

**Letter from S.P. Bunting to General Secretary, Comintern,  
1 January 1923**

The General Secretary  
Communist International  
Moscow

9 Torrington Place  
London W C (1)  
1 January 1923

Dear Comrade

As delegate from the Communist Party of South Africa to the Fourth Congress I was obliged owing to my wife's illness to leave Moscow on 30 November last, thus missing both the concluding sittings of the Congress and also the advantage of a discussion with the new Executive or Presidium regarding our Party work and the general working class position in South Africa. I therefore write to you on several matters which might have been disposed of in the course of such discussion. I shall be glad if any reply you may consider necessary may be sent very promptly, as I contemplate, if my wife's health permits, sailing for S Africa about the beginning of February. If the Executive Committee thinks any good purpose can be served by my coming again to Moscow on a flying visit during January, I can do so if I receive notice in time – preferably by telegraph. (Letter since received stating such visit unnecessary).  
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- (1) I have been unable to get any information of the proceedings of the Congress since I left. I see in the 'Communist'<sup>1</sup> that 'Andrejew' (South Africa) has been elected to the Executive. We have noon<sup>2</sup> of that name in our party nor in contact with it. Our General Secretary in S Africa is Com. W.H. Andrews; and when I left Moscow I asked Com. J. Campbell (who as alternate delegate remained to represent S Africa at the Congress after I left) to propose Com. Andrews – for what it was worth – for the E.C. Whether it is he that has been elected and the name has got mutilated in transmission I do not know; Com. Campbell has not written to me, although I expected to have heard from him with a parcel of papers which he was to have sent after me to London. If it is Com. Andrews that has been elected, has Com. Andrews himself been notified of his election, and has he stated that he can come to Moscow accordingly? When last I heard from him he was still unable to get a passport to leave S Africa as he was still on bail on a charge connected with the Rand strike of last March; but he was considering coming to Russia as soon as he could get through those proceedings. Com. Kussinen, in consultation with Com. Ivon Jones, had tentatively suggested this course. I should be glad to know the actual position.
- (2) When I left on Nov 30 the Congress had just adopted a thesis and recommendations regarding the 'Negro Question'. It was only earlier on the morning of that same day that this thesis had been submitted to and passed by the Commission appointed to deal with the question, and although I was a member of the Commission I was unable to get a copy of the thesis in question. Com. Sasha,<sup>3</sup> who acted as Secretary of the Commission, and also Com. Trojanovsky, another member of the Commission, one or both promised to send me here a copy of it, but nothing has arrived. Unless therefore a copy has been sent to S Africa direct (where owing to police attention few addresses are safe nowadays) it would seem that our party, which is vitally concerned in the thesis, is to remain in ignorance of it. Will you be good enough to send me a complete copy of the thesis and annexures, including a copy of the earlier draft thesis originally submitted by Com. Jansen to the Commission?<sup>4</sup>
- (3) The thesis proposed a Negro Congress at the earliest possible date. What arrangements, if any, have been made or are contemplated for this Congress?
- (4) My recollection of the thesis adopted was that (unlike Com. Jansen's draft, although the latter was too pedantically worded) it laid down as universal a policy which is chiefly applicable to conditions in the northern United States. Unfortunately, without the text before me, I cannot develop this criticism accurately. But I remember that a clause in Com. Jansen's draft: 'Negro workers

1. Most probably, the London journal *Communist Review*.

2. No one.

3. The identity of Com. Sasha could not be established.

4. There are single lines in pencil in the left and right margins opposite these two paragraphs starting from: '(2) When I...'

should everywhere be organised, and where negro and white workers coexist a united front should be formed' – (or words to that effect) was rejected as suggesting 'Jim Crow'<sup>5</sup> unions; and a clause was substituted stating merely that the Comintern would use all its efforts<sup>6</sup> to get negro workers into white unions and if it failed a United Front was to be formed to enforce admission. Apart from the obscurity of the reference to the United Front, this, which as far as I remember was the only recommendation of the Thesis on agitation, education, or organisation of negroes, is obviously inadequate.

(a) It has nothing to say regarding the many hundred thousand negroes who are exploited in countries where there are no white unions at all, or hardly any: e.g. West, East, and Central Africa, the Congo, the West Indies etc.

