

THE I. C. U.

Apart from organisations such as the Teachers Union and the Joint Council of Europeans and Africans there were other organisations which attracted our attention and excited our admiration during our young days. One of these was the famous organisation known as the I.C.U. The full title of this body was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, but it became famous as the I.C.U. Simple African workers who were members of this organization thought the letters I.C.U. stood for "I SEE YOU" and often added to it the words MLUNGU meaning WHITE MAN. For them the I.C.U. was their watchdog. It watched the white man who was so apt to do things to them.

The I.C.U. was under the leadership of Clements Kadalie, an African who had come from Nyasaland. He had worked in Cape Town and while there had conducted a successful strike for higher pay by dock workers. This success encouraged Kadalie and his followers to form a permanent organisation and to extend their activities to other spheres of work besides the docks in Cape Town, and so was born the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union. Early in its history it split into two sections, one known as the I.C.W.U. and the other I.C.U. Kadalie was the leader of the I.C.U. which, under his inspired leadership, went from strength to strength until it had covered the whole of the Union of South Africa, especially the urban areas but not excluding the rural areas. At its heyday it claimed to have 100,000 members scattered throughout the Union, a claim which no non-white organisation had made before or since. There were a number of factors responsible for the fact that the I.C.U. spread through the Union like wild fire. The first of these was Clements Kadalie himself. All one can say about him is that he was a born leader. He had come from Nyasaland to work in the Union. There are thousands of Africans who migrate from the small over-populated territory of Nyasaland to seek their fortunes in the more prosperous Union of South Africa. They generally work as waiters and cooks in hotels and other catering establishments and in private households

households. They make very reliable and trustworthy servants. Union Africans tend to look down upon, more particularly because they take on jobs which are regarded as women's work - cooks, waiters, domestic servants, houseboys, etc. To come from a group like that and to become the acknowledged leader of a men's organisation with a membership running into thousands, shows that Kadalie was a remarkable individual. He was not highly educated, having only gone as far as the end of the primary school course in a church of Scotland Mission School in Nyasaland. This was the mission run by the famous Scottish Missionary, Dr. Laws. Kadalie could not speak any of the Bantu languages spoken in the Union so that he always had to address his meetings in English and have his speeches interpreted into the various Bantu languages. In other words he started out with almost everything against him - he was a foreigner, a despised Nyasa who could not speak to his hearers in their home languages. He overcame all those disadvantages because he had a wonderfully magnetic personality, he was a great orator and he was a fearless leader. It was a treat to see him in action, standing on a table with one interpreter on each side of him, one interpreting into Xhosa or Zulu and the other into Sotho. His meetings were usually held in the open air and thousands came to listen to him. He spoke for hours on end and in the South African heat, he dramatically took off his jacket and then his waistcoat, indicating that he was in fighting form all the time. He was very direct in his speeches; he had no time for "humbly requesting" or "respectfully urging" the authorities to do this or that. He "demanded" better wages for his followers; he "condemned" the employers and did not merely "deplore" their actions or "plead" with them. Moreover, Kadalie was not merely a talker, his words were followed by deeds and these deeds produced results. The I.C.U. became a terror to employers throughout the country. If an employer withheld any wages due to his employee unfairly, the I.C.U. demanded the wages and if they were not forthcoming,

they dragged the employer before the Court, and many employers had judgments given against them and they had to pay up. The result was that African workers flocked to this militant organisation in their thousands.

But Kadalie was not the only reason for the success of the I.C.U. The I.C.U. came at a time when the town-drift of Africans which followed World War I was at its height. The Natives Land Act of 1913 had been responsible for the eviction of many Africans from European farms. This was the law which divided South Africa into "white" areas in which Africans would have no land rights and "Native" areas in which non-Africans would have no land rights. The effect of the putting into effect of this law was that thousands of Africans, evicted from European farms, finding no room in the limited "Native" areas had to migrate to the urban areas which were then exempted from the provisions of the Natives Land Act of 1913. Their numbers swelled the labour market in the urban areas, wages were low and terms and conditions of employment most unsatisfactory. These discontented workers were just ripe for a workers organisation such as the I.C.U. - a General Workers Union organised on a mass basis which was more of the nature of a political organisation rather than a trade union, a militant organisation out to work for the redress of the grievances of its members.

