

Nigerian Natives Win Over British Imperialism By Uniting...

"Class Struggles In Nigeria" ...

By Robert L. Birchman

Admired wild rejoicing half a million African workers celebrated their own V-Day the first week in September. The general strike of more than 150,000 Nigerian workers on the government-owned railroads, harbor, communications systems and public works had achieved a sweeping and complete victory. For ten weeks the strikers had withstood all forms of official pressure, intimidation and terrorism. Thanks to the unbreakable unity of their ranks, the British Colonial Office was compelled finally to grant their demands.

On instructions from George Hall, the new Labor Party colonial secretary, Governor Richards of Nigeria broadcast a statement agreeing to comply with the strikers' demand for a minimum wage of 2 shillings, sixpence a day and promising to pay them full wages for the ten weeks. He also agreed to release all the arrested strike leaders; to reemploy all government civil servants; to lift the ban on the suppressed newspapers, the Daily Comet and African Pilot, assuring the editor, Nnamdi Azikiwe security of life and property.

To mark the historic occasion of this victory of colored labor over white imperialism, the Nigerian trade union and nationalist leaders issued a special manifesto congratulating the workers on their loyalty and appealing for still greater unity in the struggles ahead. The declaration concluded in the spirit of The Communist Manifesto: "We can send workers no better message than this which Karl Marx, the Jesus Christ of the working class, would have undoubtedly sent them if he were in this country today: namely, workers of Nigeria, unite!"

The general strike, which began on June 21, had been preceded by a month of negotiations with the government which is the largest employer of labor in Nigeria. On May 21 the African Civil Servants Technical Workers Union sent a letter to the Governor pointing out that, according to their computations, the cost of living had risen 200 percent since 1939, and that the government had partially recognized this by giving increases to its European employees and supplementary allowances to their families.

In view of these facts, the Nigerian Trade Union Congress asked for a minimum wage of 2 shillings sixpence a day, retroactive to April 1, 1944 and a 50 percent increase in cost of living allowance for all workers earning less than 48 pounds (about \$200) per year, and a sliding scale above that. The Congress also gave a one-month strike notice in support of these demands, declaring that "the workers of Nigeria shall proceed to seek their own remedy, with due regard for law and order on the one hand and starvation on the other."

The letter of the African Civil Servants Technical Workers Union to the Governor described their intolerable living conditions. Prior to the war three or four workers and their families lived in rooms measuring as little as 10 by 10 feet. Today their situation has been considerably worsened. Rents have increased abnormally, prices of food and imported goods have soared, supplies are scarce. As a result the health of the people has become severely impaired and tuberculosis victims are multiplying. "Have we fought this war in order to be exterminated by starvation?" the letter asked.

The Governor of Nigeria is the Sir Arthur Richards who attained notoriety for suppression of strikes and demonstrations while he was Governor of Jamaica. This colonial despot replied that he would not meet with representatives of the workers since no purpose could be served by discussion. An increase in wages, he said, would not offset the increased cost of living but would simply cause inflation! A second appeal made on June 11 was again turned down.

GOVERNMENT PREPARES FOR STRUGGLE:

In preparation for the coming struggle the government reenacted its recently repealed Defense Regulations under which a number of Nigerian trade union leaders had been imprisoned for four years during the war. The regulations on press censorship empower the Governor to suppress any newspaper that publishes uncensored news or criticizes the Governor or his officials. The penalty for violation is a 500 pound fine or two years in prison, or both.

Meanwhile many other trade unions, unaffiliated and affiliated with the Trade Union Congress, came out in support of the African Civil Servants Technical Workers Union and put forward wage demands of their own. On June 16, for example, the Printers' Technical Union at Lagos passed a resolution stating that "we shall not hesitate to fall in line of action with the meager but our humble demands are favorably considered."

The time for action arrived on June 21 when the strike ultimatum of the Trade Union Congress expired. At one minute past midnight over 150,000 workers went out on strike.

