

Some problems of the African trade union movement

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ONE of the most striking phenomena of the post-war world is the growth of the movement for national liberation especially in Asia, the Near and Middle East and Africa. The years from 1945 to 1953 witnessed the liberation of China, the establishment of the independent states of India, Burma, Ceylon and Indonesia, the establishment of the democratic republics of Viet Nam and Korea and the intensification of the struggle for the independence of Malaya. In the past few years, however, in Africa and the Arab-speaking countries similar progress has begun. On the African continent south of the Sahara, that is to say in that part of Africa inhabited mainly by the non-Arab-speaking peoples, the movement for national independence and against colonialism is still in a relatively early stage as compared with Asia. Nevertheless in Africa too, as seen for example in the declaration of the independence of Ghana on March 6th, 1957, the peoples have set out on the same road.

As part of this general development, and playing an increasingly decisive part within it, there is a growing working class and trade union movement.

Despite the colonial character of the economy

of Africa under which the main concentration is on transport, agriculture and minerals, nevertheless there has been a constant growth of the African working class in the past fifty years and, in the last ten to fifteen years, a very rapid development of urbanisation.

If one adds the Portuguese territories, for which no reliable estimate is available, this means that there are close on 8 million workers in Africa south of the Sahara. When one considers the character of the African working class, the fact that many of them are not wholly or continuously dependent on wages for a living, that they constantly flow from industry back to the countryside, it would be obviously incorrect to regard the African working class as yet as an overwhelmingly powerful force. Nevertheless when one considers that on the eve of China's liberation there were only 2 million industrial workers in a population of 600 million people, it is clear that the 8 million workers of Africa can be an important influence in the course of events among the 120 million people who occupy the African territories listed in Table I.

We shall have more to say later about the specific

TABLE 1

<i>Territory</i>	<i>No. of African and other non-European wage earners</i>	<i>Percentage of total population</i>
French West Africa ..	350,000	2.0
French Equatorial Africa	190,000	4.2
French Cameroons ..	125,000	4.0
Nigeria and British Cameroons	500,000	1.5
Ghana	200,000	4.5
Sierra Leone	80,000	4.0
Gambia	5,000	2.5
Belgian Congo (and Ruanda-Urundi) ..	1,000,000	8.5
Uganda	280,000	4.0
Kenya	450,000	8.0
Tanganyika	400,000	6.0
Zanzibar	5,000	4.0
Northern Rhodesia ..	250,000	13.0
Nyasaland	120,000	5.0
Southern Rhodesia ..	530,000	24.0
Union of South Africa	3,000,000	21.0

character of the African working class and how this affects the trade union movement and poses certain problems which are specific for Africa.

Side by side with the growth of the working class there has developed especially in recent years considerable urbanisation. For example, Dakar has jumped from 132,000 in 1945 to 300,000 in 1955, Bamako from 40,000 in 1946 to 100,000 in 1955, Leopoldville from 110,000 in 1946 to 340,000 in 1955, and Lagos from 126,000 in 1931 to 270,000 in 1955. Many other examples of this remarkable growth could be given.

Side by side with the growth of the African working class has been a new drive for profits and increased exploitation by the big monopolies. The big English and American monopolies controlling copper, tin, gold, diamonds, coffee, tobacco, cocoa, vegetable oils, cotton and trade have in the past ten years reaped enormous profits from their control of the resources of Africa.

Workers Organise

The increased exploitation of the African workers, for which ample evidence can be given, has naturally led to an increased resistance by the workers themselves. Indeed it is in this very period that the most marked growth of the working class and trade union movement has been seen. This is particularly true of Kenya, Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia, Nigeria and Ghana, as well as in French Equatorial and Western Africa. True there was some development of the African working class movement earlier in the century. In fact there is record as far back as 1874 of an African workers' strike in Freetown, Sierra Leone. After the First

World War there was some growth of the trade union movement, an African Railway Workers' Union was formed in Sierra Leone and a wave of strikes developed in 1919-1920 in the Union of South Africa, outstanding amongst which was the successful strike of the Cape Town dockers and railwaymen. This development in South Africa brought into being the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.) which was in effect a large general union with all the weaknesses and problems associated with early efforts in western capitalist countries to form "one big union". At its peak in the 1920s the I.C.U. had a membership of 100,000 workers, but, as a result of internal weaknesses and repression by employers and the Government, it rapidly disintegrated and is now only a memory in the minds of African workers.

