build a united front that could embrace white labour organisations. Communists in Benoni supported Labour in municipal elections, though a communist candidate, Jessie Chapman, stood in one ward in which Labour offered no opposition to the South African Party councillor, possibly a reflection of a reciprocal de facto local alliance (Glass 1924, pp. 3 & 4). Jessie Chapman's electoral address focused mainly on the wage reductions and dismissals that had affected white mineworkers, as well as calling for unemployment relief at a 'recognised white standard' (*The International* 1923, p. 2). In the absence of Labour candidates in Cape Town, communists also contested council elections, in one case performing quite creditably; here their electioneering attempted to reach beyond the concerns of white South Africans.<sup>1</sup>

In 1924 communists did not put up their own candidates in the general election, explaining that they would support the so-called Pact alliance between Labour and Afrikaner nationalists. This was not the time to split opposition to

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1 In Cape Town's Ward 6, contested by a communist representing the Unemployment Committee, the candidate, William Green, obtained 311 'single votes' compared to the winner's 411. He failed to secure many 'plural votes', that is the multiple votes landlords cast for tenants (*The International* 1923). *The International* reprinted Wilfred Harrison's electoral appeal in Cape Town which included compulsory primary education for 'all children including native and coloured' and the immediate opening of existing high schools and universities to black students (25 October 1923, p. 2).

Smuts, the Party's manifesto explained, though communists should not expect radical reforms from the Pact in power. The Party published a manifesto, a rather quixotic document given that it was sponsoring no candidates of its own. It told its supporters that SALP candidates 'should be strictly held to certain planks'. These included demands that had a particular salience for Africans, such as the 'abolition of pass and passport laws and mineworkers' records of service rights' and the extension of certain rights and entitlements 'to all classes of workers'. This inclusion of rather generalised language that in fact referred to the needs of African workers was a concession to the growing influence of the Young Communists' League which had begun to recruit black workers. Communist support for the Pact was not reciprocated; indeed, both the Pact partners were publicly hostile to the Party, though apparently Labour politicians were actively 'canvassing Communist votes in private'. The Nationalists in particular were careful to disassociate themselves from the Party. Local Nationalists closed down a Party meeting in Vrededorp, threatening to attack the platform if the speakers took up their places, subsequently writing to *The Star* newspaper to defend their action: there was no room for the Communist Party in South Africa, they explained.

Whether the Party's main strategic orientation should remain directed at winning over white workers was the key issue at the Party's conference in November 1924. By this stage, the Pact administration had been in power for five months. Two Labour Party members would accept positions in General Herzog's cabinet, Colonel Creswell taking up the portfolio for defence and labour, a 'logical result of his political career', while his colleague, Tom Boydell, became the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and Public Works. In accepting these positions in a 'bourgeois cabinet', communists maintained, the Labour Party had entirely abandoned its working class character (Bunting 1924, p. 6). Their position was arguable. Certainly, Creswell would introduce quite significant reforms during his ministry, beginning with the shortening of the working week, restrictions on employing children, and changes to the law on miners' pthisis; increased rates of compensation for white workers afflicted, and specialised medical treatment and more limited provisions for sick black workers, a one-off payment and a free rail pass home. Probably more objectionable from the perspective of the Communist Party were the measures enacted in 1925 and 1926 to protect both skilled and unskilled white workers from the threat of being replaced by cheaper black workers, the Wage Act of 1925 and the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926 which supplied legal force for the 'Colour Bar' on the mines. In September 1924, communists unsuccessfully contested local elections, putting up candidates in Johannesburg, Benoni and Cape Town, declaring themselves to be representatives not of 'the working class only' – but of all workers, 'whatever their race or colour' (*The International* 1924a, p. 4; *The International* 1924c, p. 3).

## BUILDING BLACK SUPPORT

Through the late 1920s up to the mid-1930s, the Party's strategic aims became increasingly focused on building support among black workers. Between 1924 and 1937 it participated in just three elections. One was in Durban, in 1929, one year after the Party had established a presence in the surrounding black townships. Rather unexpectedly the Communist Party secured a council seat in a municipal by-election in February 1929, with the election of Sophus Pettersen, a Norwegian ship owner and former leader of the sailor's union. Pettersen was one of the CPSA's founders and a key funder of the party as well as someone who could organise travel to Europe meetings for party delegates willing to work as stokers or seamen. In fact, Pettersen's candidature as an independent workers' candidate was unopposed on election day because his opponent in Durban Point's Ward IV was disqualified on a technicality. Within the ward, Pettersen owned several businesses, and in his campaign he had won white trade unionist nominations as well as promises of support from Indian ratepayers, a significant proportion of the voters in the ward. He lost the seat shortly afterwards when the Council decided that he was ineligible as he was one of their key contractors (Kjerland & Bertelsen 2015, p. 131; Mouton 1987 pp. 37-39).<sup>2</sup> Amongst his other properties, Pettersen owned an office building in which for a while he provided the party with free premises (Bunting 1929). Pettersen had easy access to the docks and was a familiar figure in the compounds where he addressed workers' meetings.