(b) It assumes that where there are white unions they are unions of the same trades as those the negroes work at, whereas often (e.g. in S Africa), being craft unions, and confined to 'skilled artisans' etc., they represent quite other trades, so much so that white men who might perform the same class of work (e.g. 'unskilled') as the negroes do would be just as ineligible for membership as a negro would. It would be otherwise if the 'white unions' were professedly 'industrial' unions. Meanwhile, in S Africa, within the specific 'trades', 'coloured' artisans etc. are to-day admitted to the appropriate Trade unions; and if there is still some reluctance to adhere to this principle, for instance in the Transvaal as contrasted with the Cape, it affects very few individuals. The CP would of course always support the claims of those individuals, but the satisfaction of those claims would still leave the mass of the black workers unaffected.

(c) It is incorrect to assume that 'Jim Crow' unions are always undesirable. Where, as in S Africa, the class of work done by the bulk of the negroes is markedly distinct from that done by the bulk of the whites, industrial combination of the negroes comes much more natural apart from the whites. One of the leading native industrial organisers in S Africa, H. Selby Msimang (whom I should like to see attend the Negro Congress) (he is president of the 'Industrial and Commercial Workers Union') expresses, I believe, the views of the conscious native workers of S Africa generally when he pleads for 'One Big Non-European Workers' Union'. The best means to break the white workers' prejudice is not so much to agitate for 'raw Kaffirs'<sup>7</sup> to join the Amalgamated Engineering Union, for instance, but rather to confront the whites with the spectacle of strong organisations of native workers, demanding equal pay for equal work, the co-operation of the white workers, and, for that matter, the

5. 'Jim Crow' – a derogatory nickname for African-Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century USA. A system of discriminatory racist laws and practices that emerged in the late nineteenth century was called 'jimcrowism'. By 'Jim Crow unions' Bunting meant separate black unions based on race discrimination.

6. There is a crossed-out word before 'efforts'.

7. 'Raw Kaffir' – a derogatory racist nickname for illiterate rural Africans.

formation of industrial unions to include both black and white workers, where both coexist; and also in any case, the spectacle of native workers so organised where, as under (a) above, there are no white workers. The more important, as well as the more easily attainable, policy for S Africa at any rate is, I feel sure, broad co-operation between the white and black workers instead of the present mutual repulsion. Hence the very narrow and limited clause of the thesis, above quoted, not only fails to 'touch the spot' but is liable, quite purposelessly and avoidably, to excite hostility or aversion among both white and black workers, although I should like to ascertain further the views of the latter on the point. We are all very familiar with the extreme sensitiveness of some of our negro comrades who are always seeing a slight to their colour, and often quite rightly; but after all, where, as in the case of the bulk of the S African native workers (unlike those of the northern U.S.A. no doubt) the question is not yet a burning one in that form referred to by the clause of the thesis, the main centre of gravity, the main object of effort of the C.I., is rather, I submit, to further the organisation of the unorganised and backward workers on whatever lines come most ready to hand – I would not reject even Sick Benefit Society lines if membership is best secured that way – even to the extent of ignoring the white unions if the latter will not hold out a fraternal hand. I have submitted several papers on this subject of co-operation between white and black workers to the Anglo American Group,<sup>8</sup> which are no doubt accessible: e.g. 'Statistics of S African Labour'<sup>9</sup> (published I believe in Russian in the periodical edited by Com. Losovsky<sup>10</sup>), 'Colonial Questions' (published I believe in Russian in 'Le Nouvel Orient'),<sup>11</sup> 'The Labour movement in S Africa' (published in the Congress number of *Imprekorr*),<sup>12</sup> 'The Communist Party of S Africa' (report submitted to the E.C.), 'The Colonial Labour Front', a suggested additional<sup>13</sup>

8. Anglo-American Secretariat.

9. Most probably, Bunting refers to the article, 'Rabocheie dvizheniie v Yuzhnoi Afrike' (Labour Movement in South Africa), which he published in *Krasny Internatsional Profsoiuzov* (*The Red International of Trade Unions*), the *Profintern* journal edited by A. Lozovsky (No. 10 (21), 1922).