The entire transport, power and communication systems throughout Nigeria were immediately paralyzed. Unions participating in the strike included the African Civil Service Technical Workers and its constituent unions, the African Railway and Engineering Workshops Workers, African Land and Survey Technical Workers, African Post and Telegraph Workers, Nigeria Electrical Workers, Nigeria Marine African Workers, Public Works Union, Lagos Town Council Workers, African Locomotive Drivers, Government Sawmill Workers, Nigeria Union of Nurses, African Inspectors Union, African Railway Topographical Workers, African Railway Station Masters, Gov-

ernment Press Technical Workers Union and Medical Department Workers Union. Workers on the privately-owned Elder Lines joined the strike at its beginning. The Elder Lines are a subsidiary of Elder Dempster and Co., Ltd., which has a virtual monopoly on all shipping to and from the West African colonies.

Two days after the strike began the Daily Comet reorted that "armed soldiers with rifles were yesterday reorted to be guarding the railway locomotive yard at Ebute Metta. But all was quiet and there were no disturbances, as no workers appeared on the scene." On June 26 the Comet reorted that the miners in the government-owned coal mines at Enugu had joined the strike and a government communique admitted that the general strike was spreading throughout the provinces. As a matter of fact, military personnel were forced to dig graves in the cemeteries as even the grave diggers were on strike.

Workers employed by numerous private enterprises later joined in sympathy strikes and in other cases gave support by refusing to serve as strike-breakers. Over 200,000 workers were on strike before it ended.

First, the Government threatened to withhold the wages of all strikers for the month of June and to cancel all their pensions, gratuities and contractual rights. When this intimidation failed, four railroad union leaders were arrested on trumped-up charges of participating in an illegal strike. They were later released. Next, to lure the strikers back to work, the Government issued a promise that there would be no victimization of workers if they returned immediately. But the workers held steady.

The Governor then publicly accused the strikers of sabotaging the transport and communication systems, derailing a train at Oshodi, and cutting telephone lines connecting Lagos with the interior of the country. Ten strike leaders were arrested on these frame-up charges.

The reply to these provocations was given at a huge mass rally in Lagos where thousands of workers swore on their tribal oath "by our mother Africa and the departed spirits of our ancestors" not to return to work until their demands were granted. Their five demands were: pay the strikers for the period during which they have been on strike; guarantee their pensions and other rights; no victimization of strikers; immediate release of the arrested strike leaders; grant the original demand for a 2/6 minimum wage.

The militancy of the workers was further demonstrated when Bankole, president of the NTUC, advised the strikers to return to work. This false leader was immediately repudiated and expelled from office. He was replaced by A. O. Imoude, former president of the Railway Workers Union, who had been released from four years detention and exile on June 2. Imoude had been imprisoned on grounds that his labor activities interfered with the progress of the war. On his release he returned to Lagos riding on a white horse where he was received like a conquering hero and publicly acclaimed by thousands of workers.

The anti-imperialist movement pressed the battle on still another front. In protest against the reenactment of the rigid press censorship and suppression of free opinion, the African Pilot and the Daily Comet, the two leading Nigerian daily papers appeared with their editorial pages blank. These two papers were later suppressed because they criticized those union leaders who advocated that the strikers return to work. The European community threatened to lynch the editor, Azikiwe.

Azikiwe cabled to labor, Negro and progressive organizations in the United States and Great Britain for aid on his behalf. In response to his appeal cablegrams of protest were sent to the British Colonial Office and the Governor of Nigeria by James R. Cannon, national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, Walter White for the NAACP, and R. J. Thomas president of the CIO. United Automobile Workers.

In defense of the actions of Governor Richards, the Colonial Office in London issued a statement that the Secretary of State for Colonies "is satisfied that the measures taken by the Nigerian government to combat the rise in the cost of living are the best possible under the circumstances. Any increase in the cost of living allowance would not only be operated to the detriment of the wage earners themselves, but would result in the deterioration of the general economic situation."

While the British Government was trying to break the strike, significant demonstrations of solidarity were held in England. In London over 2,000 Africans and other colonial seamen, war plant workers and students held a mass rally in support of Nigerian labor and collected about \$2,000 to aid in feeding the wives and children of the strikers. Sixty telegrams were sent to world trade union organizations and unions in America, India and the West Indies by the Pan-African Federation seeking support for the Nigerian workers. A similar mass meeting held in Manchester collected over \$500 for the strike relief fund.