Later that year, in June 1929, communists campaigned in two constituencies, Thembuland and Cape Flats, where significant numbers of Africans qualified for the franchise. Sidney Bunting, who was the Party's candidate in the Transkei, admitted that he was not really seeking support from the relatively privileged group who could vote, teachers, landowners and mining recruiting agents and the like, 'good boys' as he called them dismissively. Photographs of the crowds attending his meetings bear him out: shabbily dressed men on the whole, listening to his speech about a future 'native republic' for peasants and workers, the Party's programme at that point. Even so, he secured nearly 3 000 votes, keeping his deposit. Seventy years later, researchers could still find people who remembered Bunting's speeches, interpreted and embellished in Xhosa by his comrade Gana Makabeni (Drew 2007, pp. 171-180). In 1974 SACP and ANC's organiser Chris

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2 Pettersen owned a chandler's business in Durban and was also the proprietor of a whaling station, Lina Linga, that employed a sizeable African workforce of 200, harshly supervised according to eyewitness reports from Norwegian sailors (Kjerland & Bertelsen 2015, p. 131). Pettersen would eventually win a municipal election in Durban on his sixth attempt, in 1935. From 1932 he campaigned on an anti-Indian platform. His biographer suggests that his hostility to Indians was a consequence of the Natal Indian Congress's decision in 1930 to recommend that voters should support the Labour Party. In 1948 Pettersen joined the Senate as a member of the National Party (Mouton pp. 37-39).

Hani would set up party cells in the same vicinity. Hani's uncle had belonged to the Party, probably joining it at the time of Sidney Bunting's visit to Thembuland.

Then in 1932, the Party decided to contest an election symbolically by organising a parallel poll for African voters in a parliamentary by-election in Germiston, the ISL's former heartland. For this purpose it put up as its candidate one of its most charismatic black leaders, JB Marks. Marks was, in the view of the Comintern's local agent, Eugene Dennis, 'an effective mass agitator', and within the party's African following in Johannesburg, both with workers and the 'intellectuals' (Marks himself has been a school teacher) he enjoyed 'considerable influence'. He had an untidy personal life, though, and was always short of money: 'It's agony! The way money comes and goes', he used to say, adding: 'And you're horrified when you wake up to find who's lying next to you'. As one of his friends, Hyman Basner recalled, he possessed the saving 'grace of humour' (Basner 1993, p. 55). The party's decision to contest the election symbolically was equally canny. It was the first poll in which white women had the vote. It also represented a key test for the increasingly unpopular government: the election would receive plenty of public attention. The seat had been held by a member of the Labour Party; but given the Party's loss of support resulting from its participation as a junior coalition partner in the Pact government, and also because of the recent arrival in Germiston of tens of thousands of landless Afrikaner migrants, National Party organisers were determined to establish an urban beachhead by taking the seat. In fact both the main white parties, the ruling National Party and the main opposition, the South African Party, would provide vigorous support from their top-echelon leadership for their local candidates. Here the communists were intervening in a major arena for mainstream white politics.

The by-election campaigning took place over October and November 1932. The party organised public meetings for whites in the market square and at the railway workshops; according to post-graduate university student Eddie Roux, the campaign's main organiser, they had more success in the railway workshops where the workers were chiefly English-speaking, and 'were prepared to give the Communists a hearing' (Roux 1948). Railway workers may have been especially receptive because they had been severely affected by local retrenchments since the advent of the depression (Lewis 1981, p. 106). But for the Party, non-voters were their main target, for in Germiston's African location they were hoping to exploit local dissatisfaction over lodgers' fees. Barred from the location, Communist organisers held meetings outside the location fence: Roux recalls 'huge crowds' in attendance. *Umsebenzi* carried reports of Marks' speeches; he told his audience that the white candidates represented imperialist slavery. As well as the lodgers' permits, Marks referred to other local grievances including the poll tax and beer raids (Simons & Simons 1985, p. 460). Eddie Roux describes one of these meetings,

on October 16th, at which he was present, accompanied by Molly Wolton and by 'stalwarts from the Jewish Workers Club and girls in their bright cotton frocks' (Roux & Roux 1970, p. 117). They began their speeches, which focused on the lodgers' tax, with the help of an interpreter. Then the police arrived with their own 'unofficial supporters' who began heckling. What had been an orderly gathering degenerated into a 'rough and tumble' (Roux & Roux 1970, p. 118), and Roux as well as his comrades on the platform were arrested. Subsequently, the attorney-general dropped the charges of resisting arrest and incitement.

