

# **“Liberty or Death”: Working Class Agitation and the Labour Question in Colonial Freetown, 1938–1939<sup>1</sup>**

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**Summary:** This article examines the labour disturbances which occurred in Freetown, Sierra Leone (Figure 1), between 1938 and 1939. Contrary to the prevailing interpretation that the colonial state in Africa was faced with an alternative of either forcefully pushing the working class out of the city or moving towards some form of corporatism, this article argues that such an option was only feasible in situations where labour was relatively quiescent or where a casual labour problem existed. In Freetown, where a stable labour force existed, the choice was between accepting a militant labour movement over whom officials had little or no control, or creating a labour movement that would eschew militant protest and follow the path dictated from above. The existence of a militant organization committed to continuous agitation and the use of strike weapons to force employers to acknowledge the presence of a working class were critical factors in shaping official response to labour disturbances in the British colonies.

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If colonial officials had generally scoffed at the existence of an urban working class before World War II, the strike waves of the pre-war years and the continuous agitation by workers and the urban poor in the post-war era prompted them to rethink anew the question of what to do with African workers. From complacency to frenzied action, colonial officials found themselves tinkering with the minutest detail of workers' lives as well as issues that questioned the meaning of colonialism itself. Underlying this rethinking was the problem of development and the role workers and the labouring population in general were to play in the post-war period. The actions of workers between 1935 and 1955, which forced imperial policies to shift gear, were as much a reflection of the inadequacy of colonial policies as they were of the emergence of a conscious working class. As workers' actions threatened to remake the rules governing labour-management relations from below, officials

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Martin Klein, Myron Echenberg and Michael West for their comments on an earlier version of this article. I am also grateful to the editorial committee and its anonymous referees for their suggestions.

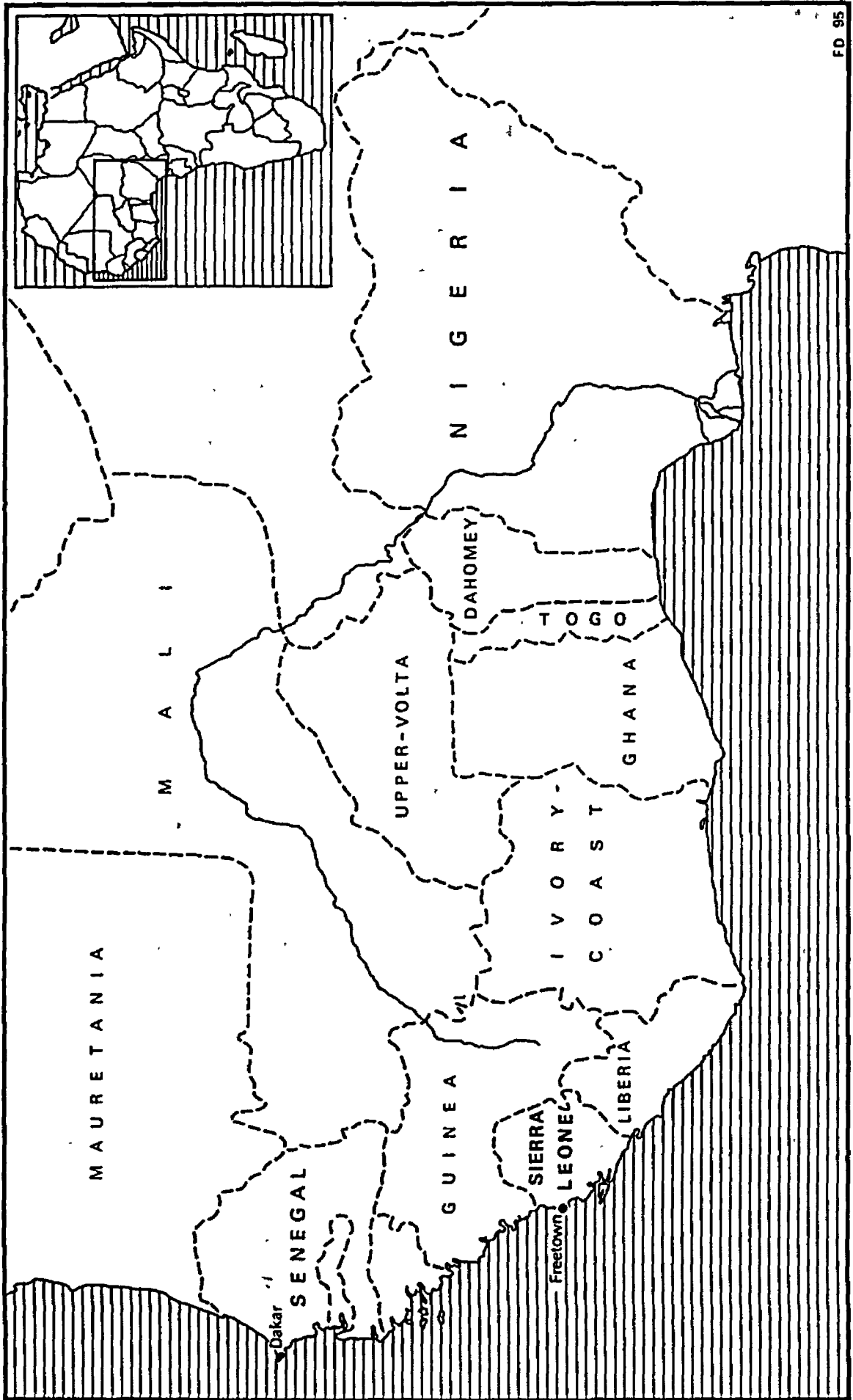


Figure 1. Map of West Africa, showing Freetown, Sierra Leone

moved in to suppress and control workers' independent action and to set in motion the process of remaking from above.<sup>2</sup>

The disturbances of these twenty-odd years were important not only because they occurred in the cities, the seat of colonial domination, but because they threatened to promote a kind of order – link with nationalists and militant trade unionists and the “riff raff” – which ran counter to the colonial vision of urban Africa and the role of colonies in a post-war Europe. Yet in spite of their importance, very little study has been done of this period. From 1935 to 1955, three types of disturbances enveloped the cities: the phenomenon of the general strike involving workers, the urban poor, and in some instances market women;<sup>3</sup> strikes by specific workers in key industries: miners in Sierra Leone, 1935 and 1938; the Copperbelt disturbances in Zambia, 1935 and 1940; rail workers in French West Africa and municipal workers in Mombasa;<sup>4</sup> and lastly the popular type incorporating a cross-section of the urban populace such as squatter movements in South Africa in the 1940s; strikes and riots in the Cameroons and the Gold Coast, 1945 and 1948; and the strikes and riots in Marampa and Freetown, 1950 and 1955 respectively.<sup>5</sup> What occurred in Freetown between 1938 and 1939 cuts across the above typology of urban disturbance.

The strikes in Freetown were industry specific, as well as city-wide. They involved workers, labourers and the unemployed – all rolled into one. They were aimed at wrenching concessions from state officials, to improve wages and working conditions and to win the right for labour

<sup>2</sup> For an empire account of this policy see Peter Weiler, “Forming Responsible Trade Unions: The Colonial Office, Colonial Labor, and the Trades Union Congress”, *Radical History Review* (1984), pp. 28–30.

<sup>3</sup> See the following: John Higginson, “Bringing the Workers Back In: Worker Protest and Popular Intervention In Katanga, 1931–1941”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 22, 2 (1988); Wale Oyemakinde, “The Nigerian General Strike of 1945”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7 (1975); John Iliffe, “The Creation of Group Consciousness: A History of the Dockworkers of Dar es Salaam”, in Robin Cohen and Richard Sandbrooke, *Development of an African Working Class* (London, 1975); Anthony Clayton, “The General Strike in Zanzibar, 1948”, *Journal of African History*, 17 (1976).

