The Forces of the African Revolution (2)

by Jack Woodis

IN other territories, the amount taken by the Europeans was often less—9 per cent in the Belgian Congo, 7 per cent in Kenya, 5 per cent in Nyasaland (now Malawi), and 3 per cent in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia); but, even in these latter cases, the land taken for European farming or plantation development, was the best land, the land left to the Africans being very poor, often swampy or dry scrubland without adequate water, and with unsuitable soil.

Thus in Northern Rhodesia, Dr. Rita Hinden (Plan for Africa, 1941) has pointed out that crude statistics have little meaning, for the Africans are confined to the "poor soils", with poor irrigation facilities which compel them to crowd into the few areas with water supplies. Cataloguing the various handicaps which face the Africans on their poor land, Dr. Hinden sums up by describing these obstacles to successful African agriculture as being "nothing short of catastrophic".

In Kenya, too, the European land, the famous White Highlands was the richest land in the territory, said to comprise 30 per cent of all the good land in Kenya. This was made the preserve of some 4,000 European farmers, while 6 million Africans were crowded into the poor, unfertile lands. In Southern Rhodesia, a former Land Development Officer, Ken Brown, has described most of the land available to Africans as being "poor soil.... known technically as Class III land; while the European Area contains nearly all the areas of fertile soil in the Colony". (*Land in Southern Rhodesia* (1959).

He adds that in many parts of the country it is embarrassing for a European to drive through a European Area into a 'Native Area', for "the change in soil-type coincides almost exactly with the boundary-line and is startlingly obvious."

PLAN TO CRIPPLE AFRICA

In addition to seizing land, the imperialists introduced measures deliberately designed to cripple African agriculture. Sometimes there were legal restrictions as to which crops the Africans could produce. In Kenya, for example, until 1939 Africans were prevented from growing coffee, partly by the high cost of the licence, and partly by the acreage limitations; coffee growing was reserved for the European farmers. There were similar restrictions on Africans wishing to grow sisal or pyrethrum. African coffee growing was also restricted in Tanganyika and in Cameroun, where there was also a quota restriction on African export of bananas.

In Southern Rhodesia, Africans are not allowed to grow the best Virginia tobacco which fetches the highest price; this, too, is reserved for the white settlers. In Uganda, Africans had to conduct a long battle before they were allowed to gin the cotton they produced. In many territories, the authorities constantly strove to reduce the herds of African livestock. Africans growing maize in Southern Rhodesia were only allowed to provide one quarter of the home maize market, the other three quarters being reserved for Europeans. At the same time the price paid to African maize growers was only about two-thirds of that paid to Europeans. (This two price systems still operates.) The absence of railways and decent roads from African populated areas to the main markets was a further factor hindering the emergence of an economically independent African peasantry.

That this was deliberate policy on the part of the imperialists is indicated by the fact that most of the rich lands they seized were never used by them. Thus a Government Report on Northern Rhodesia in 1938 (the Pim Report) found that of 23 million acres taken away from the Africans only 70,000 acres were under European cultivation; in the Abercorn district out of 5,500,000 acres set aside for Europeans, only 500 acres were under European cultivation. Even as late as 1960 only 5 per cent of the 4,500,000 acres of land in Northern Rhodesia owned by Europeans was actually being cultivated. In Southern Rhodesia, according to figures compiled in 1957, only 2 per cent of land reserved for Europeans was under cultivation. In Kenya, in 1960, only 6 per cent of the valuable White Highlands was under European cultivation.

The apparent paradox of large areas of land seized by Europeans and then not used is easily explained. The purpose was two-fold: to prevent the African peasant becoming a serious competitor to European farmers and plantation owners; and to impoverish the African peasantry to such an extent that the majority of African adult males would be compelled to work for the Europeans, in farms or in mines. We shall have occasion later on to examine the results for the African peasant producers, but for the moment we are concerned with the question of the African working class.

The measures indicated above were not sufficient in themselves to guarantee a constant flood of cheap African labour for European employers. In many parts of tropical Africa the climate was not suitable to large-scale European settlement, and so land seizures in these areas did not take place to the same extent, nor were there always the kind of restrictions placed on African agriculture that we associate with Southern Rhodesia, or Kenya. In addition, Africans, even where their economic standards were not very high had no great desire to take up wage employment in European enterprises. Thus a further economic spur was introduced, that of taxation. Taxation is generally regarded as a means of raising revenue for a government. In Africa the taxation system imposed by the Western powers had quite other functions. It was simply a device to compel Africans to take up wage labour, or, in other words, a form of labour tax.