Roux was then assigned the task of attending the official nomination meeting to announce the party's candidate. After a surprised magistrate informed him that Marks was ineligible, Roux was escorted out of the building, only to be delivered to a group of National Party 'toughs' who beat him up. For his pains, he was banished from the Witwatersrand for a year, together with other party leaders. The bans were withdrawn subsequently after the party applied to the Supreme Court to test their validity (Roux 1948, p. 271). The party continued its meetings outside Germiston location and during polling day 'collected votes for its own demonstration candidate', using forms it had distributed earlier (Roux 1948, p. 268). The Party's proxy election in the township attracted commentary as a 'curious feature' in the *Rand Daily Mail's* coverage of polling day. Arthur G Barlow's report refers to a 'march-past' the building used as the main polling station by 'native women', dressed in their Sunday best, 'on their way to protest at the town office at some new regulation in the location'. It was an indication, Barlow thought, of 'the effectiveness of Communist propaganda'. Barlow also referred to the 'straw' election the party conducted, and their announcement that they had collected 3 000 votes for their 'native candidate' (Barlow 1932). After the election Party activists tried to sustain the lodgers' permit protests. A meeting organised by the communists on 18 January was broken up by police and municipal labourers assembled for the purpose by the location superintendent. On 25 January another meeting, inside the location and this time not Party-organised, was broken up by armed policemen who fired their weapons (Roux 1948, pp. 272–273). An elderly woman subsequently died of gunshot wounds (Roux & Roux 1970, p. 117). That brought to an end any protests against the permits. Encouraged by what it perceived to be the success of this initiative in the general election of 1933, the Party announced six more demonstrative candidates, though *Umsebenzi* contains no details of any campaigning on their behalf.

Towards the end of the decade, the Party strengthened its commitment to electoral campaigning. In 1937 it contested the newly-instituted 1937 Native Representative Council (NRC) elections, backing Edwin Mofutsanyana as a candidate for the NRC election and allowing Hyman Basner to contest the Senatorial seat for the Transvaal and the Free State. Basner in fact proposed

himself, though he was one of the few Party members with the necessary freehold property ownership to stand. JB Marks offered to help him campaign and as Edwin Mofutsanyana was contesting an NRC seat that represented the townships of the Transvaal and the Free State, he, Marks and Basner would tour the relevant locations as a team. For Basner, Marks was, 'fond of lively parties, strong drink, and strong polemics' (Basner 1993, p. 93) and provided engaging company, but he was often distracted by other commitments, compelled to work for the rich bus owner, Richard Baloyi, because he was always broke. Because of his warmth and wit, Marks might have been a better choice for the NRC seat candidature, but Mofutsanyana was the Party's secretary-general. Unlike Marks, he was, in the words of Eugene Dennis, 'dependable and politically consistent'; though, writing in 1933, Dennis had noted Mofutsanyana's lack of self-confidence (Davidson, Filatova, Gorodnov & Johns 2003, p. 72).

The elections were indirect: votes would be cast by a mixture of advisory boards acting on the basis of a majority decision, and by rural councils made up of headmen or, in certain districts, chiefs voting on behalf of the men in their reserves. All these agencies needed to be visited and persuaded, though as Basner would discover, approaches to the chiefs were unrewarding. In the Free State, though, support from former ICU leaders was helpful and the team made more headway with advisory board members in the smaller centres. As initial contacts they used lists supplied by Keable Mote, 'one of Kadalie's leading lieutenants', lists of 'teachers, self-employed artisans, clergy, general labourers, hawkers... the names... of men and women who had been office bearers in the ICU [Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union]' (Basner 1993, pp. 82–83). JB Marks helped to win Mote's confidence; he had known him 'very well' since the 1920s (JB Marks interviewed by Sylvia Neame 1969, p. 9). In Kroonstad, 'natives came from all over the surrounding farms to the main meeting', Basner told his fellow members of the Poliburo, information suggesting that here at least, the Communist Party was once again benefitting from earlier networks established by the rural ICU (Politburo Minutes 1937). Apparently the Party did itself have groups in Kroonstad at one stage (JB Marks interviewed by Sylvia Neame 1969, p. 9). Mote advised Basner to 'concentrate on the women... they are the real fighters', an observation that may have reflected the ICU's own experience of the contribution women made to tax protests through the late 1920s and early 1930s (Basner 1993, p. 83). Basner suggests he had one speech, 'which he was to repeat over and over', directed mainly at women, though there were plenty of men in his audiences.

He told them that their children did not go to school because it was ordained that they should be menials when they grew up – in kitchens, on mealie fields, and deep beneath the ground. He scarcely needed to tell them that their infant sons would be humiliated and brutalised, adding that:

their husbands, fathers and grandfathers were called 'boys' because they were paid a boy's wages and not a man's... they lived in municipal locations under permit so that when they and their men became too old to be of use as workers they could be sent away to die – anywhere. ... it was time to stop crying and drive their men into Congress and trade unions and make them strong.

(Basner 1993, p. 87)

