2019 is the centenary of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU). Formed in Cape Town in 1919, the ICU exploded across southern Africa in the 1920s. It developed from a small and largely urban union centred in the Western Cape, into a huge movement across the region, with a mainly rural and small town constituency. Not just the first giant black union, and the first union to organise farm-dwellers and in reserves, it was also the central protest movement of the time. With perhaps 150,000 members in five southern African countries at its height, the ICU dwarfed the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which claimed 1,850 members in the late 1920s, and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, which had less than 4,000 members before the 1940s. While the ICU in South Africa was in sharp decline by the early 1930s, eking out its last days as a tiny union in 1940s East London, it remained an important force elsewhere, and left a deep imprint everywhere in the region.

The aim of the symposium is to re-assess the existing historiography of the ICU; to recover unpublished primary and secondary material on the ICU; to bring into dialogue new scholarship on the ICU; and, more broadly, to foster interest, including amongst postgraduate students, in neglected histories of popular and working-class resistance.

We call for papers on the ICU for 2-3 panels at the upcoming 27th biennial conference of the Southern African Historical Society (SAHS) on “Rethinking Perspectives on Southern African Histories,” to be held at Rhodes University, in Grahamstown/ Makhanda, 24-26 June 2019. We also invite contributors to the panels to join us at a one-day workshop on the ICU on 27 June 2019.

Papers on ICU-related topics may address, but need not be limited to, the topics below:

- Biographical histories of major and neglected ICU figures;
- Gendering the histories of the ICU;
- Intellectual histories of the ICU;
- Legacies of the ICU;
- Regional and national variations in ICU history;
- The ICU, the left and the international workers’ movement;
- The ICU as a transnational union;
- The ICU beyond the Limpopo;
• The ICU in global networks;
• The ICU and the land question;
• The ICU in popular consciousness;
• The ICU’s relationship with nationalisms;
• The ICU and religion/ the Independent Native Churches/ Ethiopianism;
• The ICU in small towns;
• The ICU-owned factories and farms;
• Women in/ and the ICU.

We invite you to send your title, abstract (250 words) and a short biography (80 words) – or any enquiries – to icu.1919.2019@gmail.com by 14 December 2018.

More on the SAHS and the SAHS conference can be found here: http://www.sahs.org.za/conference

ORGANISERS: David Johnson, Henry Mitchell, Tshepo Moloi, Noor Nieftagodien and Lucien van der Walt.

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