



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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SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

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. African workers were able to 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 their conceptions of African workers, and reconfigure their politics.

Between 1935 and 1938 a series of strikes, demonstrations, and riots broke out in different islands in the British West Indies and in parts of British Africa – mines in Central Africa, ports in East Africa, railways in West Africa. Most strikes were not organized by trade unions but depended on face-to-face relations among workers. British officials realized that they faced an empire-wide problem.

The strike wave came to French West Africa (the overarching administrative unit containing the colonies that became the independent states of Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Bénin, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) in late 1945, beginning in the port and administrative centre of Dakar, with multiple strikes in the port turning into an



11-day long general strike. Trade unions, including a federation of unions, led the strike, but it was also 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. When repression failed, French officials sent a labour expert to Dakar, who negotiated with union leaders, conceding wage increases and establishing scales for advancement like those of European France. Of lasting significance was the conceptual breakthrough forced on the administration: to accept that Africans were truly workers, not just “natives,” and that they had the same needs – and similar bargaining power – to European workers. Union leaders felt empowered.

That the colonial state now had to face off against mobilized workers was underscored by the strike of 20,000 railway workers across French West Africa, lasting five months in 1947-48 . The African railway workers’ union was well prepared, but part of its success was that railwaymen had family and other connections that enabled them to survive for long months. Workers gained much of what they wanted from the “cadre unique”–a single wage scale for workers of European and African origin–and made clear that their voices would have to be heard.

The general strike of 1947 in the port of Mombasa , in British East Africa, was not instigated by a trade union. As in many ports, dock labour was “casual”: workers were hired by the day through intermediaries. But the same collective structures that facilitated recruiting workers facilitated their exit. The strike spread through much of the city, cutting off the interior of East Africa from the world. As in Dakar, there were daily mass meetings in what workers called “The Field of the Poor.” During or shortly after the strike an embryonic union, the African Workers’ Federation, emerged.

Dockers wanted above all more pay. But the strike pushed the administration toward the “decasualization” of the port, employing a work force paid a monthly wage or required to work for a set number of days per month, that is a “modern” work regime based on the employer’s control of the workers’ time. Many workers in East Africa, however, engaged in what economists call “straddling,” moving back and forth between rural



farming and urban labour. But the balance was delicate, and workers could easily be deprived of needed resources, although colonial officials feared the opposite— that Africans could live without waged employment.

The next big strike in Mombasa, in 1955, was limited to dockworkers and organized by their union. It fits the conventional narrative of European labour history: regular work, wages paid weekly or monthly, modest benefits, and the chance for a well-defined workforce to form unions and defend labour's interests. In French Africa there was also extensive development of trade unions, which in turn associated themselves with the trade union federations of France until African labour leaders in the mid-1950s developed specifically African federations. The unions organized major strikes in the late 1940s and 1950s and pressured the French legislature to pass in 1952 a Labor Code that guaranteed to workers minimum wages, certain benefits, and the right to organize and strike. A one-day general strike over much of French West Africa gave the legislature the final push to enact the Code. Delayed implementation of the Code then became the object of another wave of strikes across French West Africa.

The Code applied to wage workers only, not to people who worked on farms as kinsmen or personal dependents of the owner, nor to artisans or traders in cities who worked on their own. Years later, scholars adopted the euphemism “informal sector” for workers who fell outside the domain of regulated and unionized work.

After independence, governments in much of Africa 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 peasants were in more need of resources than workers, but above all fearing challenges from organized labour.

So what should we make of the heightened militancy of 1945-55? The strikes occurred at nodal points in the networks in imperial economies, so their effect on politics was greater than the size of the wage labour force would suggest. Nor was the irregularity of work



an impediment to collective action. Indeed, regularization of work, as in Mombasa, narrowed the scope of subsequent labour action.

There is no one model of what makes possible a large-scale social mobilization, not just the building up over time of a labour force in one place, attached to one form of work. The key to large-scale collective action in Dakar and Mombasa was the relationship of workers to other parts of urban society and beyond that to rural families. 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. 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.