There must have been other speeches, because the ever-vigilant Comintern official in Moscow, Robert Nauman, noticed various 'sectarian' references to 'good boys' with reference to 'native reformists'; but in fact Basner had been quite conscientious in his efforts to obtain support from the less conservative ANC leaders (Robert Nauman to Andre Marty, 29 August 1937, Comintern Archive Online Comintern Archive 1937). On election day Basner polled 66 234 votes, against the total of 404 447 for the winning candidate JD Rheinnalt Jones, the director of the Institute of Race Relations. This was a creditable performance and a foundation for his later successful senatorial campaign in 1942 in which he benefitted from the revitalisation of the ANC as a localised political presence. The totals were in fact misleading because Basner's share was largely made up by advisory board polling, whereas Jones obtained all the bloc votes wielded by chiefs, Basner claimed. In fact, the electoral colleges wielding bloc votes were elected committees constituted by tax payers, but these were located mainly in the countryside and their make-up would have been strongly shaped by the influence of chiefs; outside urban locations Basner would indeed have struggled to win them over (Tatz 1962, pp. 92–93). Mofutsanyana fared worse, obtaining one of lowest totals, possibly because his speeches were doctrinaire expressions of Party orthodoxies delivered in manner that 'lacked the common touch', though Mofutsanyana complained later that the Party's support for him was half-hearted. It was true that the Party could not find funding to pay for his travel during the campaign (Basner 1993, p. 89; Roux & Roux 1970, p. 148; CPBG 1937). Mofutsanyana campaigned in the name of the Communist Party, whereas Basner presented himself as the candidate of the African Unity Committee, a group of notables including the Transvaal and Orange Free State provincial ANC officeholders (Basner, H [n.d.], pp. 182–183).

As one member of the British Party's Colonial Committee subsequently pointed out, the Party made no significant recruitment gains during its electoral campaigning (Robert Nauman to Andre Marty, 29 August 1937, Comintern Archive Online). But encouraged by Basner's performance the Party resolved in November 1937 to contest advisory board elections. The same month, Party member Gaur Radebe would be elected as general secretary at a conference of native vigilance associations, a sign of the new attention that African communists

would begin paying to township-based associational life (*South African Worker* 1937c). As Basner had pointed out, advisory boards had an important role as local gatekeepers; preparations for the All-African Convention had alerted communists to the importance of winning allies on the boards if they were to obtain official sanction to call meetings (*South African Worker* 1937a). Basner also discovered during his campaigning that vigilance associations were 'universally militant and radical in temperament' (*South African Worker* 1937b). Standing for the vigilance association, Radebe won a seat in the advisory board elections in Orlando in December 1937 (*Umsebenzi* 1938). With respect to white voters, in the municipal elections held in June that year communist leaders tried to secure an agreement with Labour in which both parties would support each other's candidates in wards they were not contesting. They were rebuffed, politely apparently, but even so the Party urged its enfranchised followers to vote Labour. In Johannesburg a few Party members also maintained a group within the Labour Party (Bernstein 1991, p. 31).

In Cape Town where qualified coloured people could vote in municipal polls, the Party would win a Council seat through the agency of Cissie Gool, the daughter of legendary personality Abdullah Abdurahman, a medical doctor who had won a Council seat in 1904. Cissie Gool had obtained an MA in psychology, the first black South African woman to hold such a qualification. She lived with a leading local communist, Sam Kahn, and she herself would join the Party in the late 1930s: she became a politburo member in 1939. Cissie Gool used to hold open house meetings every Saturday at their home in District Six. One visitor, a recent refugee from Nazi Germany, encountered 'a veritable League of Nations' with the company including Sam Kahn, 'a leading Stalinist Communist', the artists Gregoire Boonzaire and Frieda Locke, and IB Tabata, 'prominent member of the Trotskyite Spartacus Club, in earnest conversation with Dr Eddie Roux' (Hirson 2001, p. 171).

On this occasion, Cissie Gool was 'sitting next to her father, busy berating him and calling him an Uncle Tom for his lack of radical opposition to the prevailing political and social system'(ibid.). Her electoral campaign in Cape Town's municipal Ward 7 was organised by James La Guma, a veteran Party activist – to good effect evidently as she was elected. She would defend the seat in successive elections throughout the 1940s.

#### DEFEND SOUTH AFRICA

In 1941, in the aftermath of the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Party signaled freshly patriotic commitment to 'Defend South Africa'. One implication of supporting the war effort would be to resume serious efforts to win white electoral support. A pamphlet was published, entitled 'We South Africans' which

was aimed at potential white voters in the 1943 general election. It was studiously vague in its treatment of the Party's approach to African political aspirations. Referring to the Labour Party's 'total segregation' policy it suggested, tactfully:

Africans may prefer such a system under socialism: it bears some resemblance to the 'autonomous national republics' that have been recognised in Soviet Russia and may be a progressive step under socialism. But it is a very long-term policy; the practical question today is how to remove the disabilities imposed upon the non-white people.

(Communist Party of South Africa 1943, p. 34)

The pamphlet also argued that to protect their own long-term interests, skilled white workers should set about removing racial job reservation, as well as contending that socialism would benefit 'members of the professions, artists and scientists, shopkeepers and small farmers'. The Party's nine parliamentary candidates – four in the Transvaal, one in Durban and four in the Cape – garnered 7 000 votes between them, an average of 11 per cent of the poll. 'Communists are needed in Parliament' Betty Radford explained in *The Guardian* (20 May 1943), 'both for winning the war against Fascism and for finding a progressive solution to the problems of the post-war world'. Their best performance in the parliamentary poll was that of lawyer Harry Snitcher who took 27.7% of the votes in Woodstock, benefitting from a substantial coloured electorate.

