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"HAVE WE NO RIGHT TO ORGANISE?"  
BLACK POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS AND FARMWORKERS STRUGGLES  
IN THE WESTERN CAPE:  
1912 - 1930

BY



Dissertation submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the  
Master of Arts degree in History at the University of  
the Western Cape.

Promoter : Dr T KEEGAN

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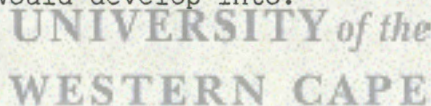
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## ABSTRACT

This study is primarily a history of black political organisations and their attempts to organise farmworkers in the rural Western Cape (1912 - 1930) with special reference to the Boland. The attempts made by these organisations to organise farmworkers in the Boland between 1912 - 1930 raises a number of important issues which will be addressed in this study.

Firstly, there is the issue to what extent capitalist agriculture existed in this area before and during the period under observation. On a general level there is a question to what extent capitalist relations of production existed in the agricultural production in the Boland. This would clearly have an effect on organisations attempting to organise farmworkers as well as the nature and form farmworkers struggles would develop into.



Secondly, it is clear that the attempts at organisation the ANC(WC) was more successful than the A.P.O. and the I.C.U. put together. This raises a whole series of issues concerning the nature and form of these organisations, for example the strategies and organisational methods that were used, the issues that were addressed and the discourse and ideology of the A.P.O., I.C.U. and ANC(WC).

Lastly, an attempt is made at evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the three organisations under consideration with a view to draw important lessons from these struggles for the organising of farmworkers in the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis arose from my interest in rural history particularly that of the Boland.

I am greatly indebted to Tim Keegan for his constructive criticism and encouragement during the research and writing of this thesis. I hope this thesis does his supervision justice.

I would like to thank Willie Hofmeyr for sharing his valuable insights with regards to rural struggles and organisations in the Western Cape. Thanks to the Human Sciences Research Council and Daad Scholarship for the funding of my studies. None of the conclusions in this thesis are necessary held by these institutions.

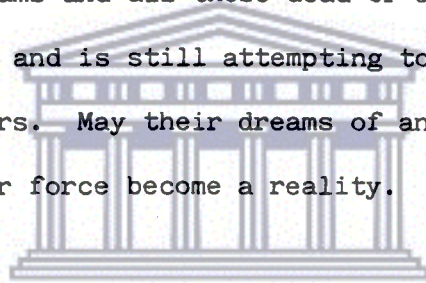
A special thanks goes to Liz Abrahams for sharing her experiences in the Food and Canning Workers Union's attempts to organise farmworkers in the Boland during the 1960's. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the librarians and staff of the South African Public Library and African Studies Library at UCT. Thanks to Ruth Abrahams for proofreading this thesis.

This thesis would obviously never have seen the light of day were it not for the untiring support and encouragement from my wife, Irma who took time off from her own work to type this thesis.

I am solely responsible for all the shortcomings of this thesis.

TO:

Liz Abrahams and all those dead or alive who attempted and is still attempting to organise farmworkers. May their dreams of an organised farmlabour force become a reality.



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## INTRODUCTION

"Already he is old enough to know the difference between the Coloured people and the whites. He knows how to say 'baas' to the farmer ... He has now properly learned his place in the natural order of things. There must be no question of any idea other than hard work and obedience."<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa, the struggle of black workers to establish independent trade unions has been a hard and bitter battle against both the state and capital who have been violently opposed to the formation of such a movement. Through their determined and militant struggle, black workers have succeeded in the 1970's and 1980's to establish an independent trade union movement whose power and growth are increasingly felt in the economic and, to a lesser degree, in the political spheres. This cannot however be said about farmworkers who, since the emancipation of slaves in the Cape and the proletarianisation of the peasantry in the rest of South Africa, have lived and worked under severely harsh conditions on the farms.

It is extremely difficult to organise farmworkers in South Africa, given the general level of repression and the structural constraints which exist on the farms. Apart from this, farmworkers are isolated, illiterate, poor, and, in the Western Cape, the 'tot system' has contributed to these factors which inhibit protest. Attempts to

organise farmworkers have usually, according to Phillip Masia of the Orange-Vaal General Workers Union, led to "... one dead end after another dead end ... one defeat after another defeat."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, attempts were made by black political organisations to take up the struggle of farmworkers in the Western Cape in the early half of the 20th century. This study will investigate and analyse the activities of the African Political Organisation, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union and the Western Cape branch of the African National Congress (hereinafter referred to as APO, ICU and ANC(WC)) in terms of their theories and practices. Furthermore, the task of this study is to find out why these organisations failed in their attempts to organise farmworkers in the Western Cape, particularly in the Boland area.

This raises a whole series of issues concerning the strategies and organisational methods that were employed, the issues that were taken up, the response of farmers and the state, and the ideologies of the APO, ICU and ANC(WC).

This study is therefore essentially a history of black political organisations and their attempts to organise farmworkers in the Western Cape (1912 -1930). I have used Willie Hofmeyr's thesis "Agricultural Crisis and rural organisations in the Western Cape: 1929 - 1933" and Gavin Lewis's book based on his doctoral thesis: Between the wire and the wall : a History of South African "Coloured"



politics quite exhaustively. Both are valuable pieces of work which have made writing this thesis both easier and more difficult. In addition, I have used mouthpieces of the APO entitled the A.P.O., the ICU's Workers' Herald and the Communist Party of South Africa's (hereinafter referred to as CPSA) Umsebenzi which was the informal mouthpiece of the militants within the ANC(WC). The Cape Times also contains valuable information on the activities of the ANC(WC). However, very few sources exist which could provide one with an insider view of the ICU and ANC(WC). The available material does give one some insight how these organisations operated.

I have retained those terms commonly used in South Africa to denote racial categories. The term Black is used in the general sense for all those not classified 'white' by the racist South African regime. These terms are by no means used to give any significant validity to the system of apartheid.

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Chapter 1 examines the nature of agriculture and the development of capitalist agriculture in the Western Cape. Important to this chapter, is the extent to which capitalist relations of production prevailed in the wine and fruit farming areas of the Western Cape.

Chapter 2 examines the strategies and organisational methods and ideologies of the APO and ICU respectively.

Chapter 3 gives a brief history of the ANC(WC) and its position

in the National ANC. The chapter also examines the strategies, organisational methods and the nature of the struggles in the Boland. It also looks at how the ANC(WC) responded to the repression at the hands of farmers, white vigilantes and the state, as well as the ideological battles between moderates and radicals in the ANC(WC).

In the conclusion (Chapter 4), an attempt will be made to evaluate these three organisations in terms of their strengths and weaknesses with a view to making some alternative suggestions which could possibly be used as guidelines for organising farmworkers in the future.



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#### Notes

1. Rex Close, New Life, (Cape Town: Pioneer Press, 1950),p.12.
2. Phillip Masia, 'Organising Farmworkers', South African Labour Bulletin, 12, 5(July 1987),p.87.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALIST AGRICULTURE IN THE WESTERN CAPE

(1870 - 1930)

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the transition to capitalist agriculture in the Western Cape with specific reference to the Boland. The years 1870 to 1930 saw a transition to capitalism, firmly entrenching itself in the agriculture of the Western Cape which would ultimately have a dramatic effect on the political economy of the Western Cape as well as the rest of South Africa.

Through a process of class struggle, both small and large estates were transformed into capitalist farms with a large majority of the indigenous people and ex-slaves effectively reduced to a harshly oppressed and exploited agricultural proletariat.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere else in Southern Africa would the indigenous people become so dispossessed and impoverished, resulting in white settler accumulation at the denial of the indigenous people to any access to the means of production.

The transformation to capitalist agriculture was a slow process. Firstly because the turnover cycle of agriculture capital is tied to the natural cycle of the seasons. Secondly, the initial attitudes of farmers to capitalism was negative. It was usually those wealthier families who generated capital outside of agricultural capital who were more interested in capitalist agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Capitalist accumulation was more rapid in the Western Cape since capitalising farmers

had no opposition from an independent peasantry or squatter tenants as in the Eastern Cape, Boer Republics and Natal.

It was in the countryside of the Western Cape that the capitalist ideal was first imprinted as well as the racist ideologies of Afrikaner farmers. This surely had an effect on the later social formation within a broader South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

#### AGRICULTURE

Ever since the early period of white settler occupation, the Cape was familiar with markets. By the late 18th and early 19th century, the wheat and wine areas became the core areas for producing agricultural commodities for export and the home market.<sup>4</sup> The discoveries of minerals in the 1870's created new markets for the agricultural produce of the Western Cape, especially with the construction of railways linking the Cape with the diamond and gold mining areas of the north. By 1870 Ross and Marincowitz argue, a capitalist market system was already established at the Cape so that by the late 19th century these markets were further expanded especially with the export of agricultural produce to the Republics and Colonies.<sup>5</sup> The acquisition of capital was through agricultural enterprises since the Cape was largely an agrarian society, however loans were also available from banks and merchant capitalists. During the last three decades of the 19th century, agriculture in the Western Cape was plagued by numerous problems such as labour shortages caused by the migration of labour to the gold mining areas and the Public Works projects.

During the 1890's wine farmers in particular were hit by the recession that had begun in Britain since the 1870's, because by then agriculture was well meshed in the web of imperialist trade.<sup>6</sup>

Production methods were usually archaic and dependant on unskilled labour which made farmers very vulnerable during times of labour shortages. Mechanization was often limited and farmers were often not willing to adopt 'new farming methods.'<sup>7</sup> Farmers also incurred financial losses due to the phylloxera which infested their vineyards. The phylloxera plague forced farmers, especially those wealthier farmers with large tracts of land to seek other alternatives to farming.

The Mediterranean climate of the Cape as well as the large farms made deciduous fruit farming a very viable alternative.<sup>8</sup> This new commodity enhanced the reproduction of capital and the foundation of what was to become a very lucrative industry was laid down during the last two decades of the 19th century. Besides the readily available local market for deciduous fruits, there was also the prospect of shipping fruit to Europe by means of cold storage. This new industry was soon to attract the likes of Cecil John Rhodes and other mining magmates as well as those who were accumulating wealth in commercial business. Capitalising farmers of the Boland feared that these business men would soon monopolize the new industry especially Rhodes who bought up to 29 farms in the Groot Drakenstein, Franschhoek, Wellington and Tulbagh districts.

By the early 20th century wine and fruit farmers had secured for themselves both local and international markets for their produce, despite the fall in demand for agricultural products during the late 1920's. Many wine and fruit farmers through state intervention were saved from bankruptcy, particularly during the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.<sup>9</sup>

#### FARMERS AND THE STATE

It is ordained that we (Afrikaners), insignificant as we are, should be amongst the first people to begin the struggle against the new world tyranny of Capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

By 1870 there already existed a small but growing group of capitalist farmers in the Boland area. It was particularly those farmers with merchant and business backgrounds who made up the elite in the Boland who came to realize that they needed support of as well as some influence within the state to accumulate wealth.<sup>11</sup> This small elite group of farmers as well as the Colonial state saw it as their moral obligation on their part to imprint capitalism on agriculture.