In the period between the two world wars there was a certain growth of workers' organisations, although in the main the outstanding characteristic in this period was one of lack of trade unions side by side with the outburst of sporadic and spontaneous strikes, some of them of very short duration. Outstanding amongst the strikes in this inter-war period one can mention the Sierra Leone railway strike in 1919; the French-Niger railway strike in 1925; the Sierra Leone railway strike in 1926; and the Northern Rhodesian copper strike in 1935. These were in the main treated by the Government as "illegal revolts" and all the force of repression was used against them.

New Tactics of Imperialism

Trade unionism only really developed in most parts of Africa as a post-war phenomenon although trade unions were allowed in French Africa after being given some legal rights by the Popular Front Government in 1937. In addition there was some trade union development in South Africa before the Second World War.

If one examines the position in the British African colonies, for example, the change in the situation is very marked. Before the Second World War British imperialism maintained its domination over the African workers solely by means of repression. Trade unions were illegal in practically every British colony. In fact in 1930 there were only three registered trade unions in all the colonial territories in the British Empire. And these three organisations were only tame ineffectual bodies tolerated by imperialism because they did not really represent the workers or fight for their demands.

Already, by the eve of the war, however, the development of working class struggles in the colonies was forcing British imperialism to adopt new tactics. The large-scale demonstrations and strikes which shook the British West Indies in 1937 were regarded by the imperialists as a warning

signal. It was obvious that the old methods of rule were insufficient. New additional methods had to be found to prevent the formation of a militant, class-conscious African working class and strong, united trade union organisations.

Government advisers developed the conception that under government control tame trade unions should be sponsored, which would co-operate with the employers and the government, and act as a cover which the government could set to work to destroy the workers' movement and whatever genuine, militant organisations that had been established.

Further compulsion on British imperialism to find a new way of holding colonial workers in check came after the 1941 strike of African copper miners in Northern Rhodesia. Once again the solution proposed by British imperialism was the encouragement of so-called "responsible" trade unions authorised and controlled by the government—that is, unions which would ensure undisturbed profits for the big monopolies.

It was only after the Second World War that this new policy of British imperialism really began to operate. The experiences of the war against fascism and the victory itself helped to release a powerful movement for democratic advance and national liberation throughout the world. This movement was very marked in colonial countries, where the workers, alive to the possibilities in the new situation, rapidly developed trade union organisation and thus forced from a reluctant British Government *de facto* recognition of trade unions, even though, for a time, legal recognition was still withheld in a number of countries.

It was clear that it had become increasingly difficult for British imperialism to rule in the old way, solely by repression, since the colonial workers were not prepared to go on living in the old way. Further, the ideological effect on the minds of the British workers of the victory over fascism had made it more difficult for the British Government to justify to the British workers repression against trade unionism in the colonies. Two other factors also compelled British imperialism to change its tactics. The formation of the United Nations and the role played in this organisation by the representatives of the Soviet Union and the people's democracies (and later by former colonial countries which had recently won their independence) constantly exposed the oppression of colonial peoples. A further important factor was the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945. This powerful organisation, which embraced the overwhelming majority of the organised workers of the world, included in its ranks trade union organisations from a vast number of former colonial countries as well as from countries struggling to be

free. The declared policy of the World Federation of Trade Unions, from its very foundation, was one of moral and material help to colonial workers and opposition to every form of imperialist oppression. The existence of the W.F.T.U., its constant protests against the violation of trade union rights in the colonies and its consistent championing of the cause of colonial workers and trade unions through its interventions at the International Labour Organisation, and at the United Nations Economic and Social Council, was also a factor which imperialism had to take into account.

The most decisive factor, however, forcing British imperialism to adopt this new policy, was the actual growth of working class organisation and militancy in the African territories themselves. Report after report reveals the extent to which historical necessity had forced a new policy on British imperialism. Thus Major G. St. J. Orde Browne, Labour Advisor to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in his report on *Labour Conditions in East Africa* (1946), in advocating this new policy refers to the fact that the trade union movement was "already perceptible in East Africa" and stresses the need for a new policy to encourage "negotiations in a reasonable fashion" in place of "extravagant demands, backed by the threat of immediate strike".

