

# Fascism Invades West Africa

By George Padmore

**T**HE British West African Governments are reputed to be less reactionary than others on the Dark Continent, a reputation hardly borne out in fact. Quite true, the whole history of colonial development in West Africa has been entirely different from that on the East coast. This is chiefly due to the devitalizing climate arising from the low-lying malarial coast and the damp forest regions, which make West Africa unsuited to white settlement. Until recent years this part of the continent was referred to as "the white man's grave." For in the early days of the chartered companies tropical fevers took heavy toll among the European merchant adventurers. Even after the territories were taken over by the British Imperial Government in the 'nineties, Europeans were not encouraged to make their homes on the west coast as they had done in the highlands of Kenya and Tanganyika and the temperate sections of South Africa, Rhodesia and the Union. In consequence there has been comparatively little alienation of land for plantation purposes in the West African colonies of Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria. It can be said without exaggeration that the mosquito has rescued the West African blacks from the wage slavery of the whites.

Agriculture in West Africa, therefore, is carried on entirely by the native peoples, who have been encouraged to grow certain commercial crops, such as cotton, cocoa, palm nut, etc., to sell to European trading companies, and the majority of natives have access to more land than those in any other part of the continent. Because of this apologists for British imperialism try to make us believe that West Africans enjoy not only economic freedom but political democracy. Recent events, however, have given the lie to this assertion.

## Monopoly Trading Companies

The greatest menace to them as producers are the monopoly trading combines. Vested interests are even more entrenched on the west coast than in East Africa, controlling trading, shipping and banking. In all these spheres there is a united front against the blacks. All interests function collectively. For example, all the companies engaged in the cocoa business have a buying agreement among themselves popularly referred to

**Monopoly, exploitation, strikes and widespread unrest in Britain's oldest African colony have caused a frightened imperialism to use frankly Fascist measures to destroy literate and politically conscious leadership of the native workers. Mr. Padmore calls upon American Negroes to back these workers and peasants in their struggle for better conditions**

as "the pool." At the beginning of every harvest season, the pool members agree between them the price to be paid to the farmers for their crops. "The pool" works hand in glove with the banks and shipping companies, which have interlocking directorates. The chief villain in the piece is the United Africa Company, a subsidiary of that monster octopus, Unilever. United Africa, which has a capital of £11 million, controls half the crop of the West African colonies. In 1937 it made £1,741,099 profit and declared a dividend of 10%. Even the Quaker conscience does not prevent Cadbury Bros. from belonging to this racket. This firm buys a quarter of the annual crop.

Desperate in the face of the relentless methods by which "the pool" firms depressed the price of cocoa, the peasants of the Gold Coast staged a nation-wide

strike by refusing to sell their 1937-38 crop to the companies, at the same time declaring a boycott against British goods. Such was the solidarity between all sections of the African toilers, producers and consumers, that the British Imperial Government was forced to appoint a commission to investigate their grievances. Although this commission condemned "the pool's" methods, the Africans are still at the tender mercies of the capitalists.

## Political Awakening

This mass action was instrumental in stirring the political consciousness of the people, and a number of organizations sprang into existence with the two-fold object of agitating for better economic conditions and a voice in the government. Foremost among these organizations is the West Africa Youth League of Sierra Leone, which has already achieved a mass basis. Although trade union legislation is not effective, the League has succeeded in organizing a number of trade unions, among them the Railway Workers Union, the Public Works Workers Union, the Mine Workers Union, Seamen's Union, Dockers Union, and several other workers' organizations. This is a signal achievement for a movement which has been in existence hardly a year.

This movement has served not only



Mass protest demonstration against deportation and sedition ordinances. Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa. May 16, 1939



to plant the seeds of trade unionism in tropical Africa, but has linked up the industrial struggle of the masses with a political agitation for democratic rights and civil liberties.