<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Abdullah, “Profit versus Social Reproduction: Labor Protests in the Sierra Leonean Iron Ore Mines, 1933–38”, *African Studies Review*, 35, 3 (1992); Ian Henderson, “Early African Leadership: The Copperbelt Disturbances of 1935 and 1940”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12 (1973); Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront* (New Haven, 1987); J. Suret-Canal, “The French West African Railway Workers’ Strike, 1947–1948”, in Robin Cohen, Jean Copans and Peter Gutkind (eds), *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> A.W. Stadler, “Birds in the Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg, 1944–1947”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6 (1979), pp. 93–123; Paul Maylam, “The ‘Blackbelt’: African Squatters in Durban 1935–1950”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 17 (1983), pp. 413–427; Richard Joseph, “Settlers, Strikers and Sans-Travail: The Douala Riots of 1945”, *Journal of African History*, 15 (1974), pp. 669–681; Joseph Engwenyu, “Labour and Politics in Ghana: The Militant Phase 1947–1950”, *Canadian Association of African Studies* (1982).

to organize. If these demands by workers in Freetown for a just wage and the right to organize was a peculiar characteristic of these years, the emergence of a united front organization with a working-class following was not. The existence of a militant grassroot organization – the Sierra Leone Youth League – with an alternative conception of what officials considered acceptable industrial relations makes the Freetown experience distinct in comparison to the disturbances elsewhere. Consequently, the organization was stifled and its organizing secretary arrested.

In a study of Mombasa, the most important city port in colonial East Africa, Frederick Cooper has argued that the real problem was that “The urban working class had come into being before its place in the city had been blessed by the colonial state”. “The choice”, he continued, was “between forcefully pushing it out while ruthlessly containing it during its necessary sojourns in the workplace or else moving toward a structure of labor that would tame and incorporate that class into a pattern of stable jobs, stable family life, stable housing, a stable community life, and eventually a stable political system.”

Cooper’s study deals with casual labour/dockers and their transformation into a stable labour force. Because Mombasa’s workforce had to undergo a double transformation, from slave to casual labour and from casual labour into a stable workforce, the problem of Mombasa was seen in official circles as one of decasualization. Compared to Freetown, which was established in 1787 as an abode for freed slaves repatriated from London, Nova Scotia and Jamaica, workers had a stable life and were accepted as part of the urban landscape.<sup>6</sup> In the freed slaves settlement that evolved in nineteenth-century Freetown, the labouring population/nascent working class was not seen as a casual labour force. Between 1884 and 1938 when unions were non-existent elsewhere in colonial Africa, workers in Freetown formed unions and bargained with state and management. In Freetown, and possibly elsewhere on the west coast, the option of forcefully pushing out the working class did not exist because casual labour was not at the centre of the problem.

An examination of the Freetown experience suggests that colonial officials were willing to concede to demands by labour only when a strike movement/disturbance threatened to overturn the *status quo*. Thus officials refused to establish labour departments (even when they were urged to do so by the colonial office), were reluctant to recognize unions even though they existed before the 1930 Passfield declaration and had gone on strike and negotiated with state and management. However, when the Youth League emerged in 1938 as a champion of labour and a defender of civil liberties, officials were forced to act, if not to check

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962); John Peterson, *The Province of Freedom* (London, 1969); Arthur Porter, *Creoledom* (London, 1963).

labour militancy, at least to remake and to control the kind of movement that was emerging from below. The existence of a militant organization committed to continuous agitation and the use of strikes to force employers to acknowledge the presence of a working class was a critical factor in shaping official response to labour disturbances in the colonies.

By situating the Youth League within the broader context of British imperial policy the article builds on the contribution of LaRay Denzer's study of Wallace-Johnson and the league, and the work of Milcah Amolo on British labour policy in Sierra Leone.<sup>7</sup> However, it goes beyond the conventional interpretation of the period by focusing on the popular initiative from below; the voices of workers and their unions and the actions they took in furtherance of their group interests.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE YOUTH LEAGUE

On 12 May 1938, an organization called the West African Civil Liberties and National Defence incorporating the West African Youth League was inaugurated. The organizing secretary and prime mover of the organization, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson (Figure 2), was already known to the colonial office as a dangerous political "agitator".<sup>8</sup> In less than a month after his arrival, Wallace-Johnson was able to utilize the prevailing discontent amongst workers and mould what was perhaps the first organization in British Africa with a large working-class following. Within six months of its existence, this "chartist-like movement"<sup>9</sup> emerged as the champion of labour and the defender of civil liberties. Its leaders urged workers to organize unions, sponsored strikes, and through its journal, *The African Standard*, publicized the activities of the working class. The League provided a loose framework which brought together different unions in Freetown and the mining areas, addressed the question of a decent standard of living on a national scale and openly proclaimed the right of workers to withhold their labour.

Isaac Theophilus Akunna Wallace-Johnson entered the colony in April 1938 with a "quiverful of arrows".<sup>10</sup> Born in Wilberforce of working-class

<sup>7</sup> LaRay Denzer, "I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League: A Case Study in West African Nationalism" (Ph.D., University of Birmingham, 1977); Milcah Amolo, "Sierra Leone and British Colonial Labour Policy, 1930-1945" (Ph.D., Dalhousie University, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> CO 267/670/32210/2, Part I, Secret dispatch, Acting Governor Blood to Secretary of State, 9 February 1939.

<sup>9</sup> N.A. Cox-George, "An Essay on Employment and Unemployment in Sierra Leone in 1948" (mimeograph, Fourah Bay College Library, Freetown, n.d.), p. 31: Cox-George likened the movement to the Chartist in Britain a century earlier because of the similarity in the questions they addressed, "political constitution, civil liberties, better wages and workmen's compensation and general amelioration of the conditions of the working classes".

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Grant, "History of Trade Unionism in Sierra Leone" (mimeograph, Freetown, 1978), p. 2.





Figure 2. I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson at a rally of the All People's Congress in the Freetown West Constituency during the 1962 election campaign (Photograph from the *Sierra Leone Daily Mail*)

parents (in rural Freetown), Wallace-Johnson first worked as a clerk and later tried his hand as a journalist before leaving the colony in the late 1920s. His sojourn between this time and his return to Sierra Leone in 1938 took him to as far east as the Soviet Union where he reportedly studied at the University of Toilers of the East, Moscow, and as far west as England, where together with George Padmore, C.L.R. James and T.R. Makonnen he engaged in anti-imperialist campaigns and pamphleteering on behalf of colonial peoples. By the time he arrived in Freetown, he had not only travelled widely, but had gained experience in organizing workers both in Nigeria and the Gold Coast.<sup>11</sup>

With such a history, it was not surprising that when Wallace-Johnson arrived in Freetown in April 1938 his luggage was thoroughly searched and 2,000 copies of the *African Sentinel*, an anti-colonial pamphlet, confiscated. "It is most undesirable that such nonsense should be circulated among the population of Sierra Leone",<sup>12</sup> Governor Douglas Jardine informed the Secretary of State of the seizure. While London wired back its disapproval of the Governor's action, Wallace-Johnson seized the opportunity to condemn it and to educate the general populace on their right to printed materials.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive account of Johnson's activities see Denzer, "Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League".

<sup>12</sup> CO 267/670/32210/2, Governor to Secretary of State.

In a series of lectures he gave on the incident, Wallace-Johnson called for mass support to protest against the seizure of the materials. In a letter to the *Daily Mail*, Johnson made it clear that he wanted a resolution of protest, *not* a petition, the prevailing mode of presenting constitutional protests:

I said nothing about any petition to the Governor asking him kindly for nothing. I do not believe in petitions as from experience I have found out that petitions have no effect upon the nerves of the Imperialists. What I actually said was that we should pass a resolution of protest against the actions of the Comptroller of Customs and which resolution should also contain a demand for an apology from him for his remark to the effect that the Authorities of the Government do not think the people of Sierra Leone should be allowed to read literature of the type of the *African Sentinel*.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of Freetown with its sedate liberalism and orderly mode of protest, this was indeed a revolutionary demand.