In the Cape Provincial Council elections, East Londoner Archie Muller, supported by qualified African voters, was narrowly defeated, losing by a margin of only 200 votes (Johns 1996, pp. 21–22). That same year the Party's electoral efforts were rewarded with two seats on the Cape Town City Council, one in East London's City Council and in Port Elizabeth, where Mohamed Desai, an Indian party member and trade union organiser, won one seat. In East London Archie Muller campaigned for the Workers' Civic League, effectively a united front between the CPSA and the LP with trade unions around worker demands (*The Guardian* 29 July 1943). It was an encouraging start. The other left-wing contender in the general election was the Independent Labour Party; despite its well-known leader, Garment Workers' Union Secretary Solly Sachs, and a prudent 'bread and butter' manifesto, it collected only 2 per cent of the votes in the three working-class constituencies it contested (Witz 1984, p. 29). Heartened by its modest success the Party continued to fight elections. Between 1943 and 1951 lawyer Sam Kahn held a Council seat for four successive elections which he contested as a communist in a ward that was 70 per cent white and 30 per cent coloured.

In October 1944 Hilda Watts won a Council seat in Hillbrow-Berea, defeating the Labour Party candidate in an all-white electorate in a central Johannesburg

neighbourhood of high-density apartment blocks. Norman Levy grew up in the neighbourhood in which Hilda Watts won her seat, and as a teenager he encountered one of her street corner meetings; most of the people who stayed to listen to her were black, he remembers. She may not have needed to do much to tailor her appeal to white voters in her ward; many of them were relatively recent British immigrants who might have responded to her North London accent as she had had a British childhood until 1934 (Levy 2011, p. 14). She also received contributions to her campaign fund from recently arrived Eastern European immigrants (Bernstein 1993, interviewed by Don Pinnock, p.18). She believed later she may have benefitted from the effect the Soviet army's victory at Stalingrad had on public morale (Bernstein 1984, interviewed by Stephen Clingman). One of her leaflets was clearly targeted at the families of servicemen:

A little home, some soldier dreamed about. There are a lot of people dreaming of homes. Who is preparing for the boys when they come back? In 26 years the Council has built only 360 houses for Europeans. Plenty of promises – BUT NO HOMES.

This particular leaflet made no direct references to Johannesburg's black residents, with even the illustrations portraying only white people (ibid.). A longer manifesto did refer to the 'some of the worst non-European slums', as in Pimville, that were owned by the Council. It also drew attention to the fact that only one doctor served Orlando's 60 000 residents, noting that the Council had failed to provide any facilities 'for the treatment and isolation of infectious diseases amongst non-Europeans'. The risk posed to general public health by the municipality's neglect of hygiene in poorer locations, as in the non-supply of water-borne sewage and clean water, would be a key argument in communist appeals to white voters. As Hilda Watts reminded ratepayers in a leaflet endorsing the Party's candidates for the 1945 elections, 'white tiled bathrooms' and 'constant hot water' were no protection 'from germs brought in by servants' (Watts 1945, p. 3).

Referring to the 1945 municipal elections in Johannesburg, an *Inkululeko* correspondent reported on the 'disappearance of the old prejudices against communists' and the shock he encountered amongst white suburban residents 'at the horror of non-European conditions... [they] nearly always agree that improvements should be made...The voters are waking up', he concluded, 'and we communists, by fighting the elections, are helping them see the truth' (*Inkululeko* 19 October 1945). In this election, Michael Harmel wrote the Party's manifesto: its municipal candidates campaigned on the basis of his master plan for Johannesburg's reconstruction, to make it a city of 'green belts, parks and playgrounds' as well as community centres, clinics and nursery schools. Tellingly,

the inspiration for this vision was not from the socialist world; rather the pictures and plans in the booklet are from American New Deal urban planning, in particular a Harlem housing project by the American modernist pioneer architect, William Lescaze (*Inkululeko* 29 October 1945). Johannesburg would remain in certain respects the same city. 'Native hostels within easy reach of each European area are needed', the plan suggested. The propaganda did not explicitly state that all Johannesburg's citizens would share the new recreational facilities, though there was a reference to the need for 'proper recreational services for the neglected non-European servant' (Communist Party). In Harmel's ward, the voters were unpersuaded and he failed to get elected. A contributor to *Freedom* in 1946 noted that in Hillbrow 'the petit-bourgeois flat-dwelling community has shown in the past to be not unfavourable to the Communist Party' (O'Brien 1946). A new ward delimitation put paid to any prospect of Hilda Watts repeating her 1943 victory in Hillbrow as it included the affluent neighbourhood of Parktown and took out half of Berea, reducing her core supporters, the Hillbrow apartment tenants, to an isolated minority. She would fail in her bid for re-election in 1947 (Bernstein 1983, interviewed by Maureen Tayall; *Guardian* 1946).

Though the CPSA electoral propaganda was phrased in a way that invited recognition of wider social responsibilities, in these appeals the party downplayed the political and social implications of its policies. Support for the 'national democratic revolution' was frequently presented as merely the extension of civil rights to black South Africans. As the Party's thinkers explained to their followers:

Comrades, there are times when to be ultra-revolutionary is to betray the cause for which we are working. Which is the more revolutionary today – to say you want to nationalise the banks, or to say you want the vote and equality of rights for the non-Europeans.