The Nigerian Trade Union Congress which led this tremendous strike struggle to victory is only two years old. It was organized in August 1943 when 200 delegates from 56 unions, representing over 100,000 workers, met in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria. The Congress issued a manifesto declaring that the workers of Nigeria were entitled to the

full rights of democratic government, including free speech, collective bargaining, adequate wages, equality of opportunity and protection against ignorance, want, disease and exploitation. The Congress adopted a program calling for the nationalization of mining, timber and other important industries, labor representation on the Legislative Council and the Municipal Councils, social insurance, education and housing for workers and protection of workers' health.

There were delegates from 64 unions and the membership had increased to over 400,000. The Nigerian Trade Union Congress now has 86 affiliated unions with a membership of over 500,000.

The vigorous proletariat of Nigeria is new and young. The number of wage and salaried workers in Nigeria in 1939 was only 183,000. 37.5 percent were employed by the government. 37.5 percent in mining and 25 percent by commercial firms, agriculture and other private interests. Today it is estimated that there are about one million wage and salaried workers, more than half of them organized in unions.

RAPID SHIFT TO CAPITALISM

The war led directly to this rapid growth of the working class. By the beginning of 1942 the harbors of West Africa became busy ports of call for convoys bound for the Middle and Far Eastern theaters of war. Simultaneously a great chain of airports grew up near the main towns for handling the stream of aircraft carrying men and supplies to North Africa and the Far East. A huge construction program aranged from the building of mud huts in military camps to the building of up-to-date airdromes, new roads, railroads and harbor facilities. These activities were accompanied by the intensified exploitation of vital raw materials, such as ores, foodstuffs, lumber and rubber.

To supply the necessary manpower thousands of natives were literally hurled from their primitive agrarian and tribal mode of living into the modern world of machinery and capitalism. These developments produced far-reaching dislocations in the social structure of Nigeria. Processes that in peace time would have taken generations are today being completed in weeks or months.

Simultaneously with the rapid rise of the trade union movement there has developed a large and powerful Nigerian nationalist movement in which the trade unions play a leading part. This political movement has cut across tribal traditions, religious ties, Mohammedan, Christian, Pagan, and the barrier of diverse native languages. Nigeria with its numerous native states and tribes, has hitherto been bound together only by geographical proximity and the bureaucratic apparatus of the British imperialist overlords. Now its people are developing a national consciousness.

The nationalist movement took on definite shape in August 1943 when a delegation of editors of West African newspapers in Great Britain issued a memorandum on "The Atlantic Charter and West Africa." Basing their claim on Clause 3 of the Atlantic Charter which affirms "the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they may live," they asked for the immediate abrogation of the Crown Colony system of government and the substitution of representative government. The authors of the memorandum declared "that factors of capitalism and imperialism have stifled the normal growth of these territories." The memorandum set forth a series of proposals for reforms in education, health, social welfare, agriculture, mining, finance, trade and commerce.

Upon the return of the press delegation to Africa, a campaign to popularize these demands was started under the leadership of Nnamdi Azikiwe, editor of the West African Pilot, largest Nigerian daily newspaper, and secretary of the delegation. On January 20 of this year a constitutional convention was held in Lagos, capital of Nigeria, which formulated and adopted a draft constitution and a program of economic and social reforms. The convention set up the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons for the purpose of uniting in federation all progressive organizations in the country.

The Jun 26 Daily Comet reports that 126 organizations have affiliated with the Council. Among them are sixty tribal unions, the two leading political parties—the Nigerian National Democratic Party and the Union of Young Democrats—eleven social clubs, eight professional associations. The most significant are the two leading trade union organizations—the West African Union of Seamen and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria with its 86 affiliated unions and membership of over 500,000. An editorial in the May 17 West African Pilot says that the Council has a following of over 6 million people.

Alarmed by these developments the British Government set about to counter the popular insistence on a new constitution. Shortly after this convention a White Paper containing proposals for the reform of the Constitution of Nigeria was issued with the approval of the British Colonial Secretary, in the name of Sir Richards, Governor of Nigeria. By this proposed constitutional revision the British imperialists sought to prevent the emanation of a draft constitution from the people themselves through the Constitutional Convention.

Calling a special meeting of the Legislative Council in March, Richards presented a constitutional draft demanding immediate acceptance before the people had an opportunity to study it. The Council made up of a majority of white officials and a min-

ority of hand-picked chiefs, voted acceptance.

