

Makhan Singh: A revolutionary Kenyan trade unionist

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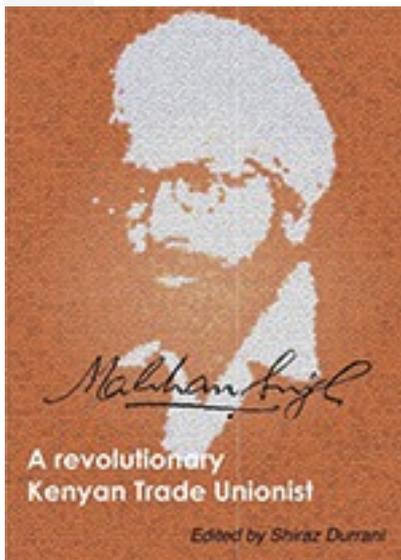
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Makhan Singh

Edited by Shiraz Durrani

Vita Books

£7.50



Many vital leaders through 200 years of struggle against racism, imperialism and capitalism are forgotten, or appear simply as footnotes. So it's always a pleasure to be reminded of their activities.

Makhan Singh was a communist, born in India in 1913, who was central to the development of trade unions in Kenya, an east African state that was part of the British Empire.

Durrani complains, “The entire history of anti-colonial struggles by people of Kenya has in general been suppressed or interpreted from an imperialist perspective.” Within that trade union activists are further downplayed.

But Singh could hardly have a stronger recommendation than a secret colonial memo from 1961 discussing whether to release him after years in detention, which calls him “an able, shrewd and inveterate communist agitator”. Singh had been detained in 1950. He was not released until 1961.

The Mau Mau independence movement is remembered for its guerrilla struggles in the countryside. But it began as an urban movement that came out of trade unions in the capital, Nairobi.

Mau Mau leader Bildad Kaggia wrote in his autobiography that he was disillusioned with the main nationalist organisation, Jomo Kenyatta’s Kenya African Union, which was lifeless. But then he heard Singh speak at a trade union rally: “He had the fire I admired and was a real revolutionary”.

Both Kaggia and Fred Kubai, Mau Mau’s other main urban leader, worked with Singh in the trade union movement.

As a trade union organiser Singh tried to break down the divisions between the Indians, who made up the majority of the organised workers, and the African workers. It was a hard struggle when the colonial authorities’ divide and rule strategy aimed to set the two groups against each other.

From the mid-1930s he attempted to show how unity would benefit all workers. He was key to organising strikes that won shorter hours and significant pay rises for workers. A 62-day strike in 1937 won a 25 percent pay increase. His role as the leader of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa pushed him to national influence.

This book is an interesting collection, but it is awkwardly structured. It is based on a commemoration meeting, and opens with recollections from friends and colleagues. It is page 61 before Durrani’s clear introduction to Singh’s politics appears. The recollections are touching if you already know about Singh, but don’t explain why he is important.

Singh’s own autobiographical essay is also presented later in the book.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent introduction. Hopefully it will allow a growth of interest in an important revolutionary who is often overlooked. Singh deserves more. It’s sad that his own history of the radical Kenyan trade union movement has never been reprinted, and that Zarina Patel’s biography, *Unquiet*, was never widely available outside Kenya.