New Forms of Repression

Similarly, the report of the *Commission of Enquiry into the Disorders in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria* (November 1949) stated that facts had to be faced. "There can be no turning back the hands of the clock now. Trade unionism is part and parcel of the law of Nigeria; it cannot be ignored; it must be made to work."

Perhaps the clearest exposition of this new policy of British imperialism towards trade unions in Africa is to be found in *Trade Unionism in African Colonies*, a booklet written in 1949 by R. E. Luyt, who later became Trade Union Advisor in Northern Rhodesia and then Labour Commissioner in Kenya. In this booklet he writes:

"African workers, growing rapidly aware that it is in their interest to organise and act collectively . . . will organise and will act collectively whether governments or employers or anybody else wish to permit it or not. And such not permitted, possibly illegal, collective action and organisation, by virtue of being illegal or without recognition, tends to be led by men more revolutionary and more irresponsible and less reasonable than the accepted and recognised trade union leaders have been."

It was on the basis of this outlook that British imperialism set into motion its new policy towards the African trade unions, aimed at bringing about division within their ranks and reducing their fighting strength. In essence the new policy can be summed up as follows: if imperialism cannot prevent

the development of trade unionism in Africa, then at least it intends to try and ensure that such trade unions as it permits will develop on "sound lines"—by which it means on lines approved of by Whitehall, Washington and the big monopolies which drain off millions of pounds profits from the colonies every year. This "new policy" of British imperialism is in essence the same as the old. It is not intended as a substitute for repression but as a means of making it easier to continue and intensify repression.

One needs only to look at what has happened to the working class in Africa in the last few years to see this—the shooting down and arrest of workers in the Gold Coast in 1948-49; the shooting down of twenty-one miners at Enugu in Nigeria in 1949; the deportation of trade union leaders in Kenya in 1950, accompanied by the dissolution of the East African Trade Union Congress; the brutal suppression by British naval forces of the dockers' strike in Tanganyika in 1950, accompanied by the arrest of eighty trade unionists, including the entire leadership of the union; the constant persecution of trade unionists in Southern Rhodesia and in Northern Rhodesia, culminating in 1956-57 in the removal of all the militant miners' leaders in Northern Rhodesia and a ban being placed on their re-entry into the copper belt.

The Struggle Grows

As a result of this double-edged policy of the British Government the past ten years has witnessed the virtual break-up of a number of the most militant trade union organisations in the British colonies of Africa and the establishment in their place of official organisations recognised by the government. However, whatever may have been the intentions of British imperialism at the outset, life has a way of asserting itself. The workers of Africa, like the workers in all colonial countries, want a better life. They want higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, social security systems, old-age pensions, compensation for industrial injuries, better housing, trade union rights and better health and educational facilities. Increasingly they realise that to obtain these things it is necessary to organise as a class, to form trade unions, to struggle in unity against the big monopolies which exploit them. In the course of such struggles they increasingly become aware of the fact that a necessary precondition for such advances is the winning of national independence so that the African people themselves can develop the economies of their countries to meet their own needs instead of having the wealth of the country extracted to increase the profits of shareholders in London and New York.

It is for this reason that in practice the "new

policy" of British imperialism towards the trade unions is constantly breaking down and finding itself faced with not only the growing organisation of African workers but also with ever greater militancy and determination to struggle. Already in the period 1951-55 strike statistics showed a growing readiness on the part of African workers to take action in support of their demands.

The period 1955-56 saw a still greater development of the strike movement in Africa. Outstanding was the strike of dockers in Mombasa, Kenya; the 18-day strike of the 40,000 tin miners and the 12-day strike of the 40,000 building workers in Nigeria; the strike of 10,000 workers on the sugar-cane plantations in Uganda; the 3-month strike of 30,000 miners against the British mine owners on the Gold Coast; and the 58-day strike of the copper miners in Northern Rhodesia. In several of these countries, such as Northern Rhodesia and Nigeria, the number of days lost through strikes reached new records.