### Government Intervention

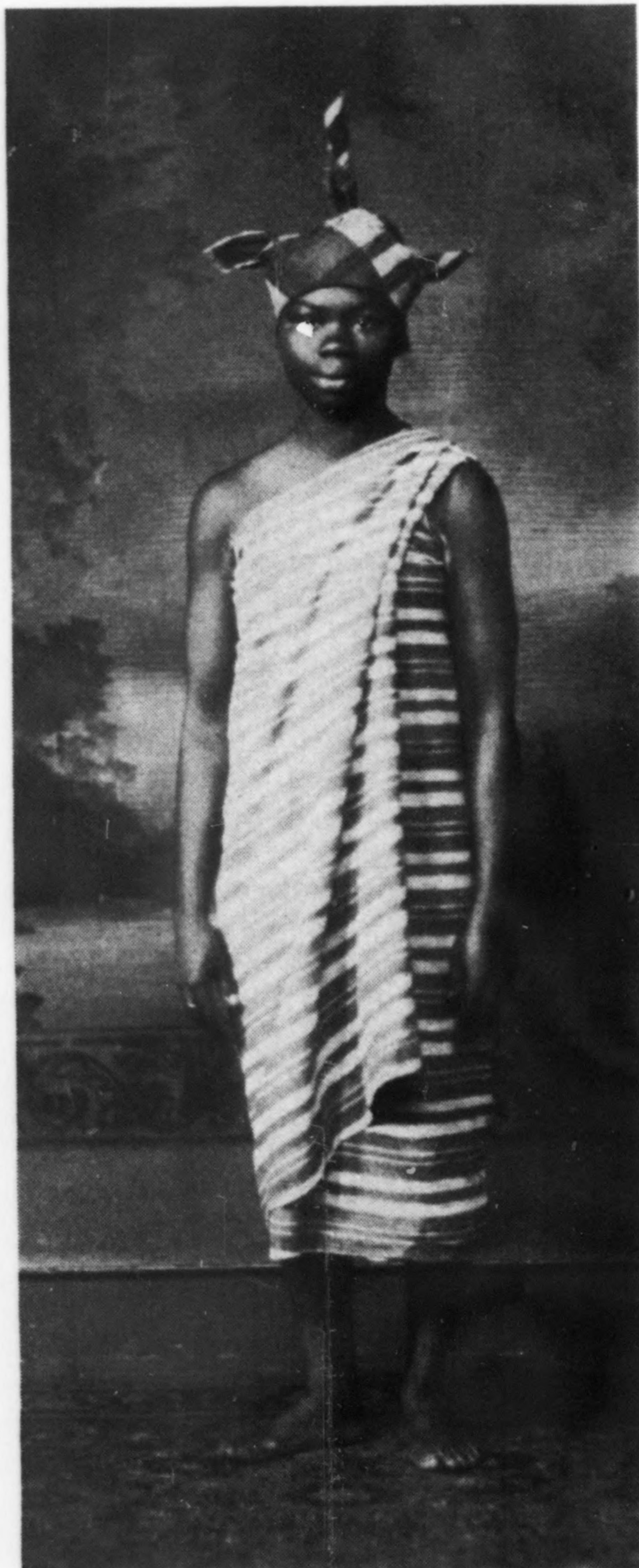
Alarmed at the intensity of this new development, the employers, especially the monopoly trading companies, have raised the cry that "Bolshevism" has invaded what was formerly an unrestricted paradise for merchant capitalists. Despite all the talk about "trusteeship" and "the paramountcy of native interests," which the imperial class is so fond of ladling out, the Governments are openly revealing themselves as the guardians of vested interests. Recent strikes among the mine workers and Government employees in Sierra Leone led to the arrest and imprisonment of the workers' leaders. These efforts of the Government to break the morale of the rank and file were unsuccessful, and realizing this, it has turned from a frontal attack to flank action.

At the opening of the Legislative Council on May 14th, Sir Douglas Jardine, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the colony, introduced four ordinances, with the object of impeding all efforts of the masses to organize for any improvement in their lot, economic and political. These bills are quite frankly fascist and are aimed at destroying any literate or politically conscious leadership which could guide the workers to action. Without any detailed examination of the Bills (which space forbids), their titles alone give ample clue to their oppressive aims, as can be seen:

- (1) Ordinance to regulate the deportation of undesirable British subjects and for similar purposes;
- (2) Ordinance to provide for the punishment of seditious acts and seditious libels;
- (3) Ordinance to prohibit the importation and publication of undesirable literature;
- (4) Incitement to Disaffection Ordinance.

Under these ordinances there will be no writ of habeas corpus, as provided in section 21 of the Ordinance covering deportation, and no "other process calling in question of the legality of any

order made under this Ordinance shall have any effect." Where natives of Sierra Leone are convicted to deportation they will be segregated in special



*West African Girl in Homespun Gown*

areas in concentration camps, and if they or their family are in possession of any kind of means, compelled to contribute to their maintenance there.

### Unrest Widespread

The prohibition of "undesirable" literature Ordinance and that covering incitement to disaffection are designed

not only to render the masses without leadership, but also to guard against political activity within the armed forces. Very few people are aware that quite recently there was a mutiny among the native soldiers of the colony, and that Lord Russell court-marshalled eleven of them. They received sentences of from seven to ten years' penal servitude. Unrest is widespread not only among the industrial workers, but throughout the civil services and armed forces. And this accounts for the large number of white troops which have lately been stationed in Freetown.

The Government, however, has aroused tremendous opposition among the people against the introduction of this dictatorial legislation. They have shown in no uncertain manner that they will not allow themselves to be passively reduced to a position of slavery even worse than that they now suffer. On the opening day of the new Legislative session a monster mass demonstration took place. It represented rural assemblies of the National Congress, British West Africa Bar Association, Christian Council, Muslim League, Amalgamated Workers' Union, Citizens Committee, and all other sections of the community, and was the largest ever seen in Freetown. The thousands of natives composing the assembly demonstrated before the seat of legislation, and presented a petition to the Colonial Secretary voicing their indignation and protest against the bills and demanding their withdrawal. Copies of this document have been transmitted to the Secretary of State for the Colonies at Downing Street.

Coloured Americans have a moral obligation to stand back of these Negro workers and peasants in their struggle to ward off the tightening up of the "democratic" imperialist yoke. They should get their organizations to pass resolutions protesting against the way the Africans are being treated, copies of which should be sent to the Secretary of State for Colonies, London, and to the Governor of Sierra Leone, West Africa. We must not forget that these same people were in the forefront of the struggle on behalf of the Scottsboro boys and Angelo Herndon. Now is a splendid opportunity for Afro-Americans to show their solidarity with their brothers in Africa.