Farmers were in no way a homogenous grouping but rather a heterogenous collective emerging from different backgrounds, culture, ideological and political persuasions. These differences became more apparent during the process of moving towards capitalism. The stratification

amongst farmers also became clearer. By 1875 there was very little land left to purchase in the Boland which made those undercapitalising farmers very vulnerable to their land being purchased by those capitalising farmers who had large farms and could adjust to the new commercial conditions.<sup>12</sup>

The credit system which was in operation at that time usually assisted those wealthier farmers, who had property investments in the rural towns, produced better quality wines, investing in local banks and gold mining companies.<sup>13</sup> As capital became more concentrated in the hands of the wealthier farmers, their poorer counterparts were forced to seek employment in towns or on the farms of wealthier farmers.

The predominantly Afrikaans-speaking farmers soon realized especially after 1880 that apart from accumulating wealth they had to be part or have some influence within the political hegemony at the Cape. These farmers organised themselves under the Zuid-Afrikaansche Boeren Bescherminings Vereeniging and later under the Afrikaner Bond firstly, to protect their economic interest and secondly, to lift them from their subordinate position within Cape politics.<sup>14</sup> Afrikaans-speaking farmers saw the Bond as a vehicle to acquire a political say to implement their racist ideologies and ultimately to promote accumulation by way of state subsidization, marketing schemes and better labour control.<sup>15</sup>

The Afrikaner Bond, more than anything else became a means of

representing the interests of the rural elite especially through the energetic work of Jan Hofmeyr. The formation of the Afrikaner Bond also facilitated the idea of creating an Afrikaner identity, coalescing various cultural and language movements which later developed in to what is called Afrikaner nationalism. It was in the Boland that the National Party when it was formed gained its most influential support in the Cape, thanks to the Bond's mobilization and organisation of Afrikaners in the area.<sup>16</sup>

Agricultural capitalism did not just develop out of economic laws but also through state intervention through legislation to a secure favourable market and a cheap labour force, simultaneously giving legal sanction to class domination and racism.<sup>17</sup> During the transition to capitalist agriculture, the state was not very strong and although capitalist farmers need the assistance of the state in terms of legislation to control their labour force there was no real need for intensive state intervention because the conditions for capitalist accumulation were already created in that most of the arable land and capital was in possession of wealthier farmers. There was also no independant peasantry which could compete with farmers for the market. The economy was largely agrarian and state legislators such as the Masters and Servants Act of 1841 and renewed in 1856 as well as the Vagrancy Act (1879) gave farmers the power they needed to control their labour force.<sup>18</sup>

The ability of capitalist farmers to invest in enterprises outside of agriculture as well as the ability to organise themselves as stated



above, therefore made them less indebted to the state financially. Through the agitation of the South African Agricultural Union (SAAU) the state was called upon to implement policies that would benefit the interests of white farming.<sup>19</sup> In 1918, the state intervened to stabilize the wine industry by establishing K.W.V. During the same year, Santam and Sanlam were established, largely through the latent capital which capitalist farmers had thereby strengthening their position of financial independence.<sup>20</sup> As agriculture moved further towards capitalism there were those amongst the Afrikaner farming community especially those rural elites who sought to promote capitalism rather than oppose it.

From 1918 onwards more capital was being invested in Cape agriculture as agriculture became more centralized through collective action of those capitalists farmers through a number of co-operatives being established which gave these farmers more power to exercise control over production and markets, as well as the collective purchasing of seeds, implements, machinery etc.<sup>21</sup>

By 1924 when the political bloc favoured the promotion of agricultural capital, did farmers in the Cape largely benefit. This gave rise to wine and fruit farming becoming more rationalized and intensified. The farmers of the Boland benefitted further when the Pact Government transferred the profits made from the mining industry into expenditure on agriculture in terms of subsidies, emergency aid, mechanization and new farming methods.<sup>22</sup>

When the demand for agricultural products declined between 1926 - 1933, organised agriculture called upon the state to intervene on its behalf through legislation to prohibit what they termed 'dumping' from the outside on the South African market.<sup>23</sup> Legislation to protect imports and exports became more organised under the Imperial Preference System which resulted in the wine and fruit industry the Cape surviving the Depression relatively unscathed. The state was ready to intervene in agriculture because it had the funds to do this due to the gold boom caused by the 'Gold standard crisis' of 1931.

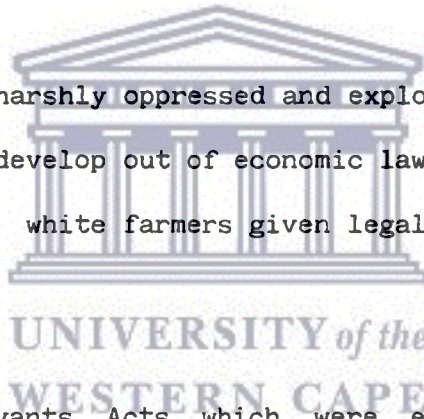
The state increased its expenditure to save those agricultural commodities (wine and fruit) which were mainly for export. The ability of capitalist farmers to increase their accumulation is a clear indication of the power and influence these farmers had within the power bloc of South Africa.

By 1930 wealth had become more concentrated in the hands of fewer individual capitalist farmers, largely through their ability to take total control of the means of production as well as having greater power and influence in the power bloc. By the 1930's the transition to capitalist agriculture was complete with capital accumulation in the hands of a minority white capitalist group of farmers assisted by the state, at the expense of a harshly oppressed and exploited black working-class.

## RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

'... that the condition is a hard one in which incessant and faithful labour for so many years, will not benefit from the fruits of their labour in an agriculture where the accumulation of wealth in some hands, growing out of the same labour, are enormous.<sup>24</sup>

The development of a harshly oppressed and exploited black agricultural proletariat did not develop out of economic laws only but also through racist ideologies of white farmers given legal sanction through state legislation.



The Masters and Servants Acts which were enacted between 1841 to 1875 was a means of maintaining the relations of production which existed during the time of slavery although there was a qualitative difference in that farmworkers could withhold their labour power. The Act was passed in the interest of those already highly commercialised farmers, giving them the power to exercise greater control over their labourers than before. The Act was (a suppression of the fundamental human and social rights of farm labourers). It gave legal sanction to a crude form of racial discrimination that was enforced on the farms by the farmers. It was on the farms that the

relations of production almost resembled that which existed during slavery.<sup>25</sup>

As Marx pointed out:

The essential difference between slavelabour and wage labour lies only in the mode in which surplus labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourers.<sup>26</sup>

The Masters and Servants Act was amended in 1873 to give farmers even greater powers over their labourers. Besides the legal confines within which labourers could act, also meant that farmers could now apply the regulations of the Act to whatever extent they wished to.

Any labourer found guilty of breaking the law was harshly dealt with either through imprisonment with hard labour, spare diet and solitary confinement.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Act gave legal sanction to the class struggles in the Cape countryside by giving the dominant class (white farmers) the undeniable right to oppress and exploit the underclass to whatever extent they wished.<sup>28</sup> Farmworkers were finding it more difficult to withhold their labour power.

The Act was clearly a means of securing a cheap labour market through coercive measures for those capitalising farmers who saw it as

coercive measures for those capitalising farmers who saw it as illegitimate to lure farmworkers to their farms through better wages and working conditions. Farmers were therefore not prepared to make use of the free market system (ie. through laws of supply and demand) but rather a system of coercive measures to secure both profits and labour. <sup>29</sup>

Even the labour power of farmworkers which under a competitive free-market system, is regarded as their undeniable possession as 'freemen' was alienated from them and became the possession of farmers who had the power to ration it out to them, thus denying farmworkers the right to determine when to sell and to whom to sell it to.

Agriculture and later deciduous fruit farming were heavily dependant on unskilled labour, firstly because of the nature of such farming as well as the attitudes of farmers towards mechanization and new farming methods. <sup>30</sup> Because of this, farmworkers were to become the most exploited in the formal sector. Workers were often forced to work from dawn to dusk without much remuneration. Work was often harsh and laborious resulting in the extraction of maximum labour-time from the farmworker and his family. Consciously or unconsciously, the attitude of farmers towards their labourers was often paternalistic and workers were treated as inferior objects not to be treated as equals with their masters. Derogatory and abusive language was used which often reminded workers of the racial differences between them and farmers. Farmers also saw this as the only method of getting

farmworkers to do the days labour, (i.e. a means of extracting maximum labour-time from labourers).<sup>31</sup>

The racial attitudes and the drive to make huge profits amongst farmers resulted in farmworkers' wages being well below the subsistence level despite the availability of plots to supplement workers' wages. By the end of the 1870's wages were in the region of one shilling per day with rations of wine five up to six times per day. During harvest time, wages would include a house and plot plus one shilling per day.<sup>32</sup> It is quite difficult to put any money value to wages in kind since this kind of wage which was intended for the farmworker as an individual was often shared by his family. Farmers refused to increase the wages of farmworkers because they believed that an increase in wages would reduce the workers work output. Farmworkers who moved to other farms in search of better wages and working conditions were often disappointed since wealthier farmers could offer only slightly better working conditions and they also paid low wages. Although the productivity of workers increased between 1870 - 1930, their wages still remained the same.<sup>33</sup>

Farmworkers were not regarded as employees as in other industries and for this reason their wages remained low and farmers relied heavily on state legislation to keep wages low. In 1925 the South African Agricultural Union strongly agitated against any legislation that stipulated a minimum wage for farmworkers and sent a deputation to General Hertzog the Prime Minister of the Union to plead against

any such moves. In 1928 General Kemp wanted to have farming defined in such a way that it would be excluded from the provisions of the Wage Act and Factories Act.<sup>34</sup> By 1930 the majority of farmworkers on farms resided there permanently completely dependant on wage labour.<sup>35</sup>

Workers were forced to live under the most wretched conditions on the farms. Since farmworkers had no where else to go they were forced to live in overcrowded, filthy and delapidated shacks.<sup>36</sup> The mission stations which were the only alternative in which to reside were itself overcrowded and served as a reservoir of cheap labour. Farmworkers could not move to the rural towns because they had no skills to offer and were forced to lease a house and plot which were not sufficient to sustain a living for their families ie. effectively tying the farmworker to the farm through the system of tied rent. Through the mechanism tied rent and the advance system farmers secured their labour supply for the peak season.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most abhorrent mechanisms of ensuring an immobile and docile labour force was the dop (tot) system whereby farmers would give workers as payment in kind a low quality wine five to six times per day. The tot system became one of the most successful mechanisms because workers were forced to become totally dependant on the daily intake of wine ever since the age of twelve.<sup>38</sup> Farmworkers became potential alcoholics and this situation made them more subservient and would also act as an escape for their frustrations and problems.