With support coming from metropolitan sources (such as the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party) to try and get the Governor to rescind his decision, Johnson moved ahead to organize locally. At a series of meetings held at the Wilberforce Memorial Hall, Freetown's *hôtel de ville*, he urged the populace to organize and resist any attempt on the part of the state to trample on their rights and civil liberties. "As a people, we have been too lethargic, drowsy and happy-go-lucky", he told his audience:

A very wide margin has been provided for the foreign exploiters – capitalists and imperialists alike – to drive the wedge of divide-and-rule within our social circle; and while we keep grasping at shadows, they are busy rapidly draining out the natural resources of the land for their personal benefits, leaving us in poverty and want.<sup>14</sup>

Later he declared:

Now is the time and now is the hour. There is only one way out of our difficulties and that is to organise and move. Although it has always been asserted by our so called benefactors that we should take what we get and be satisfied, I maintain as Aggrey did that we should not be satisfied with taking what we get or what has been given us but to use what we have been given to gain what we ought to have.<sup>15</sup>

Less than a month after these lectures, the West African Youth League was established with Wallace-Johnson as its organizing secretary. To understand why the League was so successful, it is necessary to look at the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the city.

The League came into existence at the end of the depression when the price of primary producer goods had recorded an all time low, when

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Mail*, 3 May 1938.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Denzer, "Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League", p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, "An Appeal by Wallace-Johnson", 30 April 1938.

the cost of living of the general populace was constantly soaring beyond their earnings. The biting inflation made it impossible for workers to live (except on credit) on their wages which had not increased since the 1880s. Before the turn of the century skilled labour earned between 1s 6d and 2s 6d a day, while unskilled labourers received between 1s and 1s 6d. By the mid-1930s this amount had dropped to between 9d and 1s 6d for skilled labour and 6d and 9d for unskilled labourers. The mass unemployment in the city occasioned by the retrenchment regime during the depression provided an ideal atmosphere for the League's agitation. At a time when employers were reluctant to increase wages and negotiate with workers' representatives, when two out of five adult males were unemployed, the emergence of an organization committed to addressing these burning concerns was more than propitious: the organizing secretary and the movement were the right things in the right place.

The League operated a loose organizational framework for incorporating vocal groups in the society.<sup>16</sup> A united front organization with a strong working-class following was what the Youth League came to represent. The movement appealed to all: Christians as well as Muslims, men and women, workers, the unemployed as well as chiefs. And for the first time in the history of Sierra Leone a political organization brought together as one citizens of the colony and those in the hinterland. This was unprecedented. A left-wing book club was established to cater for an increasingly voracious membership desiring to familiarize itself with ideas similar to those which the League was propagating.

By the beginning of June 1938 the League declared itself ready to discuss "certain matters of very vital importance"<sup>17</sup> with the Governor. Again the approach of the League was novel. Unlike the previous Committee of Citizens infused with the idea of formal constitutional protest, the League did not "humbly" request a meeting; it demanded one. Offended, the Governor replied through his secretary that an interview would only be granted if the League could furnish him with what they wanted to discuss together with a list of its aims, objectives and membership.

The League responded by submitting a lengthy memorandum with its aims and objectives but without a membership list. In it, they simply proclaimed their membership to be:

(T)he masses of toiling workers viz: clerks, artisans, mechanics, engineers, electricians, locomotive drivers, labourers, peasants and farmers, chiefs and the intelligentsia [. . .] who are at present labouring under the heaviest strain of

<sup>16</sup> During this period, the idea of a popular front was quite common to communist organizations. It is not impossible that through his numerous contacts with world communism Wallace-Johnson would have been familiar with this strategy.

<sup>17</sup> CO 267/670/32210/1, Memorandum submitted by members of the executive and central committee of the West African Civil Liberties and National Defence League, incorporating the West African Youth League (Sierra Leone Section) to Governor, 16 June 1938.



economic, social and political disabilities, and who feel the time has come when some definite action should be taken to alleviate, if not to eradicate these disabilities.<sup>18</sup>

The memorandum stated the aims and objectives of the League as, “to watch carefully and sincerely, affairs political, educational, economical and otherwise, that may be of interest to the masses of the motherland, to sacrifice if need be, all we have for the progress and liberty of our country and race, and to ensure happiness to ourselves and posterity”.<sup>19</sup> The document proclaimed the right of the people to a free press, free movement and free speech irrespective of creed, colour or sect. It condemned the enactment of certain bills which it considered “dangerously inimical to the general progress of the people”,<sup>20</sup> and concluded that “labour is miserably exploited throughout the colony and Protectorate by both Government and commercial firms”. The fact that two thirds of the document addressed the labour question is revealing: the League was the first organized voice of the working class in colonial West Africa.

Surveying labour conditions in the railway, education (specifically teachers) and public works departments (all state agencies), the document examined conditions of service, methods of recruitment and advancement. It called on officials to improve wages which had remained stagnant for more than forty years whereas the cost of living had increased, and demanded that something positive be done to improve labour conditions. The memorandum considered labour in the railways as “disgracefully exploited”, and charged that the situation “calls for immediate attention [. . .] with a view to better remunerating the workmen engaged therein, the majority of whom are on starvation wages”.<sup>21</sup> “In the interest of preservation of peace, law and order”, the document warned, “we demand better wages and salaries for our policemen as an inducement to better educated men enlisting in the force.” The lack of any channel/instrument of collective bargaining was considered the “root cause of all the labour troubles as well as the basis of exploitation”. It went on,

We assert that it is the duty of every Government to see that labour conditions among the working class of any country, colony or Protectorate, is brought to a standard worthy of humanity. We deplore this inactivity of Government and demand more attention on its part to labour problems.<sup>22</sup>

The document called on the Governor to give women equal access to power by allowing them to exercise their right to vote and be voted for. It ended by calling for an investigation of conditions in the colony:

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

(I)t is imperatively necessary that a special and independent commission of enquiry be appointed to investigate the entire state of affairs in the Colony and Protectorate [. . .] for the establishment of a better and more democratic, just and sympathetic form of administration for the Colony and Protectorate.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of its undeclared aim – to put the labour question on the agenda for change – the memorandum was successful. Yet it took both internal and external pressure to force the Governor to accept that the labour question was that important.

In June 1938 the League embarked on a mass recruitment campaign that ended with the launching of League branches in all the major urban centres. In the mining areas, the League's organizing secretary reportedly told workers to strike if they wanted to. The organization launched a fund to purchase a press and explored the possibility of a co-operative venture to market local resources. By August 1938, the League was strong enough to move to another stage: the organization of trade unions. The first union was the All Seamen's union.<sup>24</sup> This was probably in line with the Comintern's policy of organizing this category of workers. They were the most important link in the distribution of propaganda materials. In a resolution passed at a mass meeting organized by seafaring men, the union declared,

(H)aving realised the need for a concerted action to defend their rights and protect their lives and limbs whilst executing their arduous duties as sea-goers hereby resolve that an "All Sea-men's Union" be formed on the basis of "collective security".<sup>25</sup>

The resolution was sent to the Governor and the Secretary of State with an explicit call for recognition. The Commissioner of Police, however, condemned the union as an "off-shoot" of the League. The union represented only 10 per cent of the seafaring community in Freetown. The Krus, who accounted for about 75 per cent of the seafaring community, did not attend the meeting. Official reluctance to recognize or deal with unions on the basis of their affiliation to the League became a standard policy during this period.

On 13 August 1938, a resolution passed at a mass meeting organized by workers of the war department composed of artisans and labourers announced the formation of The War Department Amalgamated Workers' Union. The resolution called on the Governor and the Commanding Royal Engineer to take immediate steps to recognize the union. But the Governor's reply was curt: the question was under consideration and until such a legislation was enacted, he was not prepared to "consider

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The founder of this union, Marcus Grant, was insistent that it was Wallace-Johnson who pushed him to organize workers. Interview with Marcus Grant, June–July 1987.