Kadalie succeeded in attracting to this organisation a number of young fellows who acted as paid functionaries of the organization in different parts of the country. They consisted of educated young men, many of them ex-school teachers, clerks and others who wanted soft-collar jobs. They acted as local or provincial secretaries and usually had offices to which workers could come with their complaints and to pay their membership dues. The red I.C.U. membership ticket was a much prized possession of the African worker in those days, and money flowed freely into the coffers of the I.C.U. The I.C.U. Secretaries included some young men who

later developed into wellknown leaders. Among them may be mentioned Alexander Macaulay Jabavu popularly known as "Mac", a brother of Professor Don Davidson Tengo Jabavu, the first African to be appointed to the Staff of the South African Native College (as the University College of Fort Hare was then known); Keable Mote, popularly known as the 'Lion of the Free State' because of the way in which he terrorised farmers in the Orange Free State who did not treat their farm labourers as the I.C.U. thought they should be treated; and Allison George W. Champion who was the leader of the I.C.U. in Natal. Champion was the right hand man of Clements Kadalie. He was a typical Zulu, with a fine physique, arrogant, fearless with no inferiority complex of any kind, utterly ruthless in dealing with his 'enemies'. His office in Durban was always crowded with workers who wanted him to attend to one complaint or another. In the same office one always found also a number of people who had not brought any complaints but had simply come to admire this new type of leader who was able to use techniques which produced results with the white man. Champion always obviously enjoyed the adulation which was heaped upon him by his admirers. He was also not highly educated. He had been at school at Adams College before my time there. He always enjoys telling the story about how he was dismissed from Adams because of his activities among the students. Later when we were members of the Native Representative Council he hauled me over the coals because in the course of a speech I had said that I held no brief for agitators. He was the next speaker and he began his speech by pointing out that he was an agitator and had always been one. "Jesus Christ was also an agitator", he went on to point out in his hectoring voice. That was typical of the man.

When the I.C.U. was at its height in the late 20's, Champion was a very powerful figure in Natal. He used to preside at I.C.U. open air meetings which as it happened were held in an open space in Durban called Red Square. The meetings used to be held on Sunday afternoon and the square would be crowded with hearers, many

of course being merely curious to see the great figures of this wonderful movement. When Kadalie appeared on the scene the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds. The Natal I.C.U. not only had a very busy office in Durban but they also had a Hall in which entertainments were held during the week-end, so that the I.C.U. not only defended its members during the week but gave them entertainment over the week-end. All this, of course, for a fee. The I.C.U. had plenty of money. It had no difficulty in getting its members to pay their membership. Champion liked to display this money - the office table covered with half-crowns, bank notes from his different pockets, etc. As usual there were whisperings about what was happening to the funds in his hands. Champion knew about these whisperings and spoke quite freely about them. I can remember one famous occasion when he said in a meeting speaking in Zulu "Zulus, I understand there are some people who say that I am squandering your money. Who do you think should squander your money if it is not to be squandered by me? The white man? He has done that long enough" at which there was a vociferous applause from the crowd! Only Champion could make a remark like that and get away with it. But of course there were some who were not satisfied that this was an adequate reply to the rumours about misuse of funds, and eventually one of the members of the Executive of the I.C.U., a man by the name of Lenono applied to the Natal Division of the Supreme Court for an interdict requiring the I.C.U. to submit its books for examination. This was the famous case of Lenono vs the I.C.U. in which the Court handed down a decision in which adverse comments on the manner in which the I.C.U. handled its funds. That verdict did not worry the top leaders of the I.C.U. I recall that when Kadalie visited Natal shortly after the court decision had been made public, he made a great speech in which he said among other things "I am not afraid of the decision of Mr Justice Carter. The I.C.U. will carry on", at which the crowd roared its approval.