(Simons 1975, p. 122)

The Party's moderation of its public stance did not immunise it from attack. In Johannesburg, the Labour Party had twice refused the communists' offer of an electoral pact, and then published a leaflet in the 1945 election on what the Communist Party stood for. The leaflet detailed the CPSA's advocacy of universal suffrage and its espousal of the right of blacks to stand for election, in addition to its desire for 'natives and coloureds [to be allowed to] ride in the same buses and live in the same residential areas as Europeans'. As *Inkululeko* (12 November 1945) plaintively pointed out, the leaflet 'said nothing at all about the constructive municipal policy advanced by the Communists'. That the Labour Party produced this leaflet suggests that they viewed the Party as a serious competitor; and indeed, when the communists first offered an electoral alliance in 1943, Labour leaders

accepted an invitation to attend a formal meeting at the Trades Hall (Memo of meeting between representatives of the NEC of the SALP and the CC of the CPSA, Trades Hall, Johannesburg, 1 September 1943 (Simons Papers, 05). However, in 1945 communists failed to win new Council seats in the Johannesburg election; for though it achieved a total of 4 000 votes overall, its candidates polled the lowest scores in each of the four wards it contested (*Inkukuleko*, 3 December 1945).

Meanwhile, in black townships communists were at their most effective when they combined electoral politics with direct collective action. This was evident in their assertive presence on the East Rand. Here in early 1945 communists in Benoni joined forces with African tenants protesting against rent rises from Indian landlords, holding well-attended weekly meetings in Wattville location. A key leader was Arthur Damane, an Advisory Board member and a paid CPSA organiser for the African Mineworkers' Union. When evicted tenants occupied freshly constructed municipal houses, the Party paid the rents (Bonner 2005, pp. 178–183). In 1945 communists did well in East Rand Advisory Board elections, winning three seats in Springs, three in Brakpan, one in Benoni and two in Nigel (*Inkululeko* 26 October 1943). However, in Orlando, the nucleus of what would later become Soweto, communist advisory board members held back from joining one of the most successful instances of communal militancy. At the beginning of the war, each of Orlando's 5 000 houses accommodated seven people. This average nearly doubled between 1940 and 1944 as a consequence of a huge influx of migrants from the farms and the reserves seeking jobs and food. Rather than building accommodation for these people the Council lifted restrictions on subletting and tolerated the subsequent overcrowding. After fruitless protests a group of Orlando residents led by James Sofasonke Mpanza, an Advisory Board member, organised an exodus of sub-tenants out of the location to construct hessian shelters on the empty veld in March 1944. Before the sub-tenants moved, Mpanza approached the communists and asked them to join his committee. Edwin Mofutsanyana and his comrades held back, however, arguing that at the beginning of winter Mpanza's plan was irresponsible and would merely lead to greater privations than already existed. Orlando's communists distrusted Mpanza in any case, with his background as a convicted murderer, born-again evangelist and small-time huckster, and they had been energetically contesting his influence within the Advisory Board for nearly a decade. But municipal hostility and cold weather notwithstanding, Mpanza's movement grew and grudgingly the communists had to concede support while questioning Mpanza's personal motives and criticising his administration. Their initial abstention cost them dearly. Thereafter, Mpanza ensured their exclusion from any active contribution to the leadership of his kingdom and they were confined to organising soup

kitchens on its fringes and lobbying the Council in concert with liberal pressure groups for a more generous policy towards the squatters.

The extent of communist estrangement from the Orlando squatters was embarrassingly evident when a leading Party member, advocate Franz Boshoff, appeared for the Native Affairs Department in its efforts to have Mpanza deported from Johannesburg. Boshoff was suspended from his membership. In three successive advisory board elections, in 1944, 1945 and 1946, the communists failed to win any seats (*Inkululeko*, no. 93, 11 March 1946; French, 1983 p. 47). Their characterisation of Mpanza as 'irresponsible' was symptomatic of their unwillingness at that time to contemplate initiating direct action. In Orlando, this may have been partly a consequence of participation in Advisory Board elections. Though at the beginning the communists had professed to be conscious of the limited utility of the Board, by the 1940s it is possible that for them control of the Board had become an end in itself. Certainly, in Orlando in 1944 the communists demonstrated considerable insensitivity to the needs and aspirations of sub-tenants who were not, it should be remembered, entitled to vote in board elections. It is also conceivable that Johannesburg communists may have been influenced in their response to the squatters by their understanding of the local dynamics of white politics. At the time of the Mpanza exodus from Orlando, the Johannesburg Party's leadership was concentrating its energies on canvassing among white municipal voters (O'Brien 1946, p. 13).

In the Western Cape, elections continued to constitute a major focus for local party activity. The Communist Party-led Women's Food Committee had developed in 1945 out of the group elected to maintain fair behaviour in the forty food lines that 30 000 people formed at mobile food vans. By 1947 it was shifting its emphasis from food to franchise issues. In 1948 the Food Committee decided to establish a Non-European Women's League 'to fight for the vote for all black women'. The local committees supplied a network of activists who could canvass support for Sam Kahn's campaign that year in the NRC elections, and which underpinned the efforts of the CPSA's Cape Town branch that constituted Kahn's and later Fred Carneson's campaign committee (Fortescu 1991, p. 489). Local party leadership also invested considerable effort in the Cape Town City Council election in which Cissie Gool and Sam Kahn represented partly coloured wards through the 1940s.