<sup>25</sup> CO 267/666/32215, Resolution passed at a mass meeting organized by seafaring men, held at the Wilberforce Memorial Hall on Thursday, 11 August 1938.

the recognition of any trade union".<sup>26</sup> By the end of the year, the League had organized other unions: the Mabella Workers' Union, the Motor Drivers' Union and the Amalgamated Workers' Union. All together nine unions were organized by the League, and all of them had their offices at the League's headquarters in Freetown. The League would later create a Trade Union Congress to co-ordinate the activities of all the unions.

In spite of the League's organizing drive, the Governor refused to acknowledge the importance of the labour question:

In Sierra Leone, I would not regard labour conditions as the most important, albeit the most obtrusive, problem in the realm of native welfare. Out of nearly two million inhabitants we have some 15,000 labourers only; and although I would be the first to admit that their conditions require amelioration in some respects, notably housing in certain cases, I do not feel that their welfare is anything like as urgent a claim on our consideration as, say, a district of some 50,000 souls with no hospital or medical officer.<sup>27</sup>

Laudable as the above pronouncement might seem, the Governor's efforts on either side were far from adequate. In a confidential dispatch to the Secretary of State, he reiterated his earlier position on the cost of living for a labourer, his wife and two children and remarked that, "I shall be very much surprised if the wage of nine pence does not represent something like double the cost of living".<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately for the Governor, this rather unpopular view which he had earlier communicated to the Secretary of State (on the cost of living for a labourer with three dependents) was leaked to the organizing secretary of the League. The dispatch exposed the Governor's position on the labour question and showed him to be unsympathetic to the plight of workers.

The publication of this confidential dispatch in the *Weekly News* demonstrated how powerful the League had become. Much more important was the content of the dispatches; they revealed the Governor's position on labour and provided useful propaganda material for the League. The suggestion by the Governor that a labourer, his wife and two children could live on 15s a month drew angry protests from workers. And at a mass protest meeting, allegedly attended by 10,000 workers, a strongly-worded resolution was forwarded to the Secretary of State. "Speaking for and on behalf of the members of the working classes" the meeting resolved:

that the protest of the inhabitants of the colony and protectorate, especially that of the working class of both sections be registered against the said statements

<sup>26</sup> CO 267/665/32210, Colonial Secretary, on behalf of Governor, to George Pratt.

<sup>27</sup> CO 267/665/32210, Governor Jardine to Sir Cecil Bottomley, Crown Agent for the Colonies, 19 August 1938.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

of the said Sir Douglas Jardine, with a demand that he be immediately recalled from the Governorship of the colony.<sup>29</sup>

In London, the Secretary of State requested the Governor's views on the need for a general improvement of wage rates. The Secretary of State was anxious to be informed on the position of clerks and wanted to know whether the ousting of Sierra Leonean merchants from commerce was a factor "in the general question of conditions of labour".<sup>30</sup>

Governor Jardine's report to the colonial office on the formation of trade unions revealed his determination not to register the newly formed unions. For one thing, he was quite sceptical of the way the League's unions were organized.

My own view is that in primitive countries trade unions organized on a departmental basis would be subversive of discipline and efficiency and that the public interest demands that they should not be registered or recognized; but that trade unions organized on an occupational basis should be encouraged.<sup>31</sup>

The Governor was of the view that the general unions, organized by the League, might become effective weapons in the case of a strike, since they would be in a position to bring work to a standstill in a particular department. On the cost of living and conditions of clerical workers, the Governor was forced to concede to some of the allegations which were contained in the League's memoranda. The League had informed the Governor that mercantile firms were in the habit of employing "probational clerks" at "starvation wages" of 10s to 30s a month only to dismiss them at the end of the period (by replacing them with new recruits from school), thus minimizing their wage bill. "I now believe it to be, [. . .] an undoubted fact that the conditions of employment of African clerks with mercantile firms leave much to be desired",<sup>32</sup> he informed the Secretary of State. By November 1938, the Governor was still adamant in recognizing the importance of labour. Thus he considered the establishment of a "full-scale labour department similar to Tanganyika" as "unnecessary in this country for the present at least".<sup>33</sup> His explanation, similar to that given to the Crown Agent, was that less than 20,000 or 1 per cent of the population were labourers. "Many of the evils that arise out of the industrialization of the African elsewhere do not exist here for the reason that there is, for the present at least, an ample supply of labour domiciled in the districts in which mining operations take place",<sup>34</sup> he told London.

<sup>29</sup> CO 267/665/32210, Resolution passed at a mass protest meeting of members of the working class, their supporters and sympathizers, held at the recreation grounds, Freetown, Sierra Leone, on Sunday, 25 September 1938.

<sup>30</sup> CO 267/665/32210, Malcolm Macdonald to Governor Jardine, 13 September 1938.

<sup>31</sup> CO 267/665/32210/2, Governor Jardine to Secretary of State, 27 September 1938.

<sup>32</sup> CO 267/665/32210/2, Governor Jardine to Secretary of State, 23 September 1938.

<sup>33</sup> *Legislative Council Debates*, Governor's address, 2 November 1938, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



After being in existence for six months, the League, with its motto, "Liberty or Death", had succeeded in establishing itself as the champion of labour. Through labour agitation, the formation of unions and the presentation of protest resolutions it was able to force the labour question as a priority item on the agenda. To understand its phenomenal success in so short a period it is necessary to look at the social composition and membership of the League. In other words, who were the Youth Leaguers?

The most important reason why the League refused to submit its membership list was because of a governmental order, issued after the 1926 rail strike, prohibiting civil servants from being members of "any committee or society which has a political character".<sup>35</sup> By simply referring to its members as the toiling masses, the League was protecting members from being victimized. Who then were the toiling masses? Were they members of the League? Membership of the League was open to all; it was not prohibitive. The membership dues consisted of an initial fee of six pence plus a regular monthly payment of the same amount. Members addressed each other as Comrade followed by a numeral; no member was addressed by his or her name. Perhaps, because of its magnetic appeal to workers and the unemployed, the League was able to expand beyond the expectations of the Governor and the established political class. In June 1938 membership in Freetown alone was reckoned to be 2,000. By July, the figure had reached the 5,000 mark. At the height of its popularity in 1939, the League claimed a membership of 42,000: 25,000 in Freetown and 17,000 in the hinterland. If these figures were exaggerated for propaganda purposes, one thing was clear: it was the largest political organization in British West Africa before World War II.

The League's organization consisted of a central committee headquartered in Freetown with branches in the hinterland and the rural areas under the charge of local executive committees. The major urban centres in the hinterland, especially the mining areas, occasionally sent representatives to Freetown to attend meetings and obtain information. It was through this channel that the League's newspaper and propaganda materials were distributed. However, it is because of the importance of Freetown in the political economy of Sierra Leone and the fact that it had the largest concentration of workers, that it became the most important area for the League's agitation.

In the city, skilled workers, particularly artisans and clerks, were in the forefront in organizing the League's trade unions.<sup>36</sup> Marcus Grant, the Secretary of the Seamen's Union and George Pratt, the Secretary of the War Department Workers' Union were both artisans and members

<sup>35</sup> CO 267/666/32216, Governor Jardine to Malcolm Macdonald, 4 August 1938, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Marcus Grant.

of the League. The prominence of skilled workers in the organization of unions is consistent with similar processes in other parts of the world. Elsewhere, skilled workers played pioneering roles in the development of labour movements and the formation of unions. What seemed to have attracted most of the skilled workers to the League was the commonality of interest and their shared experiences as workers. As such, they identified with the ideals of the League and called it “our own”.<sup>37</sup> It is possible that a large proportion of the unskilled workers were union members first and then Youth League sympathizers. Even so, what really mattered was their presence and willingness to identify with and engage in the activities of the League.

