

Labor Trouble in Jamaica

By George Padmore

LABOR disturbances have broken out again in the West Indies. This time in Jamaica, the largest and best known of the British islands.

On the eve of the opening of the Empire Exhibition at Glasgow, which Lord Elgin, the president, informed the King and Queen represented a glorious contribution to the peace and prosperity of the peoples of the Empire, the Jamaica police were shooting and bayonetting native workers for daring to demand a living wage.

Four workers were killed. One of them, an old Negro woman, was bayoneted to death when the police attacked a demonstration of natives at Frome, an agricultural community in the County of Westmoreland, on Monday, May 2. Several scores were also wounded. Over a hundred were arrested, and several of them have been convicted and sent to prison for periods varying from one month to 12 months' hard labor. A wave of repression is sweeping the island.

These tragic events marked the climax of a strike declared by plantation laborers employed by the West Indies Sugar Company, owned by Messrs. Tate & Lyle Limited.

For months the agricultural workers of Trelawney were demanding an increase of wages to meet the rise in the cost of living. Last January 1,500 laborers refused to harvest the canes for the wages offered.

Unorganized and without experienced trade union leaders to negotiate with the employers, 600 laborers driven to despair by hunger, marched to the office of Manager Lindo, of the sugar factory on Monday morning. The men were accompanied by their wives and ragged children.

Their spokesman demanded 4s. (\$1.00) a day for field laborers and higher rates for skilled artisans such as carpenters and mechanics employed in the factory. Although the company has been making tremendous profits in recent years, the manager refused the demands of the men, offering a flat rate of 2s. (50¢) for unskilled and 3s. 6d. (87¢) for skilled labor. If the men refused to accept these terms, construction work would cease. The crowd was addressed by its leaders and the slogan "A dollar a day or no work" was taken up. The temper of the men was rising. They formed groups, and arming themselves with sticks and tools, attacked

The dark-skinned citizens of the British Empire in the West Indies—first in Trinidad and now in Jamaica—are being told by British bullets and bayonets that they cannot agitate for relief from slave wages on the sugar plantations

the office and beat up the European staff.

All the time the police had been standing by, and on the arrival of a fresh crowd, fixed bayonets were ordered and men were prodded out of the yard. Unarmed, the crowd took to throwing stones, which was followed by a warning from the police. The Riot Act was read and shots were fired over the heads of the strikers. More stones were thrown, and the next volley, lasting for ten minutes, was directed straight at the men, women and children, who by that time numbered over a thousand. Many were wounded, and four workers were killed. One of them, an old Negro woman, was bayoneted

to death. The crowd went wild, and rescuing as many of the wounded as they could, they retreated into the fields setting the cane on fire. The manager and his staff fled from the scene, but were later rescued by the police and brought to Kingston in disguise. Among the workers 93 arrests were made. Several of them have been convicted for rioting and sent to prison for periods varying from one to 12 months' hard labor.

This disturbance was not an isolated one. Since its occurrence a general strike has taken place in Kingston. Simultaneously with the celebration of Empire Day in England comes the news that the city scavengers had gone on strike and garbage had been left uncollected for days. Factories are closed and shops and offices have been forced to shut. All transport services have ceased, and a dockers' hold-up has paralyzed shipping. The governor of the island, Sir Edward Denham, noted for the ruthless manner in which he crushed the Bathurst workers and put down the seamen's strike when he was Governor of Gambia, is adopting the same firm methods against the Jamaican workers. There have been more killings, more woundings, and more arrests, including two labor leaders, Bustamante and Grant. He has stated that he will use the military, if necessary, to maintain essential services. Meanwhile, the cruiser Ajax, renowned for its similar mission to Trinidad, has been ordered to Jamaica, to intimidate the workers so desperately struggling to force a betterment of their conditions.

Historical Background

As bad as conditions are in Trinidad, in Jamaica they are much worse, for unlike Trinidad with its petroleum and asphalt to supplement agriculture, Jamaica is entirely agrarian. The island's economy is absolutely dependent on the export of bananas, coffee, ground nuts, sugar and its by-product rum, pineapples and other tropical fruits. Furthermore, there is a population problem. In proportion to its size—4,450 square miles, Jamaica is more thickly peopled than many European countries now demanding colonial expansion. It has a population of 1,138,558, about 290 to the square mile.

The majority of the inhabitants are Negroes, the descendants of slaves



Market Day in Jamaica

brought from Africa. There is also a large colored or half-caste population, which constitutes the upper middle class. The whites, numbering about 20,000, are the real masters of the colony.