10. Lozovsky.

11. The article to which Bunting refers was published in *Novy Vostok* (*The New East*), No. 2, 1922 under the title, 'Belyie i Chernyie Rabochiie v Iuzhnoi Afrike' (White and Black Workers in South Africa), not the 'Colonial Questions'. Bunting believed that Lenin had read this article during his (Bunting's) stay in Moscow and before Lenin's final speech to the Comintern, 'Five Years of the Russian Revolution' which was delivered on 13 November 1922, when Bunting was in the audience. Two years later, after Lenin's death, Bunting wrote: 'Already before that [Lenin's speech on 13 November] I was extremely happy to find out that Lenin had read my article about 'the colonial question' in the journal *Novy Vostok* and that he would probably offer me to meet him to discuss the problem.' The meeting did not take place but Bunting wrote about his impressions of Lenin after Lenin's death in an article, 'Lenin: Personal Impressions', in *The International*, 25 January 1924 (from which the quotation above is taken). This article was the only recollection about Lenin published in South Africa (and on the African continent generally).

12. 'Inprecor'.

13. There is a crossed-out word after 'additional'.

clause about negroes handed to Com. Safaroff in connection with his thesis on Oriental Questions (a copy of which thesis as finally passed I should be very glad to receive) etc. I still think, as suggested in these papers, that the toleration and co-operation of the white workers, both in the home or imperial countries and locally (where white and black workers coexist) would be of such great assistance to the negro movement that great efforts should be made, and the greatest care and tact exercised with an eye to the local psychology, to secure such toleration and co-operation rather than alienate it. I also think that though a Negro conference will be most useful, it should be coupled with a conference between black and white workers on the lines suggested by me in most of the above papers. As things stand, the terms of the thesis make it difficult for the S African C.P. to proceed on the lines which seem to promise the best revolutionary results. I am not referring to any elements in our party which may still favour 'leaving the Kaffir alone', but to those which, like myself, believe that the native workers of Africa will eventually become far more powerful instruments of revolution than the white workers there can ever be. It must be remembered that the lesson of the Rand strike of 1922 to the white workers has not yet been driven home even by Tom Mann, perhaps because he fears alienating them against it by making some false step; but provided it is done wisely, now is the time to drive it home – as for instance it was driven home in Com. Radek's resolution, passed by the Congress on the occasion of the executions of Rand strikers about Nov 17. At the time I was doubtful about the wisdom of inserting a reference to the black workers in just that resolution at just that time, concluding afterwards that as a 'tour de force' Com. Radek's draft was right; though the point is just an example of the difficulty. But I still feel sure that it would be quite irrelevant to get up an agitation for 'Jim Sixpence' (i.e. the typical 'raw' native mine labourer) to join the S African Mine Workers' Union, consisting as it does at present exclusively of white certificated miners, mostly Dutch. I write this letter without special instructions from our party, and perhaps the EC should rather be addressed by our party direct, or would prefer to confer with Com. Andrews if he is to come to Moscow sometime; but I do not think the view of the party would differ from mine by being more on the lines of the Thesis.<sup>14</sup> As regards negro propaganda I enclose some cuttings from SA newspapers: 'Hands off the Natives' etc., for your information.<sup>15</sup>

(5) I take this opportunity to offer in all modesty a few observations suggested by a three months' sojourn as the guest of the Comintern (for which I tender it my very heartfelt thanks) at Moscow.

(a) So long as the Comintern thinks well so to accommodate delegates and others otherwise than during a Congress when they are supposed to be

14. Bunting reiterated his dissatisfaction with the work of the commission and his disagreement with elements of the resolution on the 'Negro question' in his report to the Second Congress of the CPSA on 28–9 April. See document no. 30.

15. Several illegible words follow. In pen: 441 5 Deu. In pencil: ~~5 Cxx. In Deutsch. Confidential.~~

fully occupied, they should not be left to their own devices but should be systematically educated and schooled in e.g. the work, ideas, problems, methods, tactics (legal and illegal, peaceful and military) etc. of the Comintern and of Soviet Russia, by means of lectures, discussions etc. Otherwise they tend to become mere spongers and loafers at the Comintern's expense. I speak for myself no less than others.

(b) In particular, during such 'off seasons' the Presidium of the ECCI should endeavour to discuss with the delegates of each national C.P. their special party questions and problems. I was in Moscow for more than two months before the Congress, and my party will naturally ask me on my return what the E.C.C.I. had to say, and what advice it gave, as to our party work. The answer will be: 'Nothing. I was called upon for many reports, articles etc. which I supplied (and took great trouble over) and which were no doubt duly filed away in their proper pigeon holes; but that was all. I never had any opportunity of seeing any of the leaders, they were always occupied with more important work.' Of course they are few in number; and they are kept very busy settling various party disputes. But to-day the CI has to do more than that, it has to conduct the revolutionary campaign of the whole world, including the most distant outposts. They have insufficient time for these latter. No doubt competent <sup>men</sup> to increase the personnel of the permanent General staff are very scarce. Anyway, it needs strengthening to enable it to cope with its enormous task.

(c) From my small experience of work on a Commission, I should say that too much informality is allowed in Commission business. A Thesis or other result of Commission work gets accepted without debate by the Congress, which does not even see a copy of it, for it is usually not circulated, and the delegates have no idea what they are voting for, only a favoured few have seen it. Thereupon it becomes authoritative, and it is a breach<sup>16</sup> of discipline to ignore it. And yet how has such a thesis perhaps been compiled? Scratch meetings of the Commission are held at 'any old' time and place without announcement; those members of the Commission whom the Secretary happens to meet may turn up, the rest know nothing about the meeting. At the meeting, such as it eventually is, no order is kept; the members talk in groups among themselves, and no minutes are kept. In these circumstances a long and controversial thesis may be read out, without previous notice or circulation of copies, to a meeting which wants only to go to bed, the hour is so late; and in this irresponsible manner any ill-digested stuff may be jockeyed through the Commission, adopted by the Congress, and promulgated as Comintern law throughout the world. I would suggest that every Commission should be presided over by a member of the ECCI, charged to see that the meetings are properly convened, conducted and minuted; and that no thesis should be

16. There is a crossed-out word after 'breach'.

voted on by the congress until it has been both discussed by the Presidium and circulated among the delegates. It may be said that to do all this would be impossible in the limited time. Well, one remedy is to reduce the number and length of these 'theses' to more reasonable limits. If every congress is to add a huge crop of theses each year the programme and accumulated theses of the C.I. will soon become as voluminous as the statutes of a capitalist state like England, and you will require a special class of lawyers, learned in C.I. lore, to expound them.

(6) I enclose some press cuttings which in the ordinary way might have been sent just to Com. Ivon Jones; were it not that he is I believe still away, and besides I do not know his present status.

(a) Reprint from the 'Weekly Herald', an 'Amsterdam'<sup>17</sup> organ recently established in Johannesburg by A Crawford, our leading Yellow leader, together with a leaflet 'Communism and its results'. These have recently been very widely circulated in S Africa.

(b) Cuttings re agitation for reprieve of condemned strikers etc. The funeral procession of the three men executed on Nov 17 was the biggest demonstration ever held (and included the largest number ever assembled under the C.P. banner) in S Africa. Tom Mann has greatly revived the spirit of the white workers at any rate. The CP is coming in for more attention than ever. In Capetown it has successfully defied a police prohibition of its meetings, and the prohibition has been withdrawn. Apparently the execution of strikers has ended, and most of the treason cases are to be disposed of summarily. That is mainly due to C.P. efforts, I think.

(c) Cuttings re the report of the 'Martial Law Commission' copy of which I handed to Com. Kussinen.

(d) Cuttings re the movement to expunge the 'Socialist objective' from the programme of the S African Labour Party, in connection with its rapprochement to the Dutch Nationalist Party. See also in this matter the current issues of our organ the 'International'.

With cordial Communist greetings

Sidney P. Bunting

PS. I have just received the Secretariat's letters Nos. 1929 & 1965.

RGASPI, 495/64/12/1-4.

Original in English.

Typed.

Inscriptions: 1) Bunting

2) 3.34

17. The reference is to the non-communist International Federation of Trade Unions based in Amsterdam.