Farmworkers lost their self-respect and often family members and fellow workers became targets of their frustrations once under the influence of alcohol.

So effective was the tot system as a means of labour control that farmers went to great lengths to prevent its abolition. As early as 1840, the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church appealed to having the amount of liquor given as wages limited and again in 1915. In 1918 the Baxter Commission tried to abolish the tot system but could not secure a two-third majority. In 1928 the Liquor Act limited the daily intake of wine to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pints.<sup>39</sup> All these attempts failed because of the influence which farmers had in the power bloc. The extent to which farmers actually administered the stipulations of the Liquor Act is quite difficult to establish since the state did not have the power to enforce it.<sup>40</sup>

Farmers with a considerable amount of state legislation placed severe restrictions on the mobility of farmworkers and often farmworkers were indebted to farmers through the advance and the tied rent system.<sup>41</sup> Despite these constraints, the time of the labour shortage which extended from the 1870's right into the 1890's gave farmworkers some bargaining power which resulted in some of them leaving the farms to work on the Public Works projects and the railway construction works. Even during this period farmers were not prepared to improve the working conditions or to increase wages, but turned to the state for assistance. The migrant labour system was used to import African



labour from the 'reserves' in the north to supplement the loss of 'Coloured' farmworkers. This system worked against farmers because these migrant labourers were soon attracted to the Public Works where higher wages were paid.<sup>42</sup>

The state tried to eliminate the contradiction which arose between them and the farmers during the labour shortage by dismissing workers from the Public Works on 1 October each year to bring relief to farmers.<sup>43</sup> The Masters and Servants Act was also more stringently applied thereby forcing workers to remain on the farms or face the possibility of fines and imprisonment. By the end of the 1900's, the mobility and bargaining power which farmworkers had even if it was for a small period of time, soon came to an end. The state did not have the funds to continue the Public Works projects and those workers who left the farms soon found themselves back there under the autocratic control of farmers or face possible unemployment and impoverishment in the rural towns.<sup>44</sup>

The question that must surely arise when analysing the relations of production which existed in Cape agriculture, is did the farmworkers ever revolt against the harsh conditions on the farms be it individualistically or collectively. The desire to free themselves from the farms or to better their position was certainly there but the structural constraints imposed on farmworkers by farmers and the state was a major obstacle to that freedom.

The bargaining power which farmworkers had during the under-supply of labour during the 1870's to 1890's was short lived especially with the increased influence and power farmers had within the power bloc. Farmworkers' protests were more individualistic than collective. These protests usually took the form of arson, strikes and even physical confrontation with farmers.<sup>45</sup>

Collective action was done by those not residing on the farms, had it been able to filter to the permanent farmworkers, such collective action would have certainly altered the relations of production dramatically. For those residing on the farms, it was more a matter of survival than one of organising because organising meant losing everything farmworkers ever possessed.

#### CONCLUSION

By the end of the 1920's transition to capitalist agriculture was complete in the Western Cape. The relations of production still retained features of pre-industrial relations especially the coercive methods used by capitalist farmers to control labour. Capitalist farmers and it's ally, the state, effectively forced the farm labouring class into a position of immobility, dependent, illiterate, unskilled and impoverished. Farmworkers were so exploited that they could not organise themselves against their oppressors because although they existed as an agricultural proletariat a proletarian class consciousness was still of a nascent kind.

The position of farmworkers was clearly one of powerlessness, not only because they were exploited but because they were powerless to resist exploitation. It was due to this position of powerlessness that farmworkers were unable to organise themselves and would have to be taken into account by those organisations outside the confines of the farm who wished to organise them.



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## CHAPTER TWO

### 'LET THE CROPS ROT': THE ATTEMPTS OF THE APO AND ICU TO ORGANISE FARMWORKERS

Those who propose reform from above in South Africa do, it is true, envisage some political change, but modifications that are contemplated are superficial and are, for the most part, intended to enable the state and white polity to get around central concerns of politics.<sup>1</sup>

The first two decades after the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910, saw a continuous agitation on the part of black political organisations to be incorporated into the racially exclusive white dominated capitalist structure. Both the African People's Organisation (A.P.O.) which was founded in 1902 and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (I.C.U.) would try and secure political rights for blacks in a white dominated bourgeois state, through constitutional means. This strategy was opted for in the hope that blacks would be incorporated into the system after white unity was secured as well as on promises made by the National and Labour Parties that they would enjoy similar status and privileges as whites on condition that the blacks vote for them during elections.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE APO AND FARMWORKERS

Prior to 1912, the APO had established a number of branches within

the rural Western Cape. Like its urban branches, the APO rural branches were mostly supported by the Coloured elites within rural towns.

The Coloured elite was composed of clergy, traders, the teachers and those who owned property within the rural towns. This elite enjoyed similar privileges to whites in that they owned property, business, had the vote, and often lived amongst whites. This elite was distinct from the rural proletariat who lived on the surrounding farms and locations, created by those farmworkers who moved off the farms in search of better wages and working conditions in rural towns. This differentiation within the politically oppressed community had a significant influence on the attempts to organise farmworkers. The rural Coloured elite often felt part of the 'White world' and often saw themselves as 'Coloured Afrikaners' since they shared the same language, culture, religion etc. with especially Afrikaans speaking whites.<sup>3</sup> The elites often saw themselves as being on a higher level of civilization than the rural proletariat.

The APO rural branches saw its first task to protect the interests of the Coloured elite and secondly in a very paternalistic way to uplift the rural proletariat to the civilized standards of themselves and whites. It was their duty, as the APO leadership saw it, to uplift the 'common farmlabourer' and other rural proletariat ... 'and make them become as self-respecting and respectable citizens as we think we are.'<sup>4</sup>

Generally there existed a willingness within the APO to change the situation of farmworkers but not a willingness to necessarily draw them into the structures of the APO. The APO saw its task as changing the situation for farmworkers from above i.e. speaking and protesting on behalf of farmworkers and not necessarily teaching them the skills to articulate their grievances and organise themselves as farmworkers. This clearly points out the petty-bourgeois nature of the APO. As Marx pointed out '... the workers ... cannot therefore co-operate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must be freed from above by ... the petty-bourgeoisie.'<sup>5</sup>

The state was continually trying to eradicate the contradictions which existed between it and the wine and fruit farmers of the Western Cape. In 1912, the state dismissed 3000 Coloured railway workers and replaced them with unskilled white labour from the impoverished white rural community. The state also forced a poll tax on these workers thereby forcing them into wage labour on the farms. The APO protested against such measures and condemned it as ... 'simply a ruse to compel if possible, the Coloured workers to hire themselves out for a living to the farmers.'<sup>6</sup> The APO appealed to the government through its liberal representatives in parliament to protest against such actions but were unsuccessful. The state was more concerned about the interests of the farmers whose support it needed to maintain white unity and at the same time, eradicating the competition which existed between the state and farmers over cheap labour.



Judging from reports in the APO it seems that the APO rural branches were in constant contact with farmworkers. This contact was maintained through family members of farmworkers who lived in the rural towns, locations or through seasonal workers. Farmworkers themselves were in contact with APO rural branches by reporting to the offices of these branches especially when farmworkers were considering taking action against farmers. It was the actions of the farmworkers that resulted in the APO leadership instructing its rural branches to organise farmworkers and to call for strike action during harvest time when farmers were very vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of farmworkers' wages possibly been reduced in 1912, the APO called a meeting to discuss farmworkers' grievances. It is significant to note that it was farmworkers who proposed strike action should farmers go ahead and reduce their wages.<sup>8</sup>

The Greyton APO branch in 1913 was particularly concerned about the continued impoverishment of farmworkers whose wages were as low as 1d/6s a day plus 6 tots of wine. The branch organised 154 workers who were determined to do everything in their power to change the situation and demand an increase in wages as well as the eradication of the tot system. The urban APO urged the Greyton branch to take drastic action against farmers should their demand not be met. 'Organise the people, wait till the harvesting season comes around, and then demand 7d/6s a day. If you don't get that then don't work, let the crops rot.'<sup>9</sup>

None of the above efforts succeeded because such militant action was often coupled to a word of caution by the APO instructing farmworkers to only take such action in extreme cases but in most instances the workers should depend on the 'goodwill' of farmers. The other reason why such actions did not materialise was that the Coloured communities especially in the small rural towns such as Bot Rivier and Greyton were generally impoverished and could not support farmworkers during strike action.<sup>10</sup> In 1914 the APO protested against the deletion of farmworkers from the Workmens' Compensation Bill and appealed to the government to implement a minimum wage for farmworkers but it was to no avail.<sup>11</sup>

During and after the First World War wine increased from £4,10s to £35 per barrel. The Worcester Standard Advertiser was estatic about the increase in the price and demand for wine which resulted in the increase of wine farmers' prosperity and reported that ...'our wine farmers are now in great prosperity'.<sup>12</sup> Nothing was however reported in the bourgeois press of the impoverishment of farmworkers.

Farmer's prosperity was further enhanced with the establishment of a number of co-operatives especially with the state intervening in K.W.V. to stabilise and rationalise the wine industry. The prosperity also resulted in more capital being concentrated in Cape agriculture than in any other province in the Union.<sup>13</sup>

In 1919, the APO leadership once more instructed its branches in

rural areas to organise farmworkers and demand an increased wage which in some districts were as low as 3d/5s per day, as well as to demand for better working and living conditions. The APO encouraged farmworkers to follow their employers' example and organise themselves since the latter had ...'realized the value of co-operation, and it is now up to the men to emulate their masters.'<sup>14</sup> What the APO failed to realize were the constraints within which farmworkers found themselves, they were unable to organise effectively and farmers possessed the skills and resources to organise themselves and would do everything in their power to stop any attempts by farmworkers to organise. Farmworkers remained isolated from each other and were unable to organise themselves as a class.

Farmworkers were finding it more difficult to support themselves and their families on the wine and fruit farms due to the increase in the prices of consumer goods which was not in keeping with their wages. Farmers, furthermore, refused to allow hawkers on their estates to sell their goods at prices below that being charged in the rural towns. Farmworkers were forced to do extra work such as painting and other repairs on the estate without receiving extra pay. Farmers also deducted up to 3d a week from their workers' wages to improve the living quarters of their workers, yet the living facilities of farmworkers remained in a desperate state of disrepair.<sup>15</sup>

The APO rural branches made some attempts at farm labour union although

not fully understanding the nature such labour unions would take as well as lacking the practical experience of such unions.