Historically speaking, Jamaica is one of the oldest sections of the Empire. Cromwell annexed it from Spain in 1655 and since then it has been the happy hunting ground of British imperialists. First the buccaneers who made Port Royal their headquarters, from where they raided the neighboring French and Spanish colonies, and later the Sugar Kings, who imported the slaves. Not without reason. Winston Churchill, speaking at a banquet given to the Duke of Kent by the West Indian sugar planters at the Dorchester Hotel in London July 20, 1937, reminded his audience:

"The West Indies two hundred years ago bulked very largely in the minds of the people who were making Britain and making the British Empire. Our possession of the West Indies, like that of India—the Colonial Plantations and Developments, as they were then called—gave us the strength, the support, but especially the capital, the wealth, at a time when no other European nation possessed such a reserve, which enabled us to come through the great struggles of the Napoleonic wars, the keen competition of the commerce in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and enabled us not only to acquire this world-wide appendage of possessions which we have, but also to lay the foundations of that commercial and financial leadership which, when the world was young, when everything outside Europe was undeveloped, enabled us to make our great position in the world."

After the emancipation of the slaves in 1834, for which the Jamaica planters received £6,161,927 compensation out of the £20,000,000 voted by Parliament, these landlords started Indian and Chinese coolies to work their plantations.

This system of indentured labor was later discontinued, for during the latter part of the last century and the beginning of the present, the island suffered terribly from hurricanes and earthquakes which ruined many of the plantations. Some of these derelict estates were bought out by the Government to settle refugees upon them. This is how the black peasantry came into being. About 140,000 acres of land were divided into lots of 5 acres and is under peasant cultivation, chiefly bananas, but large-scale agriculture is still predominant. Of the 837,000 acres still in the hands of big proprietors, 40,091 acres represent sugar cane; 6,265 coffee; 40,074 coconuts; 72,909 bananas; 17,774 ground nuts; 964 cocoa; 2,008 sisal.

The balance represents fruit and other miscellaneous crops.

The Creole or local born whites and absentee landlords form the plantocracy. Many of the former are also engaged in trade and commerce. They and their agents dominate the economic and political life of the country.

Colonial "Democracy"

Democratic government, as practiced in England, does not obtain in Jamaica, notwithstanding the fact that the island has been a British colony for nearly three centuries. The imperial authority is vested in a Captain-General and Commander-in-Chief, who receives a salary of £5,500 and rules with the aid of a Privy Council and a Legislative Council. The latter is partly elected and partly appointed. The Governor is the President of both Councils. There are 30 members on the Legislative Council; 6 ex-officio, 10 appointed by the Governor, and 14 elected on a property franchise which makes it absolutely impossible for a member of the working class to get on the Council. Out of a population of 1,138,558 there were only 66,000 registered voters in 1937. An elected member must have an income of £200 per annum, which is the lowest in the West Indies. For in Trinidad the requirement is £400 per annum. The result is that the masses of the people, who hardly earn more than 2s. (50¢) a day, have no constitutional means of voicing their grievances. They are the lesser breed without the law. It is therefore not surprising that when they can no longer bear their burdens they break out in violence. "We have spoken in a peaceful way; the Government has apparently deafened its ears; but sometimes the deaf can be made to hear," recently declared the local labor leader in a statement to the British Press.

A special feature of the Jamaica constitution which is considered one of the most liberal in the Colonial Empire, provides that any nine of the elected members can veto any financial measure, while the unanimous vote of the 14 on other matters can be overridden by the ex-officio and nominated members unless the Governor declares that such a decision is of vital importance to the public interests. In other words, the Governor is a hardly disguised dictator.

Social Conditions

Commenting upon the social misery and starvation which abound, a Jamaican correspondent writing in *The Manchester Guardian* of April 8 says: "About 50,000 children are roaming the country parts, not being able to go to

school, chiefly because of lack of food and clothing. Things have gone so bad that a short time ago hundreds of ragged men, women and children marched to the doors of the prison in Kingston, pleading for admittance, so that they might get food. . . . There are at least 75,000 unemployed and the majority of those who are employed are very little better off for they work on empty stomachs." This is not surprising, for the cost of living is far above the incomes of the majority of the population.

According to the latest official report on the economic and social conditions issued by the Government of Jamaica in 1936, "during 1935 a four pound loaf of bread cost 1s.4d. (33¢) and a laborer's pay therefore, provided he worked six days a week, was equal to fifteen loaves in Government employ and 13 in private." The report goes on to say that in 1936 "the cost of living in Jamaica although it is lower by 8.2 points than for 1935 (being 121.8 as against 130), is still considerably above pre-war level. Taking a 100 as the index figure for the year 1914-15, the index figure for 1935 works out at an average of 121.8 made up as follows:

Foodstuffs, local products (yams and sweet potatoes), 134.4 per cent.; imported articles, 119; clothing 123.4; miscellaneous, 123.1. Total, 365.5. The average is 121.8."

At the present time the prevailing price of foodstuffs in the island is as follows: bread, 8 ounces, 2d; sugar, 2½d to 3d per pound; flour, 1½d to 2d per pound; rice, 1½d to 2d per pound; salmon, 6d a pound; herrings, 3d; cod fish, 4d; mackerel, 3d; salt beef, 6d; salt pork, 9d; condensed milk 4½d to 5d per tin; margarine, 6d a pound. More than 75 per cent. of the people walk about bare-footed. They are too poor to buy even the cheapest kind of footwear.