Kadalie, Champion, Keable Mote and other I.C.U. leaders were names to conjure with in those days. They not only attended to the

day-to-day complaints of their members in different parts of the country, but they led deputations to the Government, conferred with Cabinet ministers, organised demonstrations against the Poll Tax, defied the Pass Laws, held monster meetings, and generally kept the country on tenterhooks for a number of years. It was in order to deal with their activities that the Government first introduced section 29 of the Native Administration Act of 1927. This section made it an offence to utter any words or to do anything with intent to promote feelings of hostility between white and black and empowered the Governor-General to ban individuals suspected of such activities from one area to another. Champion himself was one of the first Africans to be banned under this section from Natal. But the leaders of the I.C.U. did not take these things lying down. They fought back in the only ways open to them. They questioned the legality of the actions taken against them and sometimes obtained court decisions in their favour.

But eventually the crash came. Internal dissensions developed, the leaders quarrelled among themselves and eventually the I.C.U. broke up into different provincial sections - the Natal I.C.U., the Transvaal I.C.U., the Orange Free State I.C.U. and the Cape I.C.U. That was the beginning of the end. From being the great men of the day the I.C.U. leaders, including Kadalie, were reduced to the size of ordinary men.

It is difficult to account for the downfall of the I.C.U. after its meteoric rise to such great heights. Some people attribute it to the arrival in South Africa of W.G. Ballinger, a British trade unionist who came to South Africa at the invitation of the I.C.U. to help to place the I.C.U. on a sounder foundation. This invitation had been issued by Clements Kadalie himself during a triumphal visit which he paid to the United Kingdom and Europe, I believe in 1927. Men like Champion believe that the rot set in after the arrival of Ballinger.

Some people attribute the downfall of the I.C.U. to the misuse of funds by the leaders and the development of intemperance among

some of the top leaders. Others blame the Government which took more and more stringent measures against the leaders and took powers to control or prohibit meetings. The Native Administration Act of 1927 was a powerful weapon in the hands of the Government against all so-called agitators or extremists. Strong measures had in the view of the Government to be taken against organisations like the I.C.U. and the Communist Party of South Africa which had also come into being for fear that they might cause the black man to rise against the white man, with disastrous consequences for the country as a whole.

Another argument which has been advanced to account for the downfall is the temptation on the part of successful leaders of organisations of this kind to over reach themselves or to overplay their hands. It has been said that "nothing succeeds like success", but the contrary is also true that "nothing fails like success". The successful leader, unless he takes his successes soberly, may be persuaded by his followers or induced by his own vanity to become bolder and bolder without taking the trouble to assess his limitations at their proper value. The result is that he promises his followers bigger and bigger gains. But sooner or later he comes up against odds with which he had not reckoned and fails. His followers begin to find the Achilles heel in him and their confidence in his magic touch is undermined. His following begins to dwindle, and then the end is in sight.

Whatever the cause or causes of its downfall the I.C.U. is now part of the history of the struggle of Africans for the amelioration of their lot in South Africa. Kadalie and Champion carried on longest after the crash, Kadalie in East London in the Cape Province and Champion in Durban in Natal. I had the honour of being among the speakers who paid tribute to Kadalie at his funeral in East London. We paid our last respects to him in a Hall which he had been instrumental in building in Duncan Village, the East London residential area for Africans. That Hall will forever remain a memorial to a man who once nearly brought the white man to his knees

in this country. He left a son who is at present studying Medicine at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. The Great Kadalie, when shall we see such another?

Champion is of course still going strong. After his I.C.U. he became a prominent member of the African National Congress in Natal and was later elected to represent the Natal rural areas in the Native Representative Council. Since the abolition of the Council he has confined his activities to the Native Urban Advisory Boards in Natal and has been replaced as leader of the Natal section of the African National Congress by Chief Albert John Lutuli. How the mighty have fallen!!.