In 1919, the Franschhoek branch stressed the importance of unionising farmworkers and forging unity between rural branches and farmworkers. It was agreed that a farmworkers' union be organised adjacent to its social branch. A committee was elected to investigate the establishment of such a union and also to popularise the idea of a trade union amongst farmworkers. The temporarily appointed officials would raise the issue of workers' wages and the tot system with farmers. Despite the enthusiasm of the Franschhoek branch to establish a labour union, no such union materialised nor was propagated amongst farmworkers.<sup>16</sup>

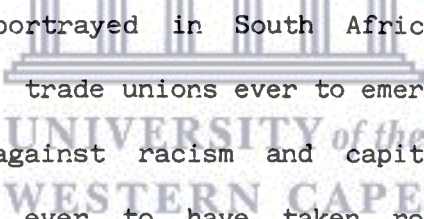
In 1920, the APO supported the Southern Workers Union in Paarl in their demand for an increase from 2s to 4s per day for farmworkers. A meeting was held between the Union, APO and the directors of those wine and fruit farms owned by gold mining companies. Although some of the wealthier farmers agreed to an increase in the wages of farmworkers, the majority of the farmers in the Paarl and surrounding districts of Groot Drakenstein and Simonsig, refused to increase the wages of their workers.<sup>17</sup>

After the refusal, farmworkers took it upon themselves to call a general strike in these districts but it was to no avail.<sup>18</sup> Workers received no practical assistance from the APO but only verbal support for their actions. Farmworkers remained too isolated to organise such a strike.

Despite its failure to effectively organise farmworkers in a labour union, the APO vowed to continue the protest through constitutional means in order to emancipate workers from oppression and exploitation. 'The APO has steadily worked and will continue to work, in spite of the vituperation and abuse from paid agents for the emancipation of farmworkers, whether he works for the Unionist, SAP or N.P.'<sup>19</sup>

Despite such rhetoric, the APO never did reach its aim to organise farmworkers because it could neither give the farmworkers the practical assistance nor support to emancipate them from the tyranny of farmers.

#### THE ICU AND FARMWORKERS



The ICU is often portrayed in South African history as one of the most profound black trade unions ever to emerge amongst black workers in their struggle against racism and capitalism. It was ...'the largest trade union ever to have taken root in the continent of Africa.'<sup>20</sup> Such profundity is based on the ICU's success in mobilising and organising farmworkers and peasants in the Transvaal and Natal especially after moving its headquarters in 1925 from Cape Town to Johannesburg, at the expense of urban black workers and to a lesser extent, farmworkers of the Western Cape.

One does not pick up much information about the ICU (especially in the rural Western Cape) in the early period of its existence but with some information available, it is possible to make some tentative

judgements of its involvement with farmworkers struggles in the Western Cape. The origin of the ICU will not be dealt with in this chapter since it is well documented elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

From the onset, the ICU committed itself to unite all workers (skilled and unskilled) irrespective of creed or colour, under its banner. This included the organising of farmworkers as stated in its conference reports. At the ICU Bloemfontein conference in 1921, the ICU committed itself ...'to promote and regulate the conditions of work in the farms and to promote the general and material welfare of those members engaged in agricultural pursuits and to help to obtain a living wage and reasonable contracts and to do all possible to afford members evicted from farms protection.'<sup>22</sup>

The above resolution, according to Wickins, was adopted not on the persistence of the Cape delegation but rather the Orange Free State delegation. In retrospect, it would seem that farmworkers in the Western Cape would have been a potential organising ground for the ICU who at that stage was primarily concerned with low wages and scandalous working conditions of workers. Bradford estimates that there are about 71,441 'Coloured' agricultural workers in the Western Cape by 1921.<sup>23</sup> There was thus more farmworkers engaged in wage labour in the Western Cape than any other province of South Africa at the time.

At the Cape conference held in Port Elizabeth, the ICU condemned

the farmers of the Western Cape for issuing wine to their labourers as part of their wages as well as the appalling accommodation which these farmers provided for their workers.<sup>24</sup> It was the first time that the ICU focused its attention on the farmworkers in the Western Cape. This was due to the ICU activists coming into contact with farmworkers and directing some of its organisational effort in the rural areas as it moved further away from Cape Town.<sup>25</sup>

In 1923, Kadalie wrote a letter to General Smuts informing him about the difficulties the ICU activists faced whilst trying to recruit farmworkers on the wine estates of the Boland. ICU activists were unable to contact workers on these estates in fear of being prosecuted or shot at by farmers. In the same year, an ICU deputation appealed to a cabinet minister to ban the tot system on Cape farms and pay workers a decent wage.<sup>26</sup> This was all to no avail since the SAP was itself on the decline and the last thing it wanted was to antagonise the predominantly pro-Nationalist Party farmers of the Boland.

Before 1925, the ICU had recruited very few farmworkers in the Western Cape according to Wickens since very few of its members actually were employed in agriculture. The ICU had set up rural branches in Caledon and Touws River which had very few farmworkers as members. In Touws River, the ICU recruited mostly seasonal workers who resided in Logan's Location and worked on the farms owned by a wealthy farmer and businessman, Mr Logan.<sup>27</sup> One suspects that the ICU failed to organise farmworkers in the Boland before 1924 because Kadalie openly

flirted with General Hertzog i.e. did not want to antagonise the farmers of the Boland which was Hertzog's political stronghold.<sup>28</sup>

The more militant leaders of the Cape ICU, Jonny Gomas and M E Johnson saw the significance organising farmworkers would have for the ICU in terms of membership and strengthening the organisation's position in the Western Cape. Jonny Gomas also pointed out that if socialism was to be attained in South Africa, both urban and rural workers had to be organised.<sup>29</sup> Jonny Gomas, with much enthusiasm and energy started to recruit farmworkers from Worcester, Stellenbosch, Paarl, Wellington and as far afield as Montague.<sup>30</sup> It is quite difficult to estimate the number of farmworkers the ICU recruited because of the lack of concrete evidence. In discussion with Bradford, she suggested that of the 15 000 members the ICU had in the Cape, some were definitely farmworkers.<sup>31</sup>

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Despite Gomas' recruitment drive amongst farmworkers, the ICU failed to establish branches in the Boland. An ex-APO member, N R Veldman, made it quite difficult for the ICU to set up branches in the Boland because as a government agent, he propagated false information about the ICU amongst farmers and farmworkers, informing them that it was not the ICU ...'but the Pact government ... would protect Coloured workers together with whites.'<sup>32</sup>

After moving its headquarters from Cape Town to Johannesburg, friction developed within the ICU leadership, friction based on political,



tactical, ideological and regional differences and at times even racial tensions developed within the ICU leadership. The internal squabbles had various implications for the ICU Cape Town branch, in particular the recruitment of farmworkers.

In 1926, Kadalie expelled J. Gomas, J.A. La Guma and other young radicals who were also members of CPSA from the ICU accusing them of ...'betraying the 'workers' struggles.'<sup>33</sup> This was ironical since it was Kadalie who at times openly flirted with government officials and his petty-bourgeois tendencies were also becoming more explicit, especially in his association with the liberal M. Ballinger.

This expulsion had a great effect on the recruitment drive Gomas started amongst farmworkers in the Boland. As Bradford points out ...'The Africanisation of the leadership following the expulsion of 'coloured' Communist in 1926 inhibited the mobilization of this sector of farmworkers in the Western Cape.'<sup>34</sup> Such racial tensions stood in direct contradiction to the ICU's principle of organising all sectors of workers, irrespective of race or creed.

In 1927, a Cape member of the ICU wrote to the Workers Herald, accusing the ICU leadership of racial prejudice towards 'coloured' farmworkers. He pointed out that both Coloured and African farmworkers were equally exploited and oppressed on the farms and that unity should be forged between them irrespective of colour ... 'it is expedient that they (farmworkers) should unify themselves under the banner of the

ICU',<sup>35</sup> The ICU leadership showed a continuous bias to organise farmworkers in the north than in the south.

In 1928, the ICU endorsed a programme of action to campaign for the improvement of all farmworkers in South Africa. 'Our programme must be of an agrarian nature ... Every endeavour should be made to enter into friendly negotiations with farmers ...'<sup>36</sup> Despite the efforts to forge an alliance between the Cape farmworkers and their northern counterparts as well as the ICU's campaign for the improvement of farmworkers conditions, nothing really materialised.

By 1928, the state had effectively crushed the ICU and the Cape ICU as Kadalie observed, 'I am almost tempted to say the Cape is dead.'<sup>37</sup> The remaining ICU activists in Cape Town had neither the strength or ability to organise farmworkers on a national scale. Neither did the Cape activists make any real effort to forge an alliance with their northern counterparts and all that remained was their continuous protests against the appalling conditions farmworkers worked under and nothing by way of organising them.

## CONCLUSION

### APO AND ICU'S FAILURE TO ORGANISE FARMWORKERS:

This conclusion will only be a brief assessment of why the APO and the ICU failed to effectively mobilise and organise farmworkers in the Western Cape. A more detailed assessment of the nature of these organisations is made in the final chapter.

In conclusion, the period 1912 - 1928 saw a variety of attempts made by the APO and ICU to organise farmworkers in the Western Cape. Despite these attempts, farmworkers were not significantly drawn into these organisations. Farmworkers remained isolated, illiterate, too poor and too powerless under the tyranny of their employers. APO and ICU activists did not have easy access onto farms and had to contact workers secretly on or off the farms.

The incorporationist strategies used by the APO and ICU failed to realize that racism and capitalism are functional to each other and that the ruling class notion of racial superiority was the main factor of upholding capitalism.<sup>38</sup> Both the APO and ICU seek alliances with white liberals who had no genuine concern with the protection of the rural 'coloured' elite's privileges and prosperity i.e. was unable to reconcile its petty-bourgeois ideology with that of the working-class.<sup>39</sup>

The APO's attempts to rally farmworkers around the idea of a Coloured identity had no particular interest to farmworkers and ultimately served the interests of farmers who saw their workers as inferior objects. Generally, farmworkers were prepared to work on the farms and not really change its structure but only wanted better wages, working and living conditions. Class consciousness was not completely absent amongst farmworkers although it was often impossible to act as a united class because of their isolation from each other. Geographic dispersal helps to prevent discussion and united action.

After 1918, there was a drastic increase in the awareness about their situation i.e. the increase demands for better wages and working conditions. Farmworkers also threatened farmers with strike action. This in itself is an awakening of class consciousness although a limited one. Farmworkers' challenge to the tyranny of their employers were often dampened by the APO and ICU's serious lack of commitment to workers struggles in the Western Cape thereby denying them the scope to develop as a class within the capitalist system and were easily absorbed into a wage economy.

One of the major weaknesses of the APO and ICU was that they depended on the 'goodwill' of farmers to change the situation for farmworkers. The actions of the APO and the ICU with regard to farmworkers struggles, remained one of protest rather than of challenge. The power base and privileged position of farmers went unchallenged but would be challenged for the first time in the late 1920's when the ANC (WC) would make serious attempts to mobilise farmworkers in the Western Cape.

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### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE ANC AND FARMWORKER STRUGGLES

"... oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or increased oppression of the under class."<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1920's when the ANC (WC) was to organise farmworkers in the Boland, agriculture was experiencing a crisis period. Although the effects of the crisis were 'relatively mild' in comparison with the rest of the country, farmers and the government nevertheless instituted measures to protect their profits which in turn had a devastating effect on the already impoverished lives of farmworkers. This resulted in mass dissatisfaction on the farms, mass exodus from farms resulting in over crowding in rural towns and labour shortage for farmers.<sup>2</sup> This situation was exacerbated with mechanization and the influx of cheaper African labour.

The crises in agriculture created the space as it were for the ANC (WC) which up until then operated mostly in the urban areas of the Western Cape, later moving into the rural areas in an attempt to mobilise and organise rural workers. The ANC's infiltration into the Boland would reveal what was still hidden class struggles between

oppressor and oppressed into open class conflict.

This would mark the first serious attempt by any black organisation in the Western Cape to organise rural workers around their grievances. Unlike the reformist approach of the APO and the ICU, the ANC(WC) would direct that struggle in a very militant way which would effectively challenge white hegemony and capitalist farmers in rural Western Cape.<sup>3</sup> This in turn would result in white farmers fighting back with the ferocity of a class faced with extinction.

#### THE ANC (WC)

During the early 1920's the ANC(WC) was already established in the Cape but was overshadowed by the activities of the APO and ICU. The organisation remained a small, exclusively African organisation representing the interest of a very small but significant African petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup>

By the late 1920's the ANC (WC) had grown into a very popular organisation of the black oppressed and exploited community of the Western Cape. The ANC (WC) represented a combination of class interests and ideological position within the oppressed community. The more militant members adhered to the marxist ideology and the extension of working class interest. The militants had close links with the CPSA, particularly those who were expelled from the ICU because of their links with the CPSA. On the other hand, there were the moderates



who espoused the Garveyist position of black nationalism.

The ANC (WC) was therefore an alliance of various classes, each trying to assert its own ideological position and class interests upon the organisation. Those who espoused the idea of Garveyism particularly James Thaele (a university graduate), would, try and attain an extension of democratic rights through constitutional means. The socialists such as Jonny Gomas, Bransby Ndobe and Elliot Tongeni advocated the total restructuring of the South African political and economic structures.

On a national level, this alliance was sanctioned when Josiah Gumede was elected president of the ANC in 1927. J Gumede was himself pro-Soviet and pro-Garveyism. Under J Gumede's presidency, the ANC would work very closely with the CPSA although no formal alliance was forged between the two organisations.<sup>5</sup> On his return from the Soviet Union, J Gumede re-emphasised the need to work in close alliance with the CPSA. "The only friends of the oppressed are the communists. Division among our ranks is helping to maintain the present despairing conditions."<sup>6</sup> This alliance was closest in the Western Cape where the ANC was also the most active and radical organisation, if not the whole country.

The ANC reluctantly adopted the Black Republic programme of the CPSA which itself was piecemeally accepted by some CPSA members particularly S.P. Bunting and W.H. Andrews. This programme envisaged

a revolution in two stages, ...'first a struggle for national liberation, uniting workers, peasants, intellectuals and the national bourgeoisie, and only then, after imperialism had been expelled and national independence achieved should the proletariat launch its own struggle for socialism.'<sup>7</sup>

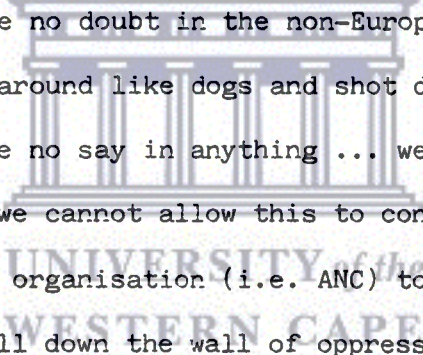
The programme itself was vaguely formulated and had its theoretical flaws. How the programme was practically implemented will be dealt with later. The programme itself slotted into the Garveyism espoused by James Thaele who at that stage had no problems of working with the communists elements with the ANC (WC).

Under the leadership of Josiah Gumede the ANC would break from its diplomatic approach to protest politics. The ANC was to embark on a course of mass action (protests, demonstrations, strikes, mass mobilization and building of branches). This call was vigorously taken up in the Western Cape particularly by the militants who embarked on an energetic drive to recruit and organise farmworkers in the rural areas of the Western Cape.<sup>8</sup>

#### ANC RURAL BRANCHES : ORGANISATIONAL METHODS, STRATEGY, TACTICS

The ANC (WC) was first attracted to the Boland when a worker in Paarl was fatally wounded by the police and later when police officers were acquitted on charges for brutally assaulting black prisoners.

The ANC (WC) immediately embarked upon a programme of action against such brutal injustices by organising demonstrations and public meetings in the Paarl region. It was through these actions that the ANC (WC) began focussing on the appalling conditions of farmworkers by proposing a programme of action for the emancipation of farmworkers from oppression and exploitation. During these public meetings, the ANC (WC) called upon rural workers to join the ANC (WC) in organising themselves for the 'onslaught' of the whites against the black people. At one of these meetings, Jonny Gomas appealed to the crowd to organise themselves under the banner of the ANC.



There can be no doubt in the non-Europeans that we are kicked around like dogs and shot down by white men, we have no say in anything ... we cannot be contended, we cannot allow this to continue we must build up an organisation (i.e. ANC) to fight against this and pull down the wall of oppression and exploitation.<sup>9</sup>

The state responded by imprisoning Bransby Ndobe, Jonny Gomas and Stanley Silwane to three months hard labour hoping to silence the ANC (WC) in its initial attempt to organise the rural workers. Farmers and other white residents of the Boland were quite alarmed at what was happening particularly the call to workers to organise themselves under an organisation which up until then had been alien to the Boland.

By the late 1920's and early 1930's farmers were receiving very low prices for the produce due to the effects of the Great Depression of 1929. Farmers responded by increasing their productivity as well as turning to the state who responded by initiating measures such as restricting imports, paying export bounties.<sup>10</sup> This in fact had a devastating effect on the lives of farmworkers and their families because the conditions on the farms had worsened since they were first highlighted by the APO before the 1920's.

Instead of increasing the wages of farmworkers to attract more labour farmers reduced the wages of farmworkers to make more profits. Despite the consistent demand for higher wages by farmworkers and the institution of a Wage Board to set up minimum wage for farmworkers, their demands were flatly refused by farmers fearing that altering the wage-system in agriculture would reduce their profits.<sup>11</sup> A commission of inquiry report which was compiled in 1937 regarding the wages of farmworkers in the Western Cape, revealed that farmworkers' wages had not increased over a long period of time.<sup>12</sup>

For those farmworkers remaining on the farms the hours of work (plus minus 15 hours) had increased in an effort by farmers to produce more. Farmers were also generally inclined to make use of seasonal labour dismissing those whose labour they no longer required. Farmers also spent less money in upgrading the dwellings of farmworkers which farmers regarded as an unnecessary spending of money.<sup>13</sup> Life on the farms were generally very depressing and the work laborious.

Workers resisted such measures and conditions by moving off the farms in search of higher wages on the public works and railways. Farmworkers also moved to the rural towns thereby increasing the unemployment and impoverishment in the rural towns. Many farmworkers were however forced to remain on the farms due to monetary indebtedness to farmers, rent had to be paid in towns as well as a high level of unemployment. For many, remaining on the farms meant housing and a means of eking out a living by whatever means was available.<sup>14</sup>

Undeterred by 'internal wrangles and political do nothingness',<sup>15</sup> the ANC (WC) set about from February 1929 vociferously turning the ANC (WC) into a mass based organisation within the Boland. The ANC (WC) articulated the grievances of farmworkers through protest action, strikes, demonstrations and mobilising campaigns from Worcester, Robertson, Barrydale, Rawsonville, Montagu and as far afield as Carnarvon in the northern Cape, resulting in it becoming the most active regional congress of the ANC nationally.<sup>16</sup>

The strategic objective of the ANC (WC) was to organise farmworkers to effectively challenge white farmers in the Boland in order to free themselves from political oppression and more important from economic exploitation. Strategically it was impossible for the ANC (WC) to organise farmworkers on the farms. On the farms, farmers exerted a quasi-political and judicial authority and would not allow their workers to be organised particularly in the light of the depression.

In 1929, Bransby Ndobe, Elliot Tonjeni, James and Kennon Thaele established an ANC (WC) headquarters in Worcester. The ANC (WC) did not only draw on the grievances of farmworkers but also those workers who lived in the rural locations and villages around issues such as overcrowding, poor housing, unemployment and impoverishment.<sup>17</sup> The ANC (WC) would use Sunday meetings as a means of mobilising farmworkers since some farmworkers resided with their relatives in the locations over weekends. The ANC (WC) would also use the sale of CPSA newspaper Umsebenzi (Worker) as a mobilising as well as a means of popularising the organisation amongst farmworkers. By early 1930 the Worcester branch of the ANC claimed over 800 members with another 200 from the surrounding farms.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the APO and ICU, farmworkers became active members of the ANC and according to Hofmeyr, extended the influence of the ANC (WC) even further amongst other farmworkers. The public meetings were usually held at times to accommodate farmworkers at the same time alleviating any fears that farmworkers might have in joining the organisation by addressing the grievances of town workers and those on the farms.<sup>19</sup> Apart from attending regular public meetings farmworkers also became actively engaged in the protest actions and demonstrations organised by the ANC (WC) in the Boland. It also gave farmworkers an opportunity to express their grievances and frustrations which directly influenced the campaigns of the ANC (WC) rural branches.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the payment of dues and attending meetings, the ANC (WC) also gave farmworkers an opportunity of identifying with and belonging to a political organisation, an opportunity which farmworkers seized in such a way that it would astound farmers.<sup>21</sup>

On the political level the communists within the ANC (WC) Elliot Tongeni and Bransby Ndoke tried to link the CPSA's programme for a 'Black Republic' to the day to day struggles of farmworkers although not expounding the abstractions of the slogan.<sup>22</sup> This was clearly an attempt by the ANC (WC) to develop the political consciousness of farmworkers by informing them about the political struggles happening nationally. In this way farmworkers would realise that they were not struggling in isolation and that their struggle was part of a broader struggle going on in the country.<sup>23</sup>

The political work which could not be done at public meetings was done through the sale of Umsebenzi which was translated into Afrikaans and Xhosa making it more readable for farmworkers.<sup>24</sup> The Mayibuye song which farmworkers adapted to their own situation became very popular amongst farmworkers and generating a sense of nationalism which never really existed amongst them.

Generally farmworkers were not attracted to the ANC (WC) because of its political programme but rather its ability to organise around the day-to-day struggles of farmworkers and their grievances about low wages, the tot system convict labour, poor housing and long

hours of work. The ANC (WC) in the Boland would therefore organise and direct its campaigns more along the lines of a trade union than a political organisation.<sup>25</sup> Through these campaigns the ANC (WC) created the scope for farmworkers to become aware of their class position within the economic structure within the Boland.

The ANC (WC) continuously emphasised that nobody else could fight the struggle for liberation but the workers themselves. The extent to which this became a reality will be examined later. The organising of farmworkers the ANC (WC) leaders would discover was by no means an easy task because they would be constantly harassed and even face possible death at the hands of farmers. The ANC (WC) organisers would therefore experience the real wrath of farmers as they attempted to organise farmworkers further away from Worcester.

FARMERS, WHITE VIGILANTES AND THE STATE



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The establishment of the ANC (WC) in Worcester and its rapid spread and popularity in the surrounding districts, would intensify the class struggle in the Boland. Farmers saw the organising of their workforce as a direct challenge to their dominance within the social relationship which existed in the Boland. As Mhlongu states : "Land-ownership is all they (farmers) have known for several generations and if this is threatened they would fight with the ferocity of a class faced with extinction."<sup>26</sup> This was because farmers possessed so much power within the rural areas as well as having developed



relatively free from state aid in terms of finance and the control of their labour.<sup>27</sup> This was due to farmers being well organised into farmers associations as well as personal traditional links.

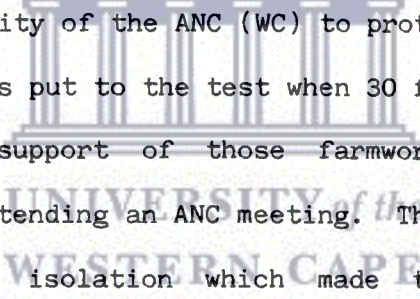
Given their dependency on profits and the cyclical nature of agriculture, farmers feared that an organised labour force would start making demands on them such as an increase of wages and the abandonment of instruments of labour control, viz. tot system, passes, instant dismissals etcetera.

The ANC (WC) encouraged farmworkers to withhold their labour power and demand higher wages. Farmers strenuously opposed any such action since it exacerbated the existing labour shortage in the Boland.<sup>28</sup> Farmers responded to this call by the ANC (WC) by stating that ..."the agitators were inviting the coloured people to take a stand, a stand against Europeans and free themselves from serfdom."<sup>29</sup>

Farmers would initially depend on their own kragdadige methods (forceful repressive methods) to secure their authority on their farms. Farmers warned their workers of the consequences of either being sympathetic or belonging to the ANC (WC); informing them that the ANC (WC) had no interest in the well-being of farmworkers. Farmers resorted to body searches of their workers to find any evidence that their workers were linked to the ANC. Thus the Cape Times reported that; "Some farmers have searched their labourers

to find whether they wear under clothing a badge or other indications of their connections with the ANC."<sup>30</sup>

This method however proved unsuccessful since farmworkers were aware of the consequences, should they be caught. Being linked to the ANC could result in instant dismissal from the farm, blacklisting, violent assault or even possible death at the hands of the farmers.<sup>31</sup> Farmers were however very cautious to enforce such drastic measures since such actions could prove disastrous because of the labour shortage. It was only in Villiersdorp that farmers were adamant to apply such measures.<sup>32</sup>



The strength and ability of the ANC (WC) to protect farmworkers against tyranny of farmers was put to the test when 30 farmworkers in Robertson went on strike in support of those farmworkers who were dismissed by a farmer for attending an ANC meeting. The strike failed because farmworkers acted in isolation which made them very vulnerable to instant dismissals. Farmers regarded strike action as illegitimate and were themselves protected by the Masters and Servants Act which gave them the power to dismiss workers who failed to work.

Farmworkers were also under the illusion that the ANC (WC) would protect them. Although the ANC supported the strikers and threatened a general farmworkers strike they had neither the resources nor the practical experience to carry out such a threat. The ANC (WC) however could give limited support by way of accommodation and food to the

dismissal of strikers in Robertson. But the power of the farmers extended beyond the boundaries of the farms and these strikes were forced out the location by the local municipality as vagrants.<sup>33</sup>

Having secured their position on their farms, farmers decided to direct their efforts against the ANC (WC) in the rural towns. At that stage, the ANC (WC) was attracting large crowds of rural workers to their meetings. As the class struggle became more open and the towns became the centre stage of this struggle, farmers resorted to new methods of countering the ANC (WC) activists within the Boland.

Farmers were particularly alarmed at the growing support which the ANC (WC) enjoyed amongst farmworkers and the 'inflammatory language' used by the 'native agitators'. At the National Party Conference which was held at Ceres in September 1929, the pro-Nationalist government farming community, sought closer assistance from the state to take firmer action and pass legislation to silence the 'native agitators' in the Boland. The farmers were not going to wait for the state to solve their problems but would arm themselves and form white vigilante associations to forcefully drive the ANC (WC) out of the Boland.

White vigilante groups consisting of farmers and local white civilians were frequently used to stop or disrupt ANC (WC) public meetings when the state failed to take any action against the ANC (WC).

Apart from making use of vigilantes, farmers also relied on their relatives from neighbouring districts to assist them against the ANC (WC).

The ANC(WC) on the other hand was not prepared to jettison its strategy of holding public meetings in the wake of possible violence from farmers but would muster support from its members in Worcester and Cape Town to strengthen its position in the Boland. This however was not always possible since lorryowners (whites) refused to hire their lorries out to the ANC (WC) in solidarity with farmers.<sup>34</sup> The ANC leaders were clearly singled out for attack by white vigilante attacks despite the presence of the police.

The ANC (WC) first experienced the violence of the farmers when they organised a public meeting in Robertson in April 1929. Here the vigilantes disrupted the ANC meeting and provoked the ANC's supporters into open clashes. The ANC (WC) leader Bransby Ndobe had to flee from Robertson via public transport. Despite these attacks farmworkers and other rural workers joined the ANC.<sup>35</sup>

In January 1930, the ANC (WC) held a conference in Worcester to discuss its plan of action for the 1930's. Here the ANC (WC) adopted a resolution to take up the grievances of farmworkers more seriously in the surrounding districts and to demand a minimum wage and better working conditions for all farmworkers. The ANC (WC) also resolved to put an end to the almost slavlike existence of farmworkers

and criticised the farmers for using convict labour.<sup>36</sup>

In February 1930, the ANC held a meeting in Rawsonville where they explained to the farmworkers how they planned to implement the living wage campaign. The meeting was stopped by the Rawsonville Village Management Board who informed the ANC that they could not continue with the meeting on the village property. The meeting was then moved to a nearby coloured people's church. Here the ANC (WC) leaders launched a vociferous attack on the way farmers were treating their labourers stating;

... that they (farmworkers) were fools to work at 25,6d a day, and that the farmers were making money out of them. They had to send their wives to work in the farmer's houses to eke out an existence, If the farmers would only pay them, their wives need not undertake domestic work. Let the farmers' wives do their own dirty work.<sup>37</sup>

A leading farmer and spokesman of the farmers responded to the ANC's demands, by indicating that farmers were not going to increase the wages of their labourers and that the insults against their wives were not taken lightly. The Rawsonville Management Board approached the police to put an end to the ANC (WC)'s meetings. The police refused to stop the meetings on grounds that they did

not have the power to do so. Farmers also approached the Worcester magistrate in the meantime to prohibit the ANC (WC) from holding further meetings on Sundays as ... "it was an unnecessary desecration of the Sabbath."<sup>38</sup> After negative responses from the police and the magistrate, farmers decided to take matters into their own hands and to stop the ANC agitators from inciting their workers against them.

The ANC on the otherhand was equally determined to go ahead with its meetings in the Boland towns, holding meetings simultaneously in Rawsonville, Montagu and Barrydale. This was clearly a well orchestrated and uniform plan of action on the part of the ANC to break the power of farmers and vigilantes and to break the isolation of farmworkers. At these meetings the ANC (WC) tried to inform the farmers who were present about the grievances and frustrations of farmworkers and that the ANC (WC) was prepared to go ahead with its campaign for a living wage for farmworkers.<sup>39</sup>

Farmers openly denied to the press that they were mishandling and underpaying their workers. Such allegations farmers insisted were unfounded and the ANC only wanted to disrupt the 'good relations' which existed between farmers and their workers. Farmers continued with their attacks and harassment of ANC (WC) leaders. In Barrydale farmers forced Elliot Tongeni at gunpoint to leave and should he return he will ... "meet death with sudden death."<sup>40</sup> In Rawsonville 50 farmers and vigilantes violently broke up an ANC (WC) meeting

resulting violent clashes erupting between ANC supporters and vigilantes.

In an attempt to counter the violence of the white vigilantes the ANC (WC) established an ANC 'bodyguard' of police to protect ANC leaders and to maintain order at meetings.<sup>41</sup> Elliot Tongeni also urged ANC supporters to respond violently to the violence of farmers and white vigilantes. In Rawsonville the ANC supporters did just that by attacking whites who disrupted their meetings and in the process 13 whites were slightly injured and one was throttled.<sup>42</sup>

During these skirmishes the police usually arrested ANC supporters as in the case at Rawsonville when two farmworkers David Cornelius (leader of the ANC Rawsonville branch) and his son August was arrested on public violence charges. The ANC (WC) had for sometime although reluctantly accepted that the police was protecting and also hoped that some of the farmers and white vigilantes would also be arrested but nothing materialised. Despite police findings after investigating started the fighting nothing was done to arrest or stop the assault on ANC supporters by white vigilantes.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, farmers denied that they started the fighting or that they were armed.

Farmers had infact declared war on the ANC and would in future take decisive action against the ANC, despite the assurances from the police to leave matters in their hand by stating:

"Law or no law ... farmers were determined to prohibit any gathering of natives on Sundays, especially when the purpose of such meetings is to invite our employees to insubordination."<sup>44</sup>

The ANC (WC), especially the militants, were not to be intimidated by the threats from farmers that they were going to take the law into their own hands. During an interview with the Cape Times, Elliot Tongeni revealed that Easter rallies would be held in all the Boland towns since it was imperative that the ANC established branches in areas such as Rawsonville, Barrydale and Bonnievale.