Fresh Attacks

British imperialism, seeing with apprehension that its policy of fostering tame trade unions which it thought to control is breaking down, is constantly being forced to make fresh attacks against the very trade unions which it itself originally helped to sponsor. Thus, for example, in Northern Rhodesia in the past twelve months militant trade union leaders have been arrested, removed from their union positions and deported to out-of-the-way villages. Others have been persecuted, and even their families have not been spared. Both in Kenya and Tanganyika, faced with the growing strength of the trade unions, the government has threatened to take action in the past two years—in the former case threatening to declare the Federation of Labour illegal and in the latter case preparing to crush by force a general strike which the Tanganyika Federation of Labour had proposed to organise. In Nigeria the attack has taken a different form—this time divisions have been brought about within the ranks of the trade union movement and a second trade union centre formed at the beginning of 1957.

Despite these difficulties the workers of Africa are continuing to build up their trade union organisations and to transform them more and more into genuine weapons of struggle in the service of the working class. In the comparatively recent period trade union centres have been established in Tanganyika, Uganda, Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia.

The present position of the trade union movement in Africa reveals the following:

TABLE 2

<i>Territory</i>	<i>No. of African and other non-European wage earners</i>	<i>Membership of trade unions</i>
Uganda	280,000	10,000
Kenya	450,000	50,000
Tanganyika	400,000	15,000
Northern Rhodesia	250,000	50,000
Southern Rhodesia	530,000	10,000
Nyasaland	120,000	5,000
Gambia	5,000	1,000
Sierra Leone	80,000	15,000
Ghana	200,000	100,000
Nigeria and British Cameroons	500,000	150,000
South Africa	3,000,000	40,000
French West Africa	350,000	250,000
French Cameroons	125,000	50,000
French Equatorial Africa	190,000	5,000

(The above figures are compiled partly on the basis of figures provided by the trade union organisations themselves or government reports and partly on the basis of the author's own estimates.)

It can thus be seen that the number of African workers organised in trade unions is now approximately 1 million. This represents, it is true, only some 12 per cent of the number of African workers but already it represents a significant organised force which, despite all setbacks, has continued to grow, both in membership and in experience.¹

The African working class still faces many acute problems in its efforts to build up its trade union movement. The African working class itself has its own specific problems. It is a new class closely linked with the countryside to which it constantly returns, and under strong tribal influences. This tends to delay the growth of class consciousness amongst African workers who, as a class, are unstable in the sense that there is a constant drift of workers from the mines and factories into the countryside. This characteristic is aggravated by the fact that most African labour is migrant labour, most of the more developed regions drawing a large part of their labour from more depressed colonial territories, sometimes adjacent, but very often distant. The result of all this is that there is a very high labour turnover. For example, in 1947, among the African employees of the Kenya and

Uganda Railway, almost 50 per cent had less than three years' service and one-third had worked for less than one year. It should also be taken into account that most African labour is unskilled or, at best, semi-skilled, and employed mainly in agriculture, mining, government services and transport. Manufacturing industry plays a very small part in the economy of almost all African territories.

If one poses the question as to why trade unionism in Africa is still relatively weak one has to take into account that there are objective reasons for this, beyond the immediate control of the trade union movement. The existence of migratory labour is quite clearly a major drawback to trade union organisation. Workers who are continually moving to and fro between the towns and the countryside are difficult to organise, and migrant workers often do not return to the same factory or even the same town after a spell of farming.

African Working Class

Another factor holding back trade unionism among Africans is that they are restricted mainly to unskilled work. Skilled workers everywhere find it easier to organise successfully. They are better able to bargain with the employers who find it difficult to replace them. That is why trade unionism originally began in most countries with the skilled craftsmen.

And yet, when all these objective factors have been taken into account, it has to be stated that the main obstacle preventing the more rapid growth of the African trade union movement is the persecution by the imperialists who constantly harass trade union organisations, sow division in their ranks, intimidate or remove militant leaders and constantly by manoeuvre, legal violation and repression, restrict the development of African trade unions.

But the imperialists are not succeeding. Their victories are only temporary. The struggles of the African peoples to win or consolidate their independence rises ever higher. Several territories on the African continent have already established their own independent governments and others are marching in the same direction. This is the trend of history from Khartoum to Cape Town. And as part of this trend, and playing an ever more decisive part within it, marches the African working class and trade union movement, young, relatively inexperienced, but militant, courageous, with a remarkable aptitude for organisation and constantly, through struggle, creating the unity which will bring it ultimate success.

¹ One should not forget the important trade unions in North Africa, especially in the Sudan Republic, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria.