

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 6: ACROSS BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES: HOW A DECADE OF STRIKES EMPOWERED THE EMERGENCE OF THE AFRICAN WORKING CLASS

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KEY READING:

A MILITANT MOMENT: LABOR MOVEMENTS AND STRIKES ACROSS AFRICA, 1945-55¹

The decade after World War II was a great period of labour activism in British and French Africa. The strike waves of these years belie assumptions that worker mobilization is a phenomenon of “advanced” countries. Wage labour forces in Africa were a tiny percentage of the population compared to people engaged in farming or artisanal activities; most workers at that time were not literate; the political context was oppressive; trade unions were new and often more the consequences than the instigators of strike action. African workers showed that they could act collectively across social boundaries—rural/urban, skilled/manual, public/private—as well as ethnic and linguistic diversity. The strikes - against miserable wages and working conditions and rampant inequality between white and black workers—produced results, forcing colonial administrations to increase wages, rethink the way they conceived of African workers, and reconfigure their policies.

This is a story about colonial empire, and it begins in another part of European empire. Between 1935 and 1938 a series of strikes, demonstrations, and riots broke out across the British West

¹ This paper is based on previous publications of the author, which you can find under “references”.

Indies, including areas of centuries-old sugar production and new oil producing zones. Low wages, terrible working conditions, and lack of housing and social services were issues in the strikes. In the same period there were strikes in copper mines in British Central Africa, railways in the Gold Coast, and in port cities in East Africa. The strikes were for the most part not organized by trade unions but depended on networks and face-to-face relations. They tended to spill over into what officials called “disturbances” or “riots.” British officials realized that they faced an empire-wide problem. These workers were full participants in an imperial economy, not “natives” who occasionally worked for wages. The government tried to shoehorn the labour problem into “development.” The “Colonial Development and Welfare Act” of 1940 linked promoting colonial production to improving the living situation of colonized people, concentrating on housing and services for urban workers. That left out much of Africa, where small scale production for consumption and export predominated.

World War II delayed spending on the new initiative, but the demand for labour in key sites both added to the crowded misery of urban life and put workers in a position to make demands. The war brought on strikes in ports and railways in British West Africa, a colony-wide strike of government workers in Nigeria, and strikes in port cities in East Africa and mines in Central Africa.

The strike wave came later to French Africa because of its defeat by Germany in 1940 and an Allied blockade, but when it did, it shook up the French colonial regime. It began in December 1945 in Dakar, the leading port and administrative center of French West Africa (the administrative unit combining eight colonies, now the independent countries of Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Bénin, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) . A series of strikes in the port culminated in a general strike in January. In this instance, trade unions were involved. They had been partially legalized under the Popular Front government (1936-38), suppressed during the rule of France’s collaborationist government during the war, and revived after the war. Unions of metal workers and clerks were prominent. Most important was the “Union des Syndicats,” the trade union federation, led by relatively educated activists but including both literate employees of government and businesses and the largely illiterate labourers on the docks and elsewhere in the city. The strike became a wider urban movement: market sellers



refused to sell to whites, and people assembled every day in a field to share information and vital necessities. The issue was not just poverty, but inequality, for African workers were aware of what their European counterparts were being paid. The general strike paralyzed the government, which feared both a widespread social movement and—following the old colonial myth—that workers were rural people who could quit wage employment for their farms if pushed too hard.

The strike movement as a whole lasted two months, the general strike 11 days; it was part work stoppage, part urban mass movement. It was resolved when officials resorted to something they thought they understood—industrial relations methods from France. They sent an expert to Dakar who negotiated with union leaders, conceding wage increases and establishing scales for advancement along the lines used in European France. Of even more lasting significance was the conceptual breakthrough forced on the colonial administration. It had to admit that Africans were truly workers and that they had the same needs—and similar bargaining power—as European workers. The machinery for calculating minimum wages and for negotiating between workers and employers had to be imported from Europe. Union leaders felt empowered, and they had a clear path forward: to demand the wages and benefits of European workers, including pensions, limited working hours, paid vacations, sick leave. The French labour expert drew another lesson: “There is a technique to organizing work, as with anything, and it cannot be improvised.” Officials now wanted to believe that African workers fit their models of “modern” relations among workers, employers, and the state.

The most famous strike in French Africa was the 5-month long strike of some 20,000 railway workers on all the lines of French West Africa in 1947-48. It took place on the terrain marked out by the Dakar strike of 1945-46: insistence on non-racial scales for wages and benefits. The union was well prepared, but part of its success was that railwaymen had family and other connections that enabled them to survive without pay for long months. The administration pulled its punches—refraining from expelling strikers from railway housing for instance—for fear that the African workers it needed most might return to their villages of origin. The end came when new administrators in French West Africa accepted a settlement that gave workers much of what they wanted in terms of implementing the “cadre unique”—a single wage scale for

workers of African and European origin. Above all, the strike showed that the voices of African workers would have to be heard—even within a territory that remained a colony of France and a railway administration run by Europeans.

On the other side of Africa, under a different colonizer, another iconic strike movement took place: the general strike of 1947 in the port of Mombasa, in British-ruled Kenya. The strike was not instigated by a trade union but began among dockworkers whose mobilization followed the organization of work. As in ports around the world, dock labour in Mombasa was “casual”: workers were hired by the day. They were organized into work gangs by leaders known as “serangs,” useful intermediaries for the shipping companies, which did not need to know who their workers were. But the same collective structures that facilitated recruiting workers facilitated their collective exit. The dockwork gangs were the nucleus of the strike, but it spread through much of the port and urban surrounds. The general strike, involving some 15,000 workers, paralyzed the port which was the link between upcountry Kenya and Uganda and the world economy. As in Dakar, there were daily mass meetings in what workers called “The Field of the Poor.” The anonymity of dock and other workers made it difficult for the state to get the men back to work; a striker risked a day’s pay, not a long-term job. The dockers had connections to kinsmen in adjacent rural areas, who could help to sustain them during the 12-day general strike. During the strike an embryonic union, the African Workers’ Federation, emerged, led by a clerical worker with only loose ties to the labourers at the core of the movement but with a personal connection to African politicians who intervened to bring about negotiations.

Dockers wanted above all more pay. But the strike pushed the administration to activate a plan that had been kicking around: the “decasualization” of the port, that is to develop a work force either paid a monthly salary or required to work for a set number of days per month, in short a “modern” work regime based on the employer’s full control of the workers’ time. In the context of the economy of the Kenyan coast, where many workers from nearby had access to enough land to contribute to a family’s subsistence but not enough to earn significant cash, casual work was more attractive than it is in the context of a European city. In such a situation, what economists call “straddling,” moving back and forth between different ways of making a living, fit into the life cycle of workers. They did not necessarily become fully proletarianized. But the

balance between urban and rural resources was delicate and workers could find themselves destitute, although colonial officials were concerned with the opposite possibility—that Africans could too easily hold wage employment at arm's length.

The alternative to straddling was embodied in the conventional narrative of European labour history: a path toward regular work, wages paid weekly or monthly, modest benefits, and the chance as a well-defined workforce of forming unions to defend labour's interests collectively. That happened to a significant extent in Mombasa, Dakar, the railways of French West Africa, as well as ports and railways in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria, the mines of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and in a different way—because of much more extensive development of a landless proletariat and a more rigid racial order—South Africa. In French Africa, there was extensive development of trade unions, which in turn associated themselves with the trade union federations of France, most significantly the communist affiliated *Confédération Générale du Travail*, until African labour leaders in the mid-1950s tried to develop trade union federations that were specifically African. The unions organized major strikes in the late 1940s and 1950s, and they became a political force as well, pressuring African elected representatives to France's legislature and their allies on the French left and center-left to pass in 1952 a Labor Code that guaranteed to wage workers minimum wages, certain benefits, and the right to organize and strike. A one-day general strike over much of French West Africa was instrumental in giving the French legislature the final push to enact the code. After it did so, another wave of strikes took place in much of French West Africa over the terms of implementing the code, including a two-month long strike movement in Guinea, in which Sékou Touré's decisive leadership proved a steppingstone to his political career.

The Code's benefits applied to wage workers only, not to people who worked on farms as kinsmen of the owner or as personal dependents, and not to the artisans or traders in cities who worked on their own. Wage workers were a small minority, and their successful move into a regulated, organized sector of the economy widened the gap between them and the majority of the population, urban as well as rural. Some years later, scholars adopted the euphemism "informal sector" for workers who fell outside the domain of regulated and unionized work.

In Mombasa, the next big dock strike took place in 1955. It was, unlike the strike of 1947, limited to the docks, and it was led by a trade union. By then, the port had been largely decasualized. Through the strike, the dockers improved their wages, which were increasingly seen as a long-term, if not permanent, basis for supporting a family. The leader of the dockworkers' union, Tom Mboya, who came from a distant part of the country, was catapulted into national recognition by his skilful handling of the movement. At this very time in central Kenya, Africans who had been pushed off their land by white farmers—and increasingly by African farmers similarly looking toward export markets—were engaged in an armed struggle against the state, known as the Mau Mau Emergency. That movement was put down but the British government realized it had to pass on power to Africans willing to cooperate with it. Mboya would become a leading figure of Kenya's government after independence in 1963.

Since that time, independent governments in much of Africa have either coopted or repressed African trade union leaders and movements. Some of the most effective trade union leaders of the early 1950s, like Sékou Touré of Guinea, were among the most vigorous in putting unions in their place, insisting that other parts of society were in more need of resources but above all fearing that labour leaders might challenge the great man's power. The period 1945-55 still stands out as a time of heightened labour militance, but strike movements have periodically developed since then, sometimes spilling beyond the realm of "industrial action." A general strike movement took place in Guinea as recently as February 2024. South Africa has all along witnessed a distinct pattern of labour movements, sometimes referred to as "social movement unionism" because of the way they embraced issues beyond wages and conditions in the workplace itself.

So what should we make of the strikes of the 1940s and early 1950s? Strike movements occurred where wage workers were concentrated, but these were nodal points in the networks in regional and imperial economies, so their effect on politics was greater than the size of the wage labour population would suggest. Nor was regularity of wage work a prerequisite for militance. Some of the biggest strike movements—Mombasa in 1947, Dakar in 1945-46—were urban phenomena as much as wage labour phenomena. By contrast the railway strike in French West Africa in 1948 involved a regularly employed labour force—although one of the instigating factors was a

significant portion of workers who worked regularly but were not defined as such by management. In different ways, the interplay of wage labour with other kinds of economic activities—by family members or by straddling workers—was a strength rather than a weakness of the movement.

African workers in the late 1940s had a lesson that is relevant beyond their time and their place. There is no one model of what makes possible a large-scale mobilization. Labor militancy is not just a question of building up over long periods of time a labour force concentrated in one place, attached to its form of work, be it a railway or a steel plant. The key in Dakar and Mombasa was the relationship of workers to other parts of urban society and beyond that to rural families that made it possible to organize on the scale of the strikes discussed here. Workers both raised the classic issues of wages and working conditions, using the classic weapon of labour movements, the strike, and acted within a wider social field and in the context of a colonial regime. In these instances, it was the government that wanted to define a “working class” separate from the rest of society, and in the view of officials more manageable for that reason. The strikers of Mombasa or Dakar showed that they could make powerful connections—within and beyond the realm of wage labour.

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