

‘A Call to Action, in Translation: Abantu-Batho and the July 1918 Shilling “Strike”.’

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What kinds of audiences did radical organizers wish to reach in the early years of the century, and how did they do so?

The early newspaper, Abantu-Batho, carried news of major and minor mobilizations in a variety of voices. A single page might carry a screed declaring South Africa a black man’s country, and a sympathetic account of an Afrikaner farmer’s extrajudicial killing of a black miscreant. In June, 1918, Daniel Letanka, Isaac Mabaso, S.M. Makgatho, and Tinker Israelsteyn in coordination with Transvaal Native Congress and the International Socialist League, organized a series of meetings to agitate for an across-the-board raise of one shilling per day for every “native” worker, man or woman in South Africa. As Peter Limb has recounted, the planned protest, and namely whether or not to call a general strike, was contested, and no single, clear message was achieved. At the same time, the accounts of their meetings, some with an estimated thousand participants, and their published calls to further action, appear in three different languages: English, Sesotho, and Zulu. According to the editorship of Abantu-Batho, there was little coordination between the drafters of the various versions, and the wordings among them differed in tone and content.

Drawing on surviving copies of Abantu-Batho, and police reports, and with the assistance of a translator, S. D. Matjila, I will in this paper examine the nature of organizers’ calls to action, disclosures, and argumentation, in three different linguistic dimensions.