Odd Man Out: Labour, Politics and Dixon Konkola¹

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If there were a Zambian History Trivia Contest with the question ‘who was the first president of UNIP? (i.e., the United National Independence Party, which led Zambia to independence in 1964 and ruled the country for the next 27 years), I would imagine rather few – even in Zambia itself – would answer ‘Dixon Konkola’. True, Konkola’s tenure as the party head lasted only a few weeks; but his relative obscurity seems more a product of the country’s ‘master narrative’, emphasizing the ultimate winners (typical, of course, of many national histories). Some standard texts do not mention Konkola at all, and he is certainly not featured in those which do. Yet in the middle 1950s it would not have been outlandish to have bet on Konkola as the future president or prime minister of the country.

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(an ambition which almost surely crossed his mind as well). Like Joshua Nkomo and Roy Welensky, Konkola used a base in the trade unions on the Rhodesia Railways as his springboard to political prominence, albeit not nearly so great or long-lasting as theirs. His bouts with mental illness add an intriguing dimension to his career. My object in this article is to provide a fuller portrait a man who was a significant ‘player’ in Zambia’s last decade as a British colony.

The trajectory of Konkola’s early life echoes that of so many figures of the nationalist era. He was born in 1920 near Mporokoso, in Zambia’s Northern Province, and according to one of his autobiographical summaries his father’s family was ‘associated with the Bemba Royal Family.’ Perhaps so, but it is fair to say that aside from a passing reference to a desire to write a treatise on the ‘role of the chief’ under modern conditions (and, certainly, journeys home on occasion), Konkola evinced little interest in the ‘traditional’ or rural sides of the struggle in Northern Rhodesia. He became, rather, a thoroughly urbanized man, and stayed that way. A very bright student, he was educated at Mbereshi mission in Luapula among other sites, and became a teacher (what else? – again, typical of many nationalists). His main teacher training and first teaching experience was at Nyadiri mission near Umtali, in Southern Rhodesia; one imagines that exposure to Southern Rhodesia’s generally harsher settler regime affected his later views, though I have found no direct reference to such. Konkola returned to Mbereshi and taught there for a time. Dissatisfied with the salary, in the late 1940s, he made his way to the Copperbelt and to Lusaka. There he learned of a new program of the Rhodesia Railways to train African ‘welfare officers’ – one of the reforms the Railways made in the wake of the major African strike in 1945, and organized under the new African Affairs Department. Accepted as a candidate, he went to Bulawayo, the Railways headquarters and of course again in Southern Rhodesia, for a year-long training course. Among his instructors was

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