The meetings failed to materialise for various reasons. Firstly a severe strain had been placed on the alliance between the moderates and the militants particularly in the light of farmers threatening ANC (WC) activists and that they would kill them if they return to either Rawsonville or Barrydale.<sup>45</sup> Secondly the state which had stood aloof of the happenings in the Boland was now being drawn into the conflict. After visiting the area in March, the Minister of Justice, Oswald Pirow, had already drafted an amendment to the Riotous Assemblies Act (1913) to deal with the situation in the Boland and the ICU in Natal. The Minister of Justice also authorised the Worcester magistrate to ban all meetings over the next weekend in Rawsonville, Barrydale and Bonnievale.<sup>46</sup>



Despite the rhetoric of the militants to continue the agitation for the economic rights of farmworkers the bannings and vigilante attacks did have an adverse effect on the organisation. Tongeni's threat of a national strike was not possible because such a strike would not be supported by the moderates or other regional congresses of the ANC. Elliot Tongeni and Kennon Thaele held a meeting in Worcester which was more moderate in tone than the radical rhetoric of previous meetings in fear of government actions against them. Despite these setbacks farmworkers were still prepared to attend ANC meetings and join the organisation.

Gradually the state was drawn into the conflict due to the powerful position farmers had in the government as well as the government's direct interest within agriculture. Local Afrikaners were also gaining more influence in the state apparatus (police force and magistrate courts). Both the local police and magistrates refused to take any actions against the ANC (WC) and usually responded to farmers' appeals that they were only there to maintain law and order even if it meant protecting the ANC (WC) from unruly whites. The ANC (WC) was also of the opinion that the police was protecting them hoping that the state would use the 'hostility clause' of the Native Administration Act (1927) against farmers and vigilantes.<sup>48</sup>

The situation became increasingly more tense particularly when farmers called upon the police to enforce various liquor laws to prohibit the sale of home brewed beer and liquor in the location

since this threatened the farmers monopoly over the sale of liquor. The police also carried out pass raids in the locations and those offenders who were not by the means of paying the fines were forced to work on the farms. These raids usually resulted in violent clashes between the police, farmers and the ANC supporters.<sup>49</sup> The farmers and the state immediately seized the opportunity to crush the ANC. After heavy clashes between ANC supporters and the police, Tongeni and Ndoke were forced into hiding for four days without the police or white vigilantes being able to locate their whereabouts. This was due to the loyalty and popularity the ANC enjoyed amongst farmworkers. Tongeni and Ndoke later fled from Worcester in the boot of CPSA member Eddie Roux's car thereby escaping arrest and even possible death at the hand of farmers and white vigilantes.<sup>50</sup>

The state and farmers soon realised that the violence and intimidation was not going to stop the ANC from holding public meetings. The state opted for legalistic repressive methods. The Riotous Assemblies Amendment Act was passed in June 1930. The state now had the legal means to prohibit meetings or ban ANC (WC) leaders from the Boland. The Act was immediately enforced in Worcester and the surrounding towns of Robertson, Montagu, Barrydale, Swellendam and Rawsonville from June to 21 September 1930.<sup>51</sup> Only meetings of a religious nature could be held on Sundays.

In response to the ban the ANC organised a meeting on the day

when the ban was to take effect. James and Kennon Thaele as well as other three ANC leaders were arrested and charged with contravening the Act. They were however released on technical grounds that the meeting was legal since it was held on private grounds. The ban on meetings were immediately extended to December 1930 and James Thaele was barred from residing or entering the Boland. This dealt a decisive blow to the ANC (WC) who relied exclusively on Sunday meetings to draw farmworkers who resided in the rural towns over weekends.

#### MODERATES AND RADICALS

While in the process of trying to come up with an effective way of countering the onslaught of the state and farmers, the ANC was itself invested with internal problems on the local and national levels. The cracks which began to show in the alliance between the militants and moderates had become too wide to mend.

For some time, James Thaele who had his own hidden agenda in the alliance, was trying to dissuade Tongeni and Ndobe from continuing to organise the rural working class in the Boland. The militants felt that to abandon the struggle of the rural proletariat, would amount to nothing else but betrayal of the working masses.<sup>52</sup>

James Thaele saw the popularity of the militants as a threat to his leadership position within the Western Cape and his reformist

goals. Like Kadalie, Thaele too would launch a personal attack on Ndobe and Tongeni and other radicals with CPSA links. Thaele was not prepared to debate the political and ideological differences neither was he prepared to put his reformist ideas to the test in the Boland. The very racism which Thaele abhorred he would use against the militants accusing them of being agents of the white man i.e. communists.

At national level, the moderates within the ANC were becoming more alarmed at the influence of the CPSA within the ANC. At the ANC conference in April 1930, the moderates organised a well orchestrated coup to oust the 'pro Soviet' Josiah Gumede and replace him with the more conservative Pixley Seme. The ANC leadership it seems, clung to the belief that change in South Africa would come about through constitutional means and not by direct confrontation with the state and capital.

On their return to Cape Town, the radicals accused the new ANC executive of totally selling out the struggle for liberation by jettisoning the interest of the toiling masses for those interests which would perpetuate the capitalist system of exploitation.<sup>53</sup> The position of James Thaele and other moderates was strengthened by the new executive. Thaele used various methods to undermine the militants and the struggle in the Boland. Thaele was now preaching reconciliation and peace whereas Tongeni and Ndobe urged the oppressed and exploited to continue with their struggles against

the state and farmers. Thaele was also accused by the militants of flirting with the police and white liberals.<sup>54</sup>

Thaele used various platforms to launch scathing attacks on the militants, particularly on the Grand Parade in Cape Town where he had much support. Thaele once again accused the militants of being agents of the 'white man' and selling out the struggles of the oppressed masses. While Thaele was building up his support in Cape Town, Tongeni and Ndobe who were engaged in serious political and community work, clearly were not interested in any personal clashes with Thaele.

In September 1930, Thaele called a meeting of the ANC (WC) executive with the idea of expelling those with 'bolshevik tendencies'. The organisers of the meeting made sure that the rural branches would receive the notice of the meeting at short notice thereby denying the radicals of any representation. At the meeting which was dominated by the moderates a resolution to bar all Congress members with CPSA links from addressing Congress meetings as well as prohibiting the sale of Umsebenzi on its premises was passed.<sup>55</sup>

Thaele also tried to split the ranks of the radicals by suspending Ndobe as Provincial Secretary of the ANC (WC) and replacing him with Tongeni. The radicals were too principled to allow such an underhand tactic to divide them. In a letter addressed to the

ANC (WC) executive, Tongeni and Ndobe expressed their disgust at such underhand tactics and were not prepared to sell out the struggle of the toiling masses in persuance of personal ambitions.<sup>56</sup> Within the rural areas, the ban on the sale of Umsebenzi was ineffective since the ANC activists were not prepared to get involved in personal vendettas which would inevitably undermine their struggle. The rural ANC activists saw Umsebenzi as a tool in highlighting the plight of the oppressed and exploited i.e. refused to be bluffed by Thaele and other moderates.<sup>57</sup>

After a short spell of absence from Worcester, Tongeni returned there in October 1930 with the idea of reviving ANC activities in that area.

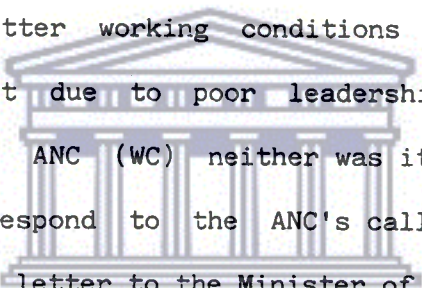
The state would not allow this and started to arrest and prohibit ANC activists to prevent them from reaffirming the ANC's strength within the Boland since banning meetings did not have the desired effect. During the latter half of October 1930, the police arrested thirty-two people on charges of public violence in connection with the happening in May. Six ANC members were also arrested in the Worcester districts.<sup>58</sup>

A further blow to the ANC came when Tongeni and Ndobe were banned for six months from entering the districts of Worcester, Robertson, Swellendam, Montagu and Wellington.<sup>59</sup> Arnold Plaatjies chairman of the Worcester ANC branch was forced out of his house by the

municipality and white vigilantes and was forced to move to Barrydale and later Swellendam where he tried to organise the rural workers but met with the same fate as in Worcester.<sup>60</sup>

The 'vanguard' organisation (ANC) of the rural workers was finally crushed by the brutality of the state and farmers and driven from the Boland, leaving the rural proletariat once more in a state of powerlessness.

The ANC failed to make any real gains for farmworkers such as improved wages, better working conditions and political rights. This failure was not due to poor leadership or feeble commitment on the part of the ANC (WC) neither was it the lack of enthusiasm of farmworkers to respond to the ANC's call to be organised but as Ndobe pointed out in a letter to the Minister of Justice:



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The growth of the African National Congress in the Western Province has been due to the terrible conditions under which non-Europeans farm labourers are groaning. These exploited people suffer from terribly low wages, long hours, bad food and deplorable housing conditions. ...The legitimate attempt of the African labourers to organise, to secure better working conditions and political conditions has been met by brutal suppression by the white farmers and their agents (the state), and these

in turn have been assisted by the armed forces of the government, who have not only condoned violent assaults on Congress meetings and members by white hooligans, but have themselves taken part in the attacks on non-Europeans at Robertson and Worcester.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

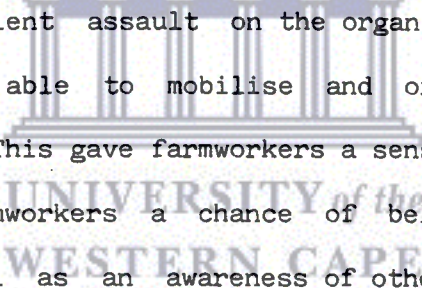
The appalling conditions under which farmworkers had to work and live as well as the economic crisis within agriculture, clearly presented the ANC with an opportunity to attempt to organise farmworkers. In this attempt, the ANC experienced a severe backlash from white farmers through violent actions, support of the state, disrupting meetings and harassing organisers to prohibit farmworkers from attaining through organisation, a position of collective bargaining power.

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Like any organisation trying to organise workers in whatever sector of the economy, the ANC (WC) too had its moments of weaknesses and strengths. One of the weaknesses of the ANC was the way they organised farmworkers. The organisation relied heavily on public meetings, particularly on Sundays when farmworkers visited the rural towns. This weakness was more a structural problem than anything else. The organisers were prohibited from organising on the farms, denying farmworkers the opportunity to establish committees to discuss their grievances. Farmers also made use of 'trap boys' to spy



on fellow farmworkers thereby instilling in farmworkers a certain sense of reluctance to discuss their grievances openly on the farms. The organisation also failed to organise grassroots leadership and depended heavily on leaders from outside the rural towns to organise the rural workers. Once these leaders were removed all ANC activities came to an immediate halt. Furthermore, the organisation did not devise any new methods to mobilise and organise rural workers after the bannings of meetings. During the 1930's, the ANC got itself entangled in conflicting ideologies between moderates and radicals which ended up in neither side advancing the struggles of the working class in the Boland to attain better working and living conditions.