The League was undoubtedly the first organization in British West Africa seriously to address the woman question. It not only championed the cause of women, but had a crop of distinguished women activists on its executive. Its first central committee had five women members, one of whom, Constance Cummings-John, was to become the first woman Mayor in post-colonial Africa. The League fought for women’s right to be elected and appointed into responsible positions among other things. This call for equality was concretely expressed in its practice.<sup>38</sup> The women, mostly teachers and traders, were responsible for organizing the Sierra Leone Market Women’s Union and the Washer Women’s Union during World War II.<sup>39</sup>

Members of the liberal profession, particularly lawyers, either became members or openly sympathized with the League. Three of the eighteen African Members of the Bar Association were members of the executive committee, while the remaining fifteen were sympathizers until the rolling strikes of 1939 forced them to reconsider their support of what was then becoming an “extremist” organization.<sup>40</sup> The support they gave the League was so overwhelming that when Dr Herbert Bankole-Bright, the aristocratic doyen of middle-class politics in the colony, subpoenaed the organizing secretary for libel in 1938, no lawyer could come to his defence. With solid support from the Freetown working class – expressed in union formation and the presentation of protest resolution on labour matters – and from women activists and members of the liberal profession, the Youth League was set to change the nature and focus of labour/political agitation in the colony.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See LaRay Denzer, “Women in Freetown Politics, 1914–61: A Preliminary Survey”, in Murray Last and Paul Richards (eds), *Sierra Leone 1787–1987: Two Centuries of Intellectual Life* (Manchester, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Ya Alimamy, June 1987.

<sup>40</sup> Akintola J.G. Wyse, “The Sierra Leone Branch of the National Congress of British West Africa, 1918–1946”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18, 4 (1985), p. 696.

## THE ROLLING STRIKES OF 1939

Armed with the weapon of strike and relying on union solidarity and community support, the workers of Freetown started their war seven months before Britain declared war on Germany.<sup>41</sup> The strikes in the city confronted officials with a difficult question: how could they arbitrate or intervene in the absence of a legislation governing labour-management relations? Officials hardly had time to figure out this question when another strike broke out in the iron ore mines. The strikes in the city and the mines received the support and encouragement of the Youth League and its newspaper, *The African Standard*. However, the ensuing struggle by workers, backed by the League, witnessed the defeat of what was the nucleus of an independent working-class movement.

The pattern of the rolling strikes in the city suggests a co-ordinated strategy aimed at vulnerable targets. The strikes involved the War Department, the Coaling Company and the Army; all were crucial to Britain's war effort. It was widely believed that the organizing secretary, Wallace-Johnson, considered the timing appropriate because "it provided a good opportunity to press for reforms in the colonies".<sup>42</sup>

On 1 January 1939, the Mabella Coaling Workers' Union held a mass meeting calling on management to grant certain demands failing which they "will cease working to a man until the demands are met". The major reason for the strike notice was "inadequacy of pay" which was related to the intermittent nature of work. As the only coaling company operating in the colony since the turn of the nineteenth century, its significance to the defence of the Empire was known to the striking men. What the men wanted was a standard wage policy (an end to casualization?) guaranteeing a fixed sum at the end of the month. The company, the men protested, offered 1s 4d per day to labourers whose average pay at the end of the month "hardly" exceeded 15s. Most of the men were permanent workers who resumed work as early as 6.30 a.m. only to be told on days when there was no work available to cease work at 10 o'clock, sometimes at 12.00 noon without being paid. This unofficial casualization affected headmen as well as winchmen, most of whom were on paper as receiving 2s 6d but only got "50/- at the end of a month as wages". The same policy was applied to clerks whose wages were "unceremoniously reduced". The men finally called on management to recognize the union "as the official representative of the workers employed by the company". A failure to "secure reasonable

<sup>41</sup> For an alternative account of these events see LaRay Denzer, "Wallace-Johnson and the Sierra Leone Crisis of 1939", *African Studies Review*, 25, 2 and 3 (June/September 1982).

<sup>42</sup> Denzer, "Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League", p. 282. This position was in line with the idea of a Popular Front.

consideration [. . .] within a month"<sup>43</sup> would result in a strike, the men informed management.

On 6 January, *The African Standard*, the League's newspaper, appeared on the streets of Freetown, almost half a century after the demise of *The Artisan*, the first working-class newspaper in colonial Africa.<sup>44</sup> Militant in tone and critical of state and capital, the paper was avowedly a working-class journal in the tradition of the *Daily Tribune* and the *Guardian*. In seeking to provide "the guide line for all",<sup>45</sup> the paper came close to Lenin's conception of a working-class newspaper. Its tone was uncompromising:

TO - DAY, we make our bow in the field of journalism. In doing so, we are not unconscious of the great responsibility we have thus undertaken nor of the eternal mountains of difficulties that stand ahead of us, especially at a period as the present when the atmosphere is charged with influences which are diametrically opposed to the cause we are out to advocate. But relying on the fact that our programme is one, the sole aim of which is to uphold the cause of man's humanity to man and assuring ourselves of the confidence and support of the millions of proletarians, workers and peasants who constitute the toiling masses of the world (especially of this section of the Colonial Empire) who are currently labouring under the crushing strain of capitalist exploitation backed by the reactionary and oppressive policy of imperialism, we have no doubt that we will be able to stem the tide.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike *The Artisan*, *The African Standard* did not just address issues affecting labour in general; it pointed the way forward to an illusive millenium where exploitation would be a thing of the past. Whereas *The Artisan* had been less concerned with colonialism in its analysis of working-class conditions, *The Standard's* understanding of the problem started with a critique of the colonial situation. The paper was popular among workers who referred to it as "our own". And its debut seemed to have signalled the beginning of a workers' war.

On the following day, the War Department Amalgamated Workers' Union held a mass meeting to "consider the attitude of the authorities [. . .] towards the economic difficulties of their African civilian employees". In their resolution,<sup>47</sup> the men complained about what they termed the "recent attempt" by a European foreman, a certain Mr Bell,

<sup>43</sup> Resolution passed at a mass meeting of the Mabella Coaling Workers' Union, held on Sunday, 1 January 1939, to consider certain treatment being meted to them in the execution of their daily duties, *The African Standard*, 10 February 1939.

<sup>44</sup> Ibrahim Abdullah, "Working Class Newspapers as Sources for African Labour History: The Artisan and The African Standard in Colonial Sierra Leone", forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* (Moscow, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> *The African Standard*, 16 January 1939.

<sup>47</sup> Resolution passed at a mass meeting of the War Department Amalgamated Workers' Union, held at St John's school room on Saturday, 7 January 1939, to consider the attitude of the authorities of the War Department towards the economic difficulties of their African civilian employees, *The African Standard*, 13 January 1939, p. 13.



to reduce the “already low wages” of workers, especially carpenters and stone masons and the “victimization” of those workers who were dismissed because they refused to accept the wage cut. The meeting resolved that until a general conference of workers scheduled to take place the following February to consider the question of wages was convened, workers were not prepared to accept any reduction in their wages. The men requested that those dismissed be re-engaged with full payment for all the days lost. The union then demanded an end to “all forms of terrorism” and warned that any failure to “secure immediate action” would lead to the cessation of work until “their just demands are met”.<sup>48</sup> The simultaneity of both demands by workers engaged in what was considered essential to the war effort put the government in a difficult situation.