The Ottawa Agreement has affected the standard of life considerably, because it has driven cheap Japanese goods out of the island, and the masses are unable to buy the more expensive British commodities.

The industrial and agricultural workers are not the only sufferers. High taxation, the rising cost of living, with the corresponding lowering of the price of agricultural products, has hit the peasantry considerably. "Thousands of small properties have been put up for sale for non-payment of taxes. Some have been sold." Those who still manage to hold on to their land are forced to seek work on the large plantations in order to augment their incomes. The small banana growers are completely at the mercy of the foreign monopoly

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Lynching

In February of each year, under the leadership of J. G. St. Clair Drake, instructor of sociology at Dillard university, New Orleans, Louisiana, youth councils and college chapters hold their annual National Youth Demonstration Against Lynching.

Education

American Education Week, sponsored annually by the National Education Association, is the occasion for nation-wide youth mass meetings against educational inequalities. These are held for the purpose of stimulating an awareness of the inequalities of educational opportunities which Negro youth face, locally as well as nationally, and of the educational program of the N.A.A.C.P. as a basis for activity and for a greater support of the Association's program. Parent Teacher organizations and other community groups cooperate with the youth councils in cities and towns, while on college campuses the faculties and student bodies participate in student meetings under the direction of college chapters.

For two successive years, through a nation-wide radio broadcast, the attention of American educators, public officials, parents, and other citizens have been focused on these inequalities and the need of their elimination. Concurrently with national campaigns youth councils have initiated local educational activities.

Jobs

In the field of equal economic opportunities, youth councils and college chapters nationally cooperate in the pro-

motion of Vocational Opportunity Week. Locally, youth groups are attempting to open up avenues of employment and eliminate discrimination in jobs and relief.

Civil Liberties

Youth councils and college chapters have continually cooperated with senior branches and the national office in the numerous legal defense cases of the Association and in the fight to free the Scottsboro youths. Efforts are being made by youth councils to secure fair municipal recreational facilities, as in parks and playgrounds, to have representation on the municipal housing committees, to eliminate segregation and discrimination in theaters, restaurants, and other public places.

Looking towards the 1938 elections and the 1940 presidential election, N.A.A.C.P. youth leaders are offering their assistance in drives to register the unregistered voters, and to stimulate the registered voters to use the ballot. The youth sections of the annual conferences offer the opportunity where youth members face their problems together, seek for solutions, decide upon methods of approach, and devise ways and means of building a more vital national youth program and a stronger membership. At the youth section of the 28th annual conference in 1937 at Detroit, Michigan, there were 343 youth delegates in attendance from twenty states and forty-four cities. The South was well represented, for delegates came from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, as well as from northern and northwestern states, representing youth in factories, on farms, in mills and in schools.

Through the channel of the N.A.A.C.P., youth are uniting and working, according to the N.A.A.C.P. youth pledge, "To secure the fundamental constitutional rights for twelve millions of American Negroes, in order that they may make a more significant contribution to the building of a more desirable social order."

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capitalists. The United Fruit Company of America, the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company and Elders and Fyfe Limited control the export market and dictate the price of bananas. They work hand in glove with the big planters who are organizing the Jamaica Banana Producers Association, which is subsidized by the Government.

Appeal to British Workers

"Tell England the conditions on this island are dreadful. In Trelawney there are workers earning only ninepence a day. Here in Kingston there are slums which make the city an appalling refuse heap. In my own district the workers are forced to live in kitchens and lavatories. They have abandoned them now to live in the open air." This pathetic appeal of the strikers' leader, epitomizes the abject poverty and social degradation of the toiling masses of Jamaica and must not go unanswered. The Labor Opposition in Parliament and the Trades Union Congress must raise their voices and protest against these terrible conditions existing in the Colonial Empire. They must demand a living wage and better social conditions for the Jamaican workers and other dark-skinned toilers in the colonies. For let it never be forgotten that "Labor in the white skin can never free itself while labor in the black is branded."

In Memoriam

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had been beaten up by a mob of office-holders in Texas, resigned and James Weldon Johnson was elected as secretary,—many people sincerely believing that he was too much of a poet, writer and dreamer to fill the position successfully. But he soon proved full capacity for the position. Under his leadership the first anti-lynching bill was voted upon in the Congress of the nation. It was known as the Dyer Anti-lynching bill, named for the congressman from St. Louis, Missouri, who introduced it,

Pledge of N.A.A.C.P. Youth

We believe in the advancement of Negroes—

Not in a spirit of racialism,
But as a contribution to a common American culture.

We believe in fundamental social and economic change—

Leading us into a new cooperative commonwealth,
Dedicated to freedom, equality, and security of all.

We believe that to struggle for the rights of Negroes—

Is to fight fascist terror,
And to help in building the new society.

We believe in preserving and extending democracy—

As a bulwark against fascism,
As an aid to social change.

We, therefore, pledge ourselves to fight, relentlessly—

With the ballot,
In the courts,
With education of public opinion,
And the enactment of legislation;
Through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
For equal opportunities in all spheres,
For protection and extension of civil liberties,
And against the insane fury of the mob.