The essence of this system was to make it obligatory on the Africans, *irrespective of their income or property*, to pay a tax *in cash*, first in the form of a hut tax, and then, more widely, in the form of a poll tax. The usual pattern for the latter was a personal tax on all adult males over sixteen (in some territories eighteen). Writing of Bechuanaland, Dr. Schapera (*Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*, 1947) has pointed out that, in Bechuanaland, following the discovery of diamonds in South Africa in 1870, and of gold in 1884, the Administration introduced a hut tax, in 1899 "and thus forced upon the people the necessity of finding a regular sum of money each year." This same obligation arose with the introduction of the poll tax.

Significantly, these taxes were introduced in a whole number of territories at the end of the nineteenth and the commencement of the 20th century when the first needs for African labour arose. Hut and poll taxes were introduced by the German authorities in East Africa in 1897, and by the British in Bechuanaland in 1897, in Kenya in 1901, in Southern Rhodesia in 1904 and in Northern Rhodesia in 1905. In the Belgian Congo an open labour tax was introduced, to be replaced in 1910 by a poll tax. In the French possessions in Africa a labour tax or *prestation* system was inaugurated. Under this system, the African was obliged to work for a specific period as a form of tax payment. If he wished, he could pay a cash tax instead of performing this obligatory work; but to acquire cash for tax payment usually meant having to take up wage labour. In either case, the African was compelled to take up labour for the Europeans.

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CRUDE TAXATION

At the time these various systems were introduced there was no attempt to conceal their purpose. Thus, a Kenya Governor, Sir Percy Girouard, stated in 1913:

"We consider that taxation is the only possible method of compelling the native to leave his Reserve for the purpose of seeing work.

In 1922, a Kenya farmers' association called on the government to "increase the poll tax to relieve the acute labour shortage, and to remit this tax if the native worked a certain period of time for a European."

Of course, if the African people could have developed their own flourishing agriculture, they could have paid the tax from their agricultural revenue. In that case there would have been little labour for the European farms and mines. But the impact of the European conquest broke down the self-sufficiency of the African economy and left the African with no alternative but to seek wage employment with the Europeans.

Dr. Schapera explains the dilemma which faced the African people in these terms:

"They could increase the output of their traditional forms of production, and so provide a surplus for export; they could produce new crops and other commodities specially for the market; or they could work for cash wages. The first two methods have up to the present proved inadequate. Wage-labour has consequently become an indispensable source of income for the people generally."

Mr. de Briey, in his study of Bechuanaland, found that the population could not earn sufficient to meet all its expenses if it relied solely on its livestock. To meet their taxation and other essential items of expenditure, it was, he stressed, necessary for the African to enrol himself as "a wage-earner in order to balance the family budget by means of his wages." Dr. Buell in his classic work, *The Native Problem in Africa* (London, 1928), pointed out that in Northern Rhodesia in the 1920's the absence of railways and feeder roads made it impossible for Africans to produce crops for export, and thus to earn the cash to pay taxes. The consequence, he said, was that "most of them, in order to pay this tax, must seek work from European employers."

Economic compulsion alone was not sufficient to force Africans into wage labour. Other forms of pressure and coercion were utilised as well, including various forms of compulsory or forced labour. Convict labour, 'civic obligations', work in 'emergencies', compulsory porterage, work by tax defaulters, labour 'recruitment'—these were many of the forms of compulsory labour imposed at different times on the African people.

Protests against these methods became so strong in the 1920's that eventually in 1930 all that major powers with colonies in Africa, apart from Portugal, ratified the Geneva Convention on Forced Labour. This, however, did not put a stop to such methods, especially in British territories during the war, and in every emergency during the post-1945 period, as well as in South Africa where the widespread use of convict labour and pass-law offenders became an international scandal in the 1950's. In Angola, especially, forced labour has been widely used by the Portuguese authorities and employers.