At the same session of the Legislative Council Richards secured approval for two bills. One granted the British Government the right to confiscate all African lands wherever minerals were discovered. The other gave the Governor power to dispose of any chief who supported the Nationalist movement against the British.

Taking up the challenge of the Governor, Azikiwe called upon the natives to rally around the National Council, and fight to defend their ancestral lands. Without these the Nigerians will surely sink into further economic enslavement like the natives of South Africa and Kenya. Mass meetings throughout Nigeria passed resolutions denouncing the "Uncle Toms" who voted support for Richards and demanded that the Colonial Office rescind the undemocratic constitution and take its hands off the African lands. In the face of this nation-wide insurgency the Government flew to London to consult with the Colonial Office. Meanwhile the natives collected over \$50,000 for the expenses of a delegation to London. Head of the delegation was Herbert Macaulay, Nigeria's "elder statesman," who successfully fought the British thirty years ago when the Government attempted to confiscate tribal lands belonging to Chief Elako, active ruler of Lagos. The delegation of twelve included representatives from the most important tribes, Christian, Moslem and Pagan. Azikiwe was appointed secretary.

NIGERIAN TRADE UNIONS PROTEST

The Nigerian Trade Union Congress sent the following cable to Oliver Stanley, British Colonial Secretary: "Nigerian Trades Unions disfavor the constitution in its present unsatisfactory form. Approval by the Legislative Council is unauthorized. Workers' claims have been flagrantly ignored. Memorandum follows." One of the main points in the memorandum of the T. U. C. was that "the proposed constitution should provide for adult suffrage irrespective of income." At the huge May Day 1945 celebration of the T. U. C. in Lagos a resolution demanded full adult suffrage for the people of Nigeria.

There are no essential differences between the new constitution and the old. The projected "reforms" do not in any respect constitute progress toward Nigeria's independence. The real power still rests in the hands of the Governor and his Executive Council. The new "reforms" simply serve to reinforce the alliance between the British and autocratic native rulers in opposition to the will and desires of the people. The primary functions of the chiefs under this system of indirect rule are to maintain imperialist "law and order," secure forced labor, recruit troops in time of war, and, above all else, collect the extortionate taxes imposed by the British authorities.

Before the conquest of the country by the Europeans the authority of the chiefs derived from the people and from elected councils of elders. They were subject to the will of the people. If he became autocratic and tyrannical, the chief could be removed by the people. Today under the system of indirect rule, the chiefs are servants of the British overlords.

The people are recognizing the true role of the chiefs as agents of British rule and asserting themselves in opposition. The Colonial authorities, aware of the dangers of this rising tide of popular discontent, are attempting to arrest the growing democratic aspirations of the people by tying the chiefs more closely to themselves under the new constitution.

The West African Pilot, reviewing these proposals, said: "Any system of government which nourishes feudalism or advances a baronial class who must thrive at the expense of the lower class is undesirable....The powerful indirect rulers of the north enjoy good salaries (5,000 pounds per annum and Oriental palaces, they have nothing to complain about. But the classes under them have no justice, no education and their health is not enviable. The building up of a ruling class, vested with power, supplied with money and set up to live in pomp and luxury side by side with a poor and underfed peasant class, will have exactly the same result as such a system has had in other countries—namely, the people seek the destruction of such institutions."

The economic and political events of the past five years in Nigeria culminating in the triumphant general strike of the organized workers against the government confirm anew the Trotskyist theory of the permanent revolution applied to the struggles of the colonial peoples. In his report to the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921 Trotsky predicted: "The combination of the military nationalistic oppression of foreign imperialism, of the capitalist exploitation by the foreign and native bourgeoisie, and the survivals of feudal disabilities are creating the conditions in which the immature proletariat of the colonial countries must develop rapidly and take the lead in the revolutionary movement of the peasant masses."

IMPACT OF IMPERIALISM

This is what is happening in Nigeria. There the impact of imperialism is braking up the ancient conditions of life and labor. Agricultural production has been carried on by small independent peasant producers working upon land which is not privately owned but held in trust from the tribe. But these peasants have been unable to escape the far-reaching tentacles of finance capital. They are

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