At a time when governors were hard pressed by the colonial office to justify actions taken against colonial peoples; when progressive elements in the metropolitan country could utilize established channels and raise embarrassing questions in the House of Commons, the state was not all that free to do what it could have done under other circumstances. The state, it should be recalled, was the largest employer of labour in the colony. It also had a history of intervening in labour disputes, as for example the rail strikes in 1919 and 1926, and the two strikes at the iron ore mines in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> By 1939, the situation had changed, the state had no “power legally to intervene between employers and employees in the event of a labour dispute”.<sup>50</sup> In the absence of a trade union law which it hoped would be tabled at the May session of the legislative council, the Governor could not intervene nor negotiate except at the request of both parties.<sup>51</sup>

While officials were contemplating what actions to take, the Coaling Company management issued a notice to the union informing them that the company would have nothing to do with “any outside body representing the Company’s Employees”. Management expressed its desire to discuss “any legitimate grievance”, but warned that they were not prepared to do so because of “outside intervention”.<sup>52</sup> Threatening workers with dismissal if they embarked on the intended strike, the management hinted that they would leave Freetown and transfer to

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> For details on state/labour relations before the Youth League see Ibrahim Abdullah, “Profit versus Social Reproduction: Labour Protests in the Sierra Leonean Iron Ore Mines, 1933–38”, *African Studies Review*, 35, 3 (1992); Ibrahim Abdullah, “Rethinking the Freetown Crowd: The Moral Economy of the 1919 Strikes and Riots in Sierra Leone”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 28, 1 (1994).

<sup>50</sup> CO 267/670/32210, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 11 February 1939.

<sup>51</sup> The governor, however, had the power to intervene “unofficially if he is of the opinion that the workers’ demands are of so reasonable a nature that the moral force at the command of government should be brought to bear upon the employers”, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *The African Standard*, 3 February 1939, p. 7.

Dakar if they went on strike. The importance of the company's service, mainly refuelling, in the refortification of Freetown made the situation more desperate. *The African Standard* poked fun at the company's decision to leave. Calling it a "Queer Declaration", it rhetorically asked: "who will suffer?"<sup>53</sup>

In the interim, the General Secretary of the War Department Workers' Union, George Pratt, sent a letter to the Colonial Office, the General Secretary of the TUC, Arthur Creech Jones, and the National Council for Civil Liberties in London, assuring them of the union's intention not to "interfere with the progress of war department works especially at a time like this". The men were determined not to work under circumstances daily and hourly reducing them to "abject slavery".<sup>54</sup> In London, Creech Jones and others, notably Walter Citrine and Ronald Kidd, got the War Office to look into the grievances of the men. As a result of their intervention, the War Department instructed the Royal Officer Commanding to discuss the grievances with the union. The meeting, however, ended in a stalemate: the union would not accept the Commander's explanation and the Commander would not give in to union demands. (The latter's explanation was that the action was taken in order to increase efficiency.) In the end, the union went on with the strike as originally planned.

The strike involved both skilled and unskilled labour on the three sites occupied by the War Department: Tower Hill, Murray Town and Wilkinson Road. *The Standard* gave full coverage of the events involving "over a thousand workmen".<sup>55</sup> Work came to a standstill at both the Murray Town Battery and Wilkinson Road sites. On the following day, half of the workers, mostly labourers, returned to work. The skilled men, who were in control of the union, held out longer than the labourers. It is possible that most of the labourers returned to work because of fear of losing their jobs to the large army of the unemployed and floating population in the city.

Of particular importance was the campaign of violence and intimidation pursued by the state. On the day the strike occurred, there was a large-scale military manoeuvre in the city which was no doubt meant to intimidate workers. Furthermore, a proclamation (no. 1 of 1939) was issued prohibiting the assembly of workers. This was aimed at preventing any regrouping or organization by strikers. *The Standard* reported the harassment of workers in their homes and an attempt to "lure them within the reach of the military area" so as to arrest and punish them. The paper alleged that over 400 "labourers" were organized and armed

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> CO 267/670/32210, Resolution passed at a meeting of the War Department Workers' Union, 18 January 1939.

<sup>55</sup> *The African Standard*, 3 February 1939, p. 9.

with sticks, by the authorities, to march through the city intimidating people so as to give the impression that they were striking men.<sup>56</sup> On 2 February, the union secretary, George Pratt, was arrested and detained for allegedly kidnapping a union executive who refused to join the strike.

Official sources indicate that 40 per cent of the skilled men and 25 per cent of the labourers were members of the union. Forty-five per cent of the workers were also believed to have been members of the League. This prevalent belief that the union and the workers were instruments of the League and its organizing secretary was principally responsible for the lack of sincerity on the part of management to bargain. Officials refused to deal with any union connected with the League. And instead of bargaining, force was used to break the strike even though the Governor alleged that he could not intervene. The Officer Commanding reported to the War Office that:

The offices of WDAMU and the WAYL are at the same address. I am more than ever convinced that the strike was engineered by the YL, not to remedy legitimate grievances but as a deliberate attempt to cause disturbance and disaffection. The colonial government is fully alive to the necessity of taking steps to curb the activities of the YL and it is to be hoped that there will not be insuperable difficulties in their way.<sup>57</sup>

In spite of the establishment of a strike committee, most of the workers were back on the job seven days later. By 16 February, only thirty artisans were still holding out: "The vast majority of War Department labourers never really struck though a few were intimidated into ceasing work for a day or two".<sup>58</sup>

But the most serious aspect of the WDAWU strike was the refusal of the gunners at the Heavy Battery in Murray Town to go on parade when ordered to do so. If government officials needed any evidence to convince them of Wallace-Johnson and the League's intention, it was this "act of mutiny". The eleven gunners, led by Emmanuel Cole, refused to parade when ordered and instead demanded a raise, uniforms and boots. The men were of the opinion that their European officers were pocketing about seven and half pence a day from their wages. Ignorant of the fact that they were contravening military law, the men promptly dropped all their demands when they were reprimanded by their officer and paraded as usual. In spite of this, they were arraigned before a military court. And to the satisfaction of the state officials, it

<sup>56</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 31 January 1939, reported the matter as if it were striking workers who went on the rampage. Interview with Suba Mansaray and Momoh Tucker confirmed *The Standard's* story.

<sup>57</sup> CO 267/670/32210/2, Officer Commanding Troops, Sierra Leone to Under Secretary of State, The War Office, 23 February 1939.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

turned out that the leader, Emmanuel Cole,<sup>59</sup> was a card-carrying member of the League and had promised help would be forthcoming from the organization.

Prior to the strike, the men had presented certain demands to the authorities which were subsequently forwarded to the War Office in London. The men had complained about wages and general conditions. Lack of power supply and the quality of their food were singled out as burning issues to be redressed.<sup>60</sup> The men were not only denied their promised proficiency pay at the end of a year's service but were also deprived of their boots, a prestigious item for a colonial soldier then. As the Judge Advocate rightly pointed out in his summing up, the difference between 2s 0d and 1s 4½d was hardly a minor issue.<sup>61</sup> Their grievances apart, the fact that some of them were members of a "communist" organization did not help matters. The gunners were recruited from "an undesirable source [. . .] the semi-literate riffraff of Freetown, instead of the Protectorate tribes, as in the case of the Royal West African Frontier Force",<sup>62</sup> the Governor informed London. The sentences were stiff; they horrified officials in the Colonial Office: all eleven gunners were sentenced to terms ranging from twelve months imprisonment to fifteen years with hard labour.<sup>63</sup>

On 1 February the Mabella Coaling Company workers numbering between 200 and 300 went on strike. According to official sources, the dismissed skilled workers of the union had anticipated that a "successful issue of the strike will result in their reinstatement".<sup>64</sup> On the day the strike broke out the men refused to accept their wages. Taking no chances, the Governor ordered a platoon of the Royal West African Frontier Force to proceed to the area "to aid the police if necessary".<sup>65</sup> The strike was peaceful; no violence was reported on the first day. On the following day, the secretary of the union, A.H.P. Katta, wrote a letter to the General Manager of the Cable and Wireless Company dissuading him from providing scabs to help the Coaling Company. The secretary went on to inform the manager that such an action would "naturally result in conflict".<sup>66</sup> In a follow-up letter, the secretary made it clear to the manager of the Cable and Wireless Company that he would be held responsible for any "loss of wages which the men" might

<sup>59</sup> The leader of this alleged mutiny, Emmanuel Cole, was made a national hero by the Momoh regime in 1987.

<sup>60</sup> CO 267/671/322161/1, Judge Advocate summing up before court martial, 8 May 1939.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> CO 267/670/32210/1, Jardine to Dawe, 3 February 1939.