Meanwhile, in the African township of Langa, the Party appeared to be 'trusted by the people', to judge from the Advisory Board elections. Communists had contested Langa's Advisory Board elections annually from 1944, winning several seats and collecting a majority of the votes every time – significantly from the more urbanised married quarters voters than from the migrant worker 'bachelors' inhabiting the barracks where the Party had no presence. At one stage

Langa Party membership peaked at 260. Led locally by Johnson Ngwevela, they constituted a political elite, prominent in the ANC and conspicuous in a range of other associations. Ngwevela was the chairman of the Langa Wesleyan church network, the township's Red Cross organisation, and a moving spirit in the Vigilance Association which for a decade had constituted itself as an unofficial oversight body, monitoring the Advisory Board. The Party's influence in Langa was enhanced by its access to the City Council from 1943. Betty Sacks and Sam Kahn in their capacities as municipal councillors were active in the City's Native Affairs Committee. A degree of success in inducing the authorities to address housing shortages as well as other incremental improvements may help to explain why the Party was able to mobilise unusually wide and assertive responses to the anti-pass campaign in the township (Fortescue p. 490; Musemwa, 1993, pp. 153-1).

Up to the close of the decade national leaders continued to direct effort and resources in elections as they had done since the middle of the war, and indeed continued to prioritise white or racially mixed municipal or parliamentary elections over contests for advisory boards, a source of continuing frustration among African party members. This was despite a trend of increasing success in winning seats on boards in Cape Town, Johannesburg, East London and the East Rand. The Party continued to contest Johannesburg City Council seats though it was never able to repeat Hilda Watts' success there in 1944. It retained seats in the Cape Town municipality, benefitting there from the racially mixed electorate. Ward changes and changing voter requirements put paid to the Party's municipal electoral chances in East London and Port Elizabeth (Johns 1996, p. 25). Less successfully, the Party also campaigned in Native Representative Council elections, nominating Mofutsanyana and Maliba as their candidates. In this it followed the ANC's example, first endorsing and then withdrawing from a decision to boycott the elections in the wake of the adjournment of the NRC during the mineworkers' strike. In 1947, the CPSA decided to nominate a slate of NRC candidates pledged to repeal the 1936 legislation and demand the introduction of universal franchise. The Party's continuing predisposition to contest the NRC elections with its own candidates was significant: at this stage it was still ready to compete with the ANC for African political support and the decision was taken after a sharp debate at the previous party conference (Rusty and Hilda Bernstein interviewed by Maureen Tayall, London 23 August 1983 (ASI 331). In May 1948 the Party sponsored a 'Peoples Assembly for Votes for All' in Johannesburg attended by 800 delegates supposedly representing 750 000 people.

More tellingly, its candidate for the parliamentary native representative for the western Cape, Sam Kahn, was elected in 1948, followed by the election of a Cape Provincial Councillor, Fred Carneson, in 1949. As noted above both benefitted from the organisation communists had set in place with the food

committees, as well as Kahn's own achievements as a city councillor. Kahn's following may also have been enhanced by his prescient record as *The Guardian's* horse-racing tipster. For mobilising the several thousand eligible African voters, Kahn relied on Johnston Ngwevela, the leader of the communist group in Langa which allied with the ANC in advisory board politics. Unlike the arrangements for the Transvaal and the Free State created in the 1936 legislation for African representation, in which the senators were elected indirectly, in the western Cape former common-roll African electors chose their House of Assembly parliamentary representative in a direct election. This helped to explain Kahn's overwhelming victory, 3 780 votes compared to the 948 votes gathered by his opponents (Johns 1996, pp. 27–29). Kahn would hold his seat until his expulsion in 1952 under the terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1949 he particularly enraged National Party MPs with his attack on the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Bill, 'the immoral offspring of an illicit union between racial superstition and biological ignorance' (Central Committee of the Communist Party of South Africa 1949, p. 38). Especially provocative was his citing of an estimation that around 600 000 white South Africans had black forebears, and several parliamentarians were among this group (Saks 1996).

#### COMMUNISTS IN GOVERNMENT

Communists would continue to win the contests for African votes in the western Cape until they were prohibited from standing in such elections in 1954. In 1948, the Party's electoral preoccupations still included efforts to influence white voters, if only indirectly. The Springbok Legion survived, though now as an ex-servicemen's organisation. It had lost most of its membership, many scared away by claims made by the prosecution in 1947 during the trial of Party leaders that the Legion was the communists' armed wing. By 1948 the leadership of the Springbok Legion was entirely in communist hands. Before the election the Legion had refused to support the Labour Party exclusively, preferring to urge support for both Labour and the United Party; an electoral victory for Smuts was preferable to Afrikaner Nationalist ascendancy. For the next few years Legionnaires, some of them ex-communists, would actively cooperate with United Party officials (White 1993, pp. 103-104). As late as 1949 Fred Carneson would argue at a Central Committee meeting that there remained 'issues among which a common struggle between Europeans and Non-Europeans was possible, as the Nationalists were beginning to expose themselves even to their followers' (CPSA 1948).