Faced with the violent assault on the organisation and its leaders, the ANC was still able to mobilise and organise farmworkers into the organisation. This gave farmworkers a sense of hope and strength. It also gave farmworkers a chance of belonging to a national organisation as well as an awareness of other worker struggles that were happening around the country. It also gave farmworkers the opportunity of expressing their grievances and an outlet for years of frustration. The organisation also raised the class and political consciousness of farmworkers although it was a very limited one. One of the most important lessons was that workers realised that working class unity transcends racial barriers.

In some it can be said that despite the weaknesses of the organisation to attain its goals to organise farmworkers, the ANC WC) did make

advances particularly under the conditions which prevailed in the Boland where farmers exercised a great deal of quasi-political and judicial authority on the farms.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

The main focus of this study has been to analyse the attempts made by Black political organisations to organise farmworkers in the rural Western Cape. The attempts evolved as a result of the economic destitution permeating the lives of farmworkers in the Boland. Farmworkers had neither the political or economic clout to liberate themselves. In short it evolved from the disenfranchised and harshly exploitative conditions farmworkers had to endure on the farms.

The appalling economic conditions under which farmworkers had to work and live, clearly motivated the APO, I.C.U. and ANC(WC) to attempt to organise farmworkers. All three organisations tried, to organise rural workers around grievances over wages and working conditions. Similarly, all three organisations faced the same constraints; inability to organise on the farms, organisers were harassed and farmworkers were too geographically isolated, illiterate, too poor and powerless against the tyranny of their employers. These organisations however differed remarkably in their attempts to overcome these constraints.

The formation of the APO was primarily to protect the privileges enjoyed by the Coloured elite in the Western Cape and the hope of those privileges been extended to the northern provinces by way of being incorporated into the existing white-dominated society.

The APO's rural branches had for a long time expressed a genuine concern for the scandalously low wages and working conditions of farmworkers in the Boland. Despite this concern the struggles of farmworkers remained relatively untouched by the activities of the APO's rural branches except for farmworkers' grievances being voiced in its publication THE APO.

With the majority of farmworkers being 'coloured' the concern expressed by the APO was one of colour and not class i.e. the response was one of shared national oppression. The elitist nature of the APO made the organisation very susceptible to the co-option policies of the state. This was particularly so because of the incorporationist nature of the Cape Province's franchise legislation.

In the rural areas the APO branches' political mobilisation programme centred primarily around the educated and upwardly mobile, whose privileged position made them distance themselves from rural workers and regard farmworkers as being below their social standing.<sup>1</sup>

The APO leadership was not under any real pressure to get involved in farmworkers' struggles and was totally divorced from the farm situation. The APO leadership encouraged its rural branches to organise and unionise farmworkers. At times the leadership encouraged strike action but with caution. The APO was of little assistance to farmworkers in that it was unable to articulate and take up the day-to-day struggles of the farmworkers. When farmworkers threatened

with action the APO failed to provide any practical assistance. The organisation was unable to direct the militancy of farmworkers in the correct way. Whatever protests which were organised were done in such a way that it would not jeopardise the elitist position of the organisation.

Farmworkers were looking for an organisation that would fight its cause against their employers. Unfortunately the APO's protests was via the system ie. working within the framework of the government and farmers thereby compromising the position of farmworkers.

Given the I.C.U.'s initial urban bias (1919 -1925) they failed to organise farmworkers in the Western Cape although it was on their agenda. Initial attempts made by Clement Kadalie and other ICU leaders through petitions and deputations failed and no attempt was made to use the methods the organisation adopted later when it organised farmworkers in Northern Transvaal and Natal.

What attempts were made seemed more individualistic than organisational. Reading between the lines and with some assistance from Musson one can only but assume that the ICU drew farmworkers into their ranks through the efforts of Jonny Gomas, but it is unclear how this was done, and what membership meant to farmworkers. Calls were made to link the struggles of farmworkers in the Northern provinces to that of the Cape. However, regional antagonisms and the relative weaknesses of the Cape ICU caused these attempts not

to materialise.

The Great Depression of 1929 which caused great concern in agriculture played an important role in the attempts of the ANC(WC) to organise farmworkers. Unlike the APO and ICU the ANC(WC) (at least the militants) rejected any form of collaboration with the state and was of the opinion that liberation can only be brought about by the workers themselves.

Through the holding of Sunday meetings the ANC(WC) mobilised and got farmworkers to join the organisation. Unlike the APO and ICU farmworkers played a significant role in the organisation and made other farmworkers aware of the ANC within the Boland. Farmworkers' grievances had a direct influence on the campaigns of the organisation. The ANC(WC) was able to mobilise farmworkers around their demands for higher wages and against the tot system. Farmworkers became active participants in whatever protest and direct actions were launched by the ANC(WC), thereby gaining its first experience in collective strength and action.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the determination of ANC(WC) in the wake of threats on their lives, they were unable to organise mass protests and large campaigns because farmworkers were too scattered to be organised effectively. Farmworkers had to go to town to be organised since organisers were unable to organise them on the farms. If organisers had access to farmworkers on the farms this would have facilitated



more grassroots participation in the light of ANC(WC) leaders been banned in the Boland.<sup>3</sup>

Membership to the farmworkers did not only mean carrying membership cards or paying subscriptions, it also meant playing a leading role in the ANC(WC) branches in towns further away from Worcester. David Corneluis (a farmworker) was the leader of the Rawsonville ANC(WC) branch. The ANC(WC) facilitated contact between local leaders and members and this gave farmworkers the support they needed against their employers. It was not always possible to maintain this contact because of the geographical isolation of farmworkers and leaders had to rely on public transport to travel from one Boland town to the other.<sup>4</sup> These contacts provided the ANC(WC) leadership with the opportunity of informing farmworkers about national campaigns and struggles in the urban areas of the Western Cape.

The ANC(WC) however failed to establish any real grassroots leadership in the Boland. There was an over-reliance on external leaders as demonstrated by Arnold Plaatjies (Secretary of the ANC Worcester branch) when he remarked about Elliot Tongeni (Black Lion of the Western Cape)... "But the white rulers will tremble with fear and rage when they see him there (in Rawsonville)".<sup>5</sup> Farmworkers were however too weak and vulnerable when left alone or once leaders were banned.

One important point which the ANC(WC) established was that worker unity transcends racial boundaries. By addressing the material interests of the Coloured and African farmworkers the ANC(WC) had set a precedent for working class unity. Coloured farmworkers were also made aware that they had the right to claim ownership of the land since they were descendants of slaves and Khoi which at the same time generated a sense of nationalism amongst the Coloured rural working class. Farmworkers under the guidance of the ANC(WC) resisted all forms of divide and rule tactics of farmers and some Coloured petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the popularity which the ANC(WC) generated amongst farmworkers they did not have the power to protect farmworkers against the wrath of farmers, white vigilantes and the state. Farmers were totally opposed to their labour force being organised and ruthlessly resisted any attempts of the ANC(WC) to organise farmworkers and increase the price of their labour power.<sup>7</sup>

The site of struggle moved from the farms into the rural towns because farmworkers were organised in town. On their own, farmers were unable to crush the ANC(WC); therefore they made use of vigilantes and called upon the state to use legalistic repressive methods to crush the ANC(WC). Since the National Party had relied on the vote of farmers to come into power they were forced to play a more active role in the conflict. By making use of legalistic repressive power

(banning leaders and instituting a state of emergency) the state dealt a final blow to the ANC(WC)'s attempts to organise farmworkers. The ANC(WC) was unable to counter the actions of the state and in wages or working conditions of farmworkers; they therefore failed.

Although all three organisations failed to organise farmworkers it does have significance in our understanding of the constraints faced by those trying to organise farmworkers today. It is hoped that this study has made some contribution to this understanding.

Important lessons can be learned from all three organisations concerning the organising of farmworkers. It would be best to organise farmworkers on the farms where they work and live. This would result in grassroots participation and leadership amongst farmworkers. Because farmworkers are weak and vulnerable to be left alone it would be important to organise a whole district. It would be very important to gain concessions for farmworkers, however small it may be, because at the end of the day one must have something to show to draw farmworkers into organisation.

There is also a need to unite struggles with that happening in the urban areas. Some organisations are at present trying to overcome this issue by addressing both urban and rural worker grievances. Political organisations can make some political gains which will have an indirect influence on the lives of farmworkers. It is very important that organisations have a principled programme

of action; therefore a clear theoretical understanding of the position of farmworkers in South Africa is imperative in order to devise new and sound strategies for the organising of farmworkers. Any theoretical position must however be tested through practice otherwise it would hold no significance for farmworkers.

To date the position of farmworkers has not changed significantly despite the attempts made by the Food and Canning Worker's Union (FCWU) in the 1960's to organise farmworkers in the Boland. Organisers such as Liz Abrahams and John Pendlani faced similar constraints as those faced by the ANC(WC) in the 1930's.<sup>8</sup>

During the latter half of the 1980's Cosatu launched its Farm Worker Project which made significant gains in the Boland under the guidance of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU).<sup>9</sup> But farmworkers' lives and conditions of work have not changed significantly and they still remain the most exploited sector within the formal economic sector in South Africa. Presently Cosatu is negotiating that farmworkers be included in the Labour Relations Act and it seems as if they will win this right for farmworkers, which will enable them to build organisations and fight for better living and working conditions on farms.

It remains imperative that farmworkers be organised so that they together with workers in the urban areas can fight racism and a better life in the land of their birth. This can remain an ideal lest,

trade unions and political organisations listen to the resounding cry of farmworkers:

"Hey you must remember us here on the farms."<sup>10</sup>



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Notes

1. R Ross, Cape of Torments: Slavery and resistance in South Africa (London, 1983), p.120.
2. G Lewis, Between the Wire and the Wall: A history of South African 'Coloured' politics (Cape Town, 1987), p.117.
3. D Mayson, 'It's a Struggle on the Farms!' A history of organising farmworkers in the Western Cape (CER, UCT, 1989), p.12.
4. W Hofmeyr, 'Agricultural Crisis and Rural Organisation in the Cape 1929 - 1933', M.A. thesis UCT, 1985, p.330.
5. Umsebenzi, 05.09.1930.
6. D Mayson, 'It's a Struggle on the Farms!' p.6.
7. J Krikler, 'Transition to a Socialist Agriculture', South African Labour Bulletin, 12,5, July, 1987, p.99.
8. D Mayson, 'It's a Struggle on the Farms', p.18.
9. Ibid., p. 20.
10. D Mayson, 'Hey, you must remember we're living here on the farms', Seminar paper, Centre for African Studies, UCT, 1986, p.1



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