MORE SLAVES

Basil Davidson, in his book, *The African Awakening*, 1955 describing his investigations in Angola, states that there are "now more slaves....than there were fifty years ago." Examining the files of the Native affairs Department at Luanda, the capital of Angola, Davidson found listed "379,000 *contradados* or force workers who are really slaves". Professor Marvin Harris found in Mozambique widespread forced labour. Under the *shibalo* system those who do not offer themselves for wage employment are declared 'idle and become subject to forced labour. Professor Harris estimated in 1958 that there were 100,000 *shibalos* in Mozambique, but that an additional 300,000 had been forced to take up work in South Africa or Southern Rhodesia in order to avoid becoming *shibalos*. In reality, all 400,000 had been compelled by the system to take up employment in government or private enterprises.

In the French occupied territories, forced labour was not officially abolished until 1946. Prior to then there had been widespread use of forced labour in European plantations in the Ivory Coast, Guinea and what is now Mali, in forestry concerns in Gabon and the Ivory Coast, and on roads and railway construction, 150,000 forced labourers, according to official figures, being utilised between 1927 and 1934 to build the railway from Brazzaville to Pointe-Noire.

THE AFRICAN WORKING CLASS

Thus the African working class came into existence as a result of the imperialist destruction of African traditional agriculture and handicrafts, and driven by the triple whip of poverty, the poll tax, and forced labour.

The circumstances in which African labour came into existence also help to explain its size and character. The birth of a class of African wage earners was not a consequence of the growth of indigenous African capitalism but the result of the imposition of colonial rule. Colonial administrations were established in Africa not in order to build up modern industrialised economies there but to make maximum use of cheap land, cheap labour and cheap resources, both mineral and agricultural, for the benefit of the industrial economies of the metropolitan countries. Thus there grew up in Africa a form of economy absolutely distorted and one-sided.

Whole territories were given up to the production of one or two raw materials—cotton in Egypt, Sudan and Uganda, coffee in Kenya and Ivory Coast, groundnuts in Senegal and Gambia, cocoa in Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria, copper in the Congo and Northern Rhodesia, cloves in Zanzibar, sisal in Tanganyika, gold, chrome and tobacco in Southern Rhodesia tea in Nyasaland, wine in Algeria. Indigenous food production declined while production of cash crops for export soared. Ships laden with minerals, timber, cotton, hides, and other saw materials sailed out of Africa's ports, to return later and unload their cargoes of manufactured goods right down to buttons and nails.

When Ghana became independent in 1957 she was exporting bauxite, importing Aluminium pots and pans; exporting palm oil, importing soap; paper and furniture; exporting hides and leather, importing boots and shoes; exporting cocoa beans in imported jute sacks, and importing back every bar of chocolate and every tin of processed cocoa. Even her limes were expressed in Ghana and the juice exported to return later in the form of bottled lime-juice.

As recently as November 1962, during a visit to Guinea, I noticed on an office desk a small bottle of glue labelled "Best Senegalese glue. Made in France." It is reported that when the luxury Dukor Monrovia, Liberia, everything needed in the construction, apart from some local stone, had to be imported, even the nails.

In other words, Africa became simply a minerals and agrarian appendage to European economy, pouring out raw materials to the West and importing back practically every single item of manufacture which, very often, was made from these same raw materials.

Such an economy had no need for a large labour force. Nor for a highly-skilled, educated, urbanised and permanent body of workers. Miners, timber and forestry workers, farm workers, domestic servants, transport and building workers, commerce and public administration employees—these were the main fields of employment which the colonial system held out to the African people. In general, industrial development only took place to any degree where there was a considerable body of European settlement—and in these cases, it was usually Euro-peans who filled the ranks of the artisan and skilled labour force. Notably was this so in South African, but the same trend could be seen in Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Kenya.

Sometimes, as in South Africa and the Rhodesias, laws were passed to deny to the Africans the posibility of taking up apprenticeships or to having access to skilled jobs.

The structure and disposition of the African working class was thus conditioned by the colonial character of Africa's economy. This is borne out by all the available statistics. The United Nations *Special Study on Economic Conditions in Non-Self-Governing Territories* (1958) provides a TABLE (see above) of the labour force excluding in agriculture in most of the former French and British held territories, as well as the Congo, Angola and Mozambique.

From this table it can be seen that he largest single category of African workers is 'domestic and other services' which account for no less than 1,500,000 workers, nearly 30 per cent of all the workers included in the table. A second striking fact is that if one excludes Suoth Africa, the one territory in which basic industrialisation has been allowed to take place, we find less than 450,000 workers employed in manufacture in the rest of Africa. If, from these, one subtracts the 167,312 accounted for by the Belgian Congo, we are left with a balance of only some 280,000 workers engaged in manufacture in all the remaining territories

It is further noticeable that, after 'domestic and other services', the main category of African labour is that employed in the extractive industries, which account for over 900,000 workers. These are mainly engaged in mining. Transport and commerce, which are closely connected with both agriculture and the extractive industries, acount for over 400,000 and 365,000 respectively. Over 560,000 are consumed by building and construction, and almost as many in public administration.