<sup>63</sup> *West African Pilot*, "Court Martial Imprisons 11 Africans Gunners for Mutiny", 9 May 1939.

<sup>64</sup> CO 267/670/32210, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 8 February 1939.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *The African Standard*, "The Mabella Workmen and the Cable and Wireless Company", 10 February 1939.



suffer. The manager's reply was brusque: the coaling for which the company requested labour, he informed the secretary, had been completed.<sup>67</sup>

On 6 February, a clash occurred between strikers, seeking to stop scab labour, and the police.<sup>68</sup> In the ensuing scuffle, five policemen were injured, while twenty-six strikers were arrested and charged with riotous conduct. The union protested against the arrest of the men, which unfortunately included their President, Mr Reginald Robert, and demanded a commission of inquiry into the dispute. By 16 March, 220 workers were still holding out and all of them, with the exception of twenty-eight men, had refused to collect their wages for the month of January.<sup>69</sup> An attempt by the Acting Governor and the Commissioner of Police to get community leaders to settle the dispute failed to yield any result. The men "stated categorically" that they were not prepared to receive their pay or resume duty nor discuss any of the grievances until "those of their number who are on remand on charges of riot had been released or had stood their trial".<sup>70</sup> By the end of March only thirty-seven of the men had returned to work. In May, the men were committed to trial. And the verdict, not guilty, was a victory for the striking workers as well as the League.

Applauding the workers for their militancy and courage, *The Standard* cautioned the men not to think that they suffered because they were Africans. The paper explained,

It is one of the policies of British Imperialism to kill the aspirations of members of the working class and to make them subservient to their exploiters, regardless of colour or creed. Thousands of British workers have suffered in the same manner. No one therefore need to go with the impression that it is because these men are Africans that they are so treated.<sup>71</sup>

The paper's rhetoric and its unqualified support for workers further alienated the League from sympathetic officials. The paper accused the officials of deliberately provoking the strikes by refusing to intervene and condemned actions taken to break the strikes and intimidate workers into submission.

Throughout the strikes and disturbances, officials refused to acknowledge the fact that workers had a legitimate reason to strike. Before the strikes, Governor Jardine had a conversation with Professor Macmillan (a leading authority on British colonial policies), who had recently returned from Sierra Leone, on the labour situation. The Governor was of the view that the organizing secretary of the League was only out to make

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> CO 267/670/32210/2, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 8 February 1939.

<sup>69</sup> CO 2267/670/32210/1, Telegram, Governor to Secretary of State, 16 March 1939.

<sup>70</sup> CO 2267/670/32210, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 6 April 1939.

<sup>71</sup> *The African Standard*, "Comedy of Errors No. 5", 9 June 1939.

trouble. With his history of communist connections, the Governor wasted no time in branding the organizing secretary as a dangerous political agitator receiving support from external sources. Jardine could not see why workers should go on strike and was consequently compelled by his own reasoning to see all labour unrest as the result of Wallace-Johnson. The sceptre of the League's militant agitation haunted both colonial and local officials.<sup>72</sup>

Professor Macmillan's appraisal of the situation differed radically from that of the Governor. There was much ground for unrest amongst workers, he told the Governor and refused to see Wallace-Johnson as an agitator. He considered the "great deal of poverty and unemployment in Freetown" to be the root cause of the problem. In his opinion, the Governor should have been "a little more forthcoming to Wallace-Johnson and the Youth Movement". What was needed, he concluded, "was an investigation of conditions, especially in Freetown, and a description of the situation from its social and economic aspects as a basis for any policy of amelioration".<sup>73</sup> This was precisely what the League was all about and what it had been calling for since 1938.

The activities of the League were much in line with progressive thinking in London. As Leo Spitzer observed,

Its political objectives – greater representation in the Legislative council, greater representation in the Executive Council, an expanded political role for women, a universal franchise without property qualifications – were all within the best tradition of democratic reformism, palatable even to [. . .] conservatives.<sup>74</sup>

What seemed to worry local officials was the League's inflammatory rhetoric and uncompromising position on labour matters. In February, during the height of the crisis, the Attorney General admitted in London that the League's "avowed objectives were quite defensible".<sup>75</sup> By March, however, the acting Governor, Hilary Blood, was expressing a different opinion:

What I am anxious to do is to get the Youth League in on the side of government, or at any rate to be able to recognise it as an organisation whom we can meet and with whom we can treat, but I see no chance of doing this so long as Johnson is the secretary.<sup>76</sup>

In February, the *African Standard* started to publish articles specifically aimed at mobilizing the police force. This, it would seem, was in line with the League's strategy to cripple the defences in the colony. After

<sup>72</sup> CO 267/671/32245, Notes of a conversation with Sir Douglas Jardine, 17 January 1939.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, Note of points about Sierra Leone made by Professor W.M. Macmillan in conversation with Dawe, 20 January 1939.

<sup>74</sup> Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone* (Ife, 1975), p. 199.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>76</sup> CO 267/670/32210/2, Acting Governor to Dawe, 15 March 1939.

the clash between the coaling company workers and strike breakers at Mabella, the paper had posed the question: “[. . .] who are the police after all?” It answered:

A band of employees who are themselves in no better economic conditions than the Mabella workers. A group of Africans held in the bond of political and economic slavery. These invariably are the tools always in the hand of the authorities of all British colonies.<sup>77</sup>

This attempt to reconceptualize the police as wage earners was central to the League’s effort to mobilize their support.

A survey of conditions of service for policemen presented a grim picture of what the writer, P.C. Rockbottom, considered “The Hidden Secrets of the Police”.<sup>78</sup> The article covered wages, pension and gratuity, salary increase, travelling allowance, housing and corporal punishment. It ridiculed the amount being paid to policemen – 2s per day – irrespective of length of service and charged that they “are tied hands and feet together with the records of a fixed rate of wages attached to their respective grades”. Rockbottom lashed at the housing provided by the state, calling them “horrible dens”. At every point comparison was made to the earnings of European officers. The article concluded by asking: “Does the Secretary of State know these things?”<sup>79</sup>

Another article raised the question of the possibility of a strike by the police. It argued a case for policemen withdrawing their labour by simply making reference to a situation where policemen had “payment and working conditions [. . .] hundred times better than ours”<sup>80</sup> and still went on strike. If such men with better conditions of service could withdraw their labour, the article pointed out, then there should be no reason why policemen in Sierra Leone cannot take similar action. The force lost 54 out of a total of 289 policemen between 1933 and 1939. Most of them died while serving, the rest a month or two after they were “invalided from the force”. “Among such horrible conditions is it possible for us to strike?”, Rockbottom asked. And his answer, “I dare the person who will say NO” to such a proposal.

The strikes and subsequent agitation among the police made officials more determined in their bid to stifle the League. The War Department strike had made officials question the loyalty of the men; now they were faced with agitation among the police who were known to be subscribers to the *African Standard*. From these activities of the League, the belief started gaining ground among local officials that the League and its organizing secretary were out to undermine the loyalty of His Majesty’s

<sup>77</sup> *The African Standard*, 10 February 1939 in CO 267/670/32210/2.

<sup>78</sup> *The African Standard*, 3 February 1939.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *The African Standard*, “Under the Horrible Conditions which Exist in the Police is it Possible for us to Strike? A Policeman raises a Pertinent Question”, 24 February 1939.

forces. At the trial of George Pratt the state had failed to turn up anything but circumstantial evidence. At this point, the acting Governor suggested a new line of approach.

In a general survey of the labour question in the colony, the acting Governor argued a case for a legislation that would strengthen the power of the state to intervene legally in all matters involving labour and management:

Our hands will be greatly strengthened if we are able to pass on the next meeting of the legislative council a bill dealing with Arbitration in Trade disputes which will give the government the right, which it does not possess at present, to intervene in a dispute which has commenced or is threatened.<sup>81</sup>

The arbitration law would enable the state to intervene in any dispute between labour and management/capital, while the trade union law would allow it to redirect and control the burgeoning working-class movement to become “responsible and respectable” by simply refusing to register Youth League unions.