One of the last of the Party's parliamentarians, Brian Bunting (Sidney Bunting's son) was elected in 1952, succeeding Sam Kahn after his expulsion under the terms of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act. Bunting would serve for just a year before his own ejection from Parliament as a listed communist. But four

decades later, he would return to the House of Assembly, elected on the ANC's party slate, poignantly greeted by the same doorkeepers who had bid him farewell forty years before. After 1953 and for a long time thereafter, communists would contest no elections in their own name, deciding only after 1994 to participate in the elections as ANC members. In exile, communists had held a majority of the seats on the ANC's national executive, and in successive ANC administrations after 1994 communists have held several cabinet positions.

Today, though, the SACP's commitment to its historic alliance with African nationalism is quite delicately poised, in what it now calls the 'radical, second phase of the national democratic revolution' (*Bua Komanisi* 2014). At the last ANC national conference, in December 2017, no senior SACP officials succeeded in winning seats on the ANC's national executive, a significant setback in its influence within the larger movement. This was all the more discouraging because the 300 000 or so signed-up communists constitute about a third of the ANC's membership. The continuing presence of communists in President Cyril Ramaphosa's cabinet notwithstanding, communists perceive the ANC's internal politics as 'reduced to a contestation' between 'capitalist factions' (Davies 2021, p. 225).

Meanwhile the Party itself aims to 're-surface more clearly the imperialist dimension of our persisting structural problems', through 'de-linking from the imperialist north' (SACP 2014). Other kinds of uncoupling are also under consideration in certain quarters. Since at least 2004 there has been an assertive minority proposing that the Party should contest elections separately. The first public suggestion from within the Party of such a course of action came in 1996 from Anthony Holiday, a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, and a member of the Party since the 1960's (Gumede 1996). Those in favour of such a course were particularly vocal in the Johannesburg Central branch, though newspaper reports suggested that strong sentiment favoured such a move at six of the party's provincial conferences in 2004, especially from Young Communist League members (Tabane 2004). The Johannesburg branch submitted resolutions to the provincial congress calling for separately elected communists who would then 'entrench revolutionary parliamentarianism' (Thomas 2007, p. 262). The resolutions failed to garner support, though research conducted at the time indicated that party leaders were not fiercely opposed to such a prospect. Secretary-General Blade Nzimande, for example, told researcher David Thomas that 'maybe we [should] be looking at a coalition' in which the party could extract concessions for its support in government (Thomas 2007, p. 264). But most of Thomas's interviewees were doubtful that the Party would win much support as an independent electoral competitor, nor were they inclined to take the risk that such a move would certainly entail, that is allowing the ANC to become more susceptible to right-wing influences. In any case, the SACP had no money to fight

elections and even some kind of compromise position, such as a pre-agreed pact or coalition, might be difficult after fighting the same turf in a campaign in a contest 'in which victory means a paid position', the central committee explained (Msomi 2005).

Such arguments prevailed up to 2017. In 2012 the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) surveyed its membership to assess the extent of support for independent SACP electioneering and discovered only 6 per cent favouring such an option (SACP 2012). On the other hand, the Young Communist League favoured separate electioneering, possibly a reflection of the lethal rivalry that can exist at branch level between the Young Communists and ANC Youth Leaguers. In 2016 in Mpumalanga, a provincial resolution calling for the SACP to field its own electoral candidates followed a succession of murderous attacks directed against Young Communists during contested nominations for the 2014 local government poll (*Umsebenzi*, March 2016, pp. 13–14; Nkonyane 2016). At the Fourteenth Congress in July 2017, in response to membership pressure, the Party did resolve that in future it would 'certainly contest elections', though the 'exact modality' of how it would do this would 'need to be determined'. It might for example be through a 'reconfigured alliance' or through an agreement about 'post-electoral' coalitions with the ANC (SACP 2017). The party's leadership appeared still to be hedging their bets but in November 2017 they allowed local branches to contest a municipal by-election in Metsimaholo (Sasolburg) in the Free State. The decision was opposed by local affiliates of the ANC-allied Congress of South African Trade Unions and so Party campaigners had to do without trade union support. They contested all 21 wards, winning none but securing about 8 per cent of the vote, sufficient to be allocated three of the proportional representation council seats. They took their votes from the ANC, especially eroding its support among young voters. The experience seems to have had chastening effects. Present policy is that the Party should continue to abstain from independent electioneering; but the ANC in constituting its candidate lists should 'reflect the composition of the alliance' (SACP 2019, p. 15).

Counter-balancing any pressure from younger communists to oppose the ANC in elections was the continuing appointment of communists to ministries. Party thinkers continue to believe that their comrades 'deployed' into influential positions since Zuma's ascent could 'drive important advances in the key economic infrastructure and related sectors' (SACP 2012). But such professions are increasingly likely to be articles of faith rather than an expression of assured conviction. There may yet be further chapters in the South African Communist Party's electoral history.

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