If one turns to the U.N. Report on the *Enlargement of the Exchange Economy in Tropical Africa*, 1954, one finds that agriculture and forestry is the sphere in which by far the largest number of Africans are employed as wage earners. This table excludes South Africa, and domestic servants in their Congo—and these two countries alone account for 1,150,000 wage earners (see previous table).

A table (see our next issue) based on a selected group of territories shows over 1,100,000 workers engaged in agriculture and forestry, and a further 390,000 engaged in mining. These two groups alone account for almost 43 per cent of the entire labour force of the territories given here. Among individual countries, we find that agriculture accounts for 52 per cent of all the wage workers in Tanganyika, 48 per cent in Kenya, 39 per cent in Southern Rhodesia, and 34 per cent in French Equatorial Africa.

LOW INCOME

It will be noted that in the ten territories listed, the number of wage earners employed in secondary industry constitutes only about 10 per cent of the total—and even half of this is accounted for by Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia. Quite apart from this, however, it should be appreciated that, generally speaking, secondary industry in Africa is usually light industry, or is associated with the preliminary processing of locally produced crops and minerals. The number of Africans engaged in factory production is usually very small. The Republic of South Africa, of course, has long been an exception to this general pattern. And in other territories, too, since independence has been won and economic reconstruction has commenced, more workers are entering factory production, though even now the total numbers involved are still a small minority of the total wage earning class.

Writing elsewhere in 1960, when most of Africa was still under direct foreign rule, I summed up the main characteristics of the African working class in these terms:

"... a colonial working class, working within the sphere of a colonial economy and scarcely touched by the breath of industrialisation. It is working class which is mainly unskilled, largely migrant and ... only partly urbanised."

(*Africa, The Roots of Revolt*: London, 1960)

Unskilled, casual, migrant labour, these terms could be applied to the African working class at any time during the past sixty years. Such were the consequences of colonialism and the lack of industrialisation. With limited factory production undertaken in Africa there was no occasion for the European rulers to develop an educated, skilled, urbanised and permanent working class.

TABLE VIII

DISTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN WAGE EARNERS BY PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION

Territory and Year of Reference		Extractive industries	Manufacturing	Building and Construction	Transport	Commerce	Domestic and other services	Public administration	Total
French W. Africa	1954	12,419	30,779	42,670	33,134	51,210	21,123	107,626	298,961
French Equatorial Africa	1953	20,333	12,188	22,089	14,292	12,626	15,329	16,800	113,657
Sierra Leone	1954	4,901	—	10,963	5,004	4,962	2,688	11,162	39,680
Gold Coast	1952	41,037	11,766	44,700	18,511	23,498	18,328	33,352	191,202
Nigeria	1952	57,688	17,923	35,392	42,335	20,579	13,129	53,181	240,227
Belgian Congo	1954	103,518	167,312	128,915	34,468	77,399	318,741	—	880,353
Angola	1953	21,809	—	—	—	—	—	—	21,809
Mozambique	1953	5,025	29,866	—	—	—	—	—	34,891
Madagascar	1953	12,920	25,312	11,138	7,677	16,900	36,997	55,343	166,287
Southern Rhodesia	1951	63,805	55,729	48,971	17,613	—	131,033	—	317,351
Northern Rhodesia	1953	46,100	18,650	25,500	8,150	6,810	73,820	37,450	216,480
Nyasaland	1953	—	1,400	4,300	5,800	1,800	3,200	19,100	35,600
Uganda	1954	7,922	24,414	45,448	7,625	6,245	28,486	48,408	168,548
Tangaynika	1954	15,453	19,669	16,373	34,262	11,428	50,946	76,334	214,465
Kenya	1954	5,448	42,754	19,411	34,355	22,080	44,274	103,709	272,031
Union S. Africa	—	491,900	436,029	107,593	98,367	109,600	830,900	—	2,074,389
TOTAL		910,278	893,801	563,463	401,793	365,137	1,588,994	562,465	5,285,931

Source: WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION, U.N., 1957