The acting Governor underplayed the importance of the strikes and disturbances in informing his analysis and prognosis. “To judge general labour conditions by the recent disturbances is rather like judging the health of a community from a visit to the hospital”,<sup>82</sup> he told London. Nor did he consider the established unions as responsible. They were not only unable to “discipline” their members but were also incapable of understanding the concept of unions in the “English sense. In Sierra Leone they are largely headings of note paper, new and rather dangerous toys, and not to be taken too literally at the present stage”, he informed the Secretary of State.<sup>83</sup> The view that workers in Africa were incapable of grasping the essence of unions/collective bargaining was rampant among colonial officials.

Perhaps the most significant move was the request by local officials for special legislative powers which would be used to silence the League and detain its organizing secretary. “So long as Johnson’s activities in the League continue, I see no hope of enlisting the League’s activities on the side of government”,<sup>84</sup> the Colonial Office was informed. The certainty of war, the uncompromising attitude of the League, the official reluctance to accept that the labour question was of any importance, coupled with official inability to refashion the organization, put paid to any serious attempt on the part of state officials to remedy the situation.

<sup>81</sup> CO 267/670/32210, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 16 March 1939.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Compare this quote from Captain H.E. Rydon’s opposition to the Trade Union bill in Tanzania, “Would any person in their senses give a child of six a loaded automatic to play with? I scarcely think so, because it is a dangerous weapon, and the child might injure himself beside injuring those on whom he would be inclined to use it”, cited in Issa G. Shivji, *Law, State and the Working Class in Tanzania* (London, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>84</sup> CO 267/670/32210, Acting Governor to Secretary of State, 16 March 1939.



Instead of legislation which would guarantee the right of workers to form trade unions and to negotiate with management, the state backed by the Colonial Office initiated a series of legislation designed to empower officials to silence the League; control unions and arrest Wallace-Johnson.<sup>85</sup>

It was the Secretary of State, Malcolm Macdonald, who urged the Governor to consider the possibility of an ordinance on the "lines of the United Kingdom Incitement to Disaffection Act", 1934, to permit officials to deal effectively with any attempt "to seduce" His Majesty's troops. Another ordinance to regulate the deportation of "undesirable British subjects" was also suggested. The latter ordinance, while not making any provision for the deportation of Wallace-Johnson, was flexible enough to empower officials to curb his activities by relegating him to a "specified part" of the colony.<sup>86</sup> Another bill, the "Undesirable Publications" ordinance was aimed at the *African Standard* for its vigorous and sustained propaganda "to excite enmity, not only against constituted authority but also against the white race". The bill intended to address the labour question "in the interest of the workers", was designed to regulate union formation, the resolution of industrial conflict through arbitration, and to grant enough power to officials to intervene in industrial disputes. All together six bills were drafted: the Undesirable Publications bill; the Incitement to Disaffection bill; the Trade Union bill; the Trade Disputes and Arbitration bill; the Undesirable British Subjects bill (simply referred to as the "deportation bill"); and the Sedition bill. In spite of the mass protest from workers and the community, the bills were introduced and subsequently became law.

The bills were generally seen as an attack on civil liberties and a committee of citizens was constituted to co-ordinate the protest movement which developed. In London, critics and sympathizers dubbed the bills "drastic", "repressive", "fundamentally un-British", "unconstitutional", "anti-working-class", and "calculated to prevent the organization and expression of political opinion".<sup>87</sup> Creech Jones was quite uncomfortable with the official explanation for the bills, namely the "strategic" importance of Freetown. He considered the "unnecessarily harsh conditions of existence" as the sole reason for prompting workers to take the actions they did. It was difficult for him to appreciate why such powers should be given to a "Government which has no accountability and which can use them with scarcely any provocation". A statement

<sup>85</sup> For details on these legislations see, Ibrahim Abdullah, "The Colonial State, Mining Capital and Wage Labour in Sierra Leone" (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1990); Leo Spitzer and LaRay Denzer, "I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League", parts 1 and 2, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 6, 3 and 4 (1973).

<sup>86</sup> CO 267/673/32254/8, General comments on the situation which led to the enactment.

<sup>87</sup> CO 267/672/23354/1.

by the Governor justifying the deportation ordinance on the basis of "the clever and underground methods of certain persons whose object was to stir up strikes and disaffection"<sup>88</sup> only served to confirm his suspicion that with the suspension of the writ habeas corpus, the Governor would easily move against Wallace-Johnson and the League.

In Freetown a resolution forwarded by the committee of citizens attacked the bills without exception. Although it considered the trade union bill long overdue, the committee was concerned that a particular section of the original United Kingdom Trade Union Act of 1876 which provides "for the consolidation of the economic situation of a trade union" was omitted. The resolution singled out the provision on cancellation of registration and compulsory dissolution of unions by the registrar for special attack. "The real object and reason" for this provision, they protested, was to "provide for the compulsory dissolution of Trade Unions". They also insisted on an unbiased arbitration as contained in the original Trade Dispute Act of 1906 by demanding for a substantial number of worker representatives on any arbitration panel.<sup>89</sup> A meeting of six of the unions affiliated to the League condemned the provision of the Trade Disputes Ordinance as inadequate; the Clauses, they objected, were "diametrically opposed to those in the Trade Union Acts of 1871 and 1876". The discrepancy between laws enacted in England and those promulgated in the colonies sums up an essential dimension of colonial existence.

By curtailing civil liberties and controlling arbitration and the registration of unions, state officials sought to promote a particular kind of trade unionism that would be amenable to official control. In the context of a colonial situation where colour prejudice tends to correspond to privileges, where labour disturbances and strikes inevitably had political implications, not least because the state was the largest employer of labour, empowering local officials to ensure that labour was fairly treated only strengthened their hands in suffocating genuine worker representation. On 1 September 1939, Wallace-Johnson was arrested on charges of libel against the Bonthe District Commissioner, John Henry de Burgh Shaw. Released on bail, Wallace-Johnson was later rearrested under the wartime emergency defence regulations which needed no judicial proceedings. Denied a trial by jury, he was subsequently tried by a judge and three assessors. He served twelve months imprisonment without hard labour, but was held in detention after his term until the end of the war. His trial and conviction ended a phase in the building of an independent labour movement.

<sup>88</sup> Arthur Creech Jones Papers, Creech Jones to Malcolm Macdonald, 23 June 1939.

<sup>89</sup> CO 267/672/32254/1, Reply by the Committee of Citizens to statement made on 19 May by His Excellency the Governor to unofficial members of the legislative council regarding certain bills.

The late 1930s witnessed an upsurge in working-class agitation in the colonies. Throughout the British empire, conservative nationalist movements were either displaced by radical youth movements as in Nigeria and Ghana or by militant labour organizers as in Sierra Leone and the British Caribbean. This displacement was partially due to the failure of economic conditions to keep pace with the increasing cost of living as well as the tradition of militancy inherent in each colony. The Sierra Leone version of this empire-wide movement was represented by the Youth League which emerged as the champion of working-class interests. The formation of unions without official support, the establishment of a newspaper committed to advancing the interest of the working class broadly defined, and the strident call for an investigation of labour conditions in the colony, made it impossible for officials to mould the organization as they would have liked. The League's mode of operation – supporting continuous strike action, militant petitioning and mass demonstrations – was also anathema to local officials who seized the opportunity provided by the approaching war to silence the League and imprison its organizing secretary.

The actions taken by state officials were designed to cripple the emergence of an independent working-class movement that they could neither control nor predict. The choice, then, was not between rejecting the working class in its necessary sojourns in the city or moving towards a *modus operandi* that would guarantee them a stake in society. In Freetown, the choice was between accepting a relatively independent working-class movement over which officials had little or no control or a working-class movement that would follow the official path as dictated from above. The latter option was more acceptable to colonial officials because it served the needs of the empire.