

NIGERIA'S BLOODY FRIDAY

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ON November 20 last year the name of the Nigerian mining town of Enugu became known to the British people. That evening a bare official release told of the shooting two days earlier of a large number of miners at the Enugu colliery by police in 'self defence'.

The true story of that Bloody Friday and the full extent of the massacre is only gradually unfolding. A report* by a Nigerian trade union organiser who was in Enugu at the time tells of 60 men shot dead and 80 admitted to hospital, or nearly thrice the number of casualties admitted in the official release. This report throws some light on why it took the Nigerian Government two days to concoct a story of the Enugu events which it could present to the world. The official story ran that it was 'necessary to evacuate explosives from the mines in the interest of public safety' and that the miners 'rushed at the police' who were detailed to carry out this 'precautionary' measure, in an attempt to 'obtain possession of the explosive stores'. Among significant facts omitted from this version are these:

When the Government (which owns the mine) rejected the miners' demand for a basic wage of 5/10 a day and dismissed over 200 of their number *they refused to come to the surface and continued peacefully working underground; this was the purpose for which they required the explosives*; while at the same time peaceful demonstrations were going on at the pithead in which the local population took part. All this continued for two full days before the massacre *without the outside world being allowed to know one word about it*. Secondly, on November 23 Under-Secretary Mr. Rees Williams was compelled to admit that no police were killed or injured—contrary to the original official statement. A fortnight later on December 7, William Gallacher enquired how many of the miners had entered upon a stay-down strike and then asked the Under-Secretary, who remained mute:

Is it not the case that these miners went slow; that their number was 251 and they were dismissed; that they refused to come out; and that the officials refused to allow food and water to be taken down to them and even refused them air?

On November 22, in an editorial which omitted any mention of the fact that there had been demands for an increase in wages (and such wages!) *The Times* stated blankly:

The few trouble-makers in Nigeria have concentrated on gaining power

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inside the trade unions. Active union members . . . are to be found at all the key points. The rank and file African trade union member is more than usually dependent on his leaders and he can be quickly led astray. This is what happened at the Government-owned Enugu colliery.

Was a similar presumption intended to be created by Mr. Creech Jones' reply to questions asked in the House of Commons as late as November 28 to the effect that to the best of his knowledge there had been no negotiations in regard to wages, no trade dispute had been declared and this was not a normal breakdown in labour relations as understood in this country?

Mr. Creech Jones' knowledge may not be of the best, even though in the same breath he advised Mr. Platts-Mills to acquaint himself with the most elementary facts concerning Nigeria before asking questions. We shall be glad to recall some of these elementary facts to Mr. Creech Jones' failing memory.

The first elementary fact is that the Nigerian people are not master in their own home, that their country is administered by the Colonial Office as part of the British colonial system through a Governor appointed by Whitehall. The Governor exercises the absolute right of veto over the so-called 'Legislative Council', a veto against which Mr. Bevin has never been heard to protest.

The colonial system was imposed on the peoples of Nigeria after the capitalist slave trade had seriously depleted the population, corroded and disrupted their old civilisation and weakened the resistance of the people by engendering disastrous internecine wars. Great humanists had long campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade; but their campaign did not succeed until sections of the British capitalist class found that rather than export slaves to their American rivals they would exploit this cheap labour power themselves in its own homeland. That was the basis of colonial rule in Africa. Lest anyone thinks that this basis has miraculously disappeared with the advent of the British Labour Government, let us quote what Lord Baden-Powell said of the African worker in the House of Lords while Mr. Creech Jones was fencing off awkward questions in the House of Commons: 'His wants are few, his cost of living is cheap, and thus labour is inexpensive, besides being plentiful. This latter fact is of inestimable value to all employers of native labour. . .'. With a simplicity and directness that are almost touching the Noble Lord thus gave a lesson in elementary facts concerning the essence of colonial economy to his Labour counterparts who accepted it with expressions of the warmest praise.

In fact, Nigeria today under the Labour Government continues not only to be the happy hunting ground of some of the biggest monopolies (such as the United Africa Company—a Unilever subsidiary) in whose interests both wages to the worker and crop prices to the peasant are kept scandalously low; but also is now intended

to serve as a vital disembarkation point and supply base in the war Anglo-American imperialism is preparing in the interests of monopoly capital, against the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies. Hence the ten-year development plan, whose true purpose is being hidden by Fabian chatter about 'generosity' in 'partnership'.

The recent events are but the culmination of a process which began in the early stages of the war when the denial of civil rights and the economic exploitation were suddenly intensified under the plea of the war emergency. If in 1926 Nigeria was still able to buy back some 80% of its exports in imported goods, by 1941 the volume of imports had shrunk to 25% of exports (in 1926 prices). Of course, a disproportionate amount of the imported goods are bought up by the European staffs of the Government and the companies, while the exported goods are exclusively produced by Nigerians, who raise the cocoa, groundnuts and cotton, climb the palmtrees to cut the fruits and press out the palm oil, wash the tin ore and hew the coal. A list of the imported consumer goods affords an illustration of the beggarly condition of the working people who for manufactured goods must depend almost wholly on imports owing to the destruction of their ancient industries and handicrafts: cotton piece goods predominate to the extent of 26% (1934-9) to 44% (1944). All other items are insignificant in comparison: but the biggest among them is—salt. For the rest there are corrugated iron sheets (roofing for the more 'luxurious' type of building), kerosene, dried fish. . . Such things as bicycles and motor-cars play the rôle not of consumer but of capital goods in Nigeria. But now even dried fish, an important substitute for the meat that is so scarce, has practically dropped out of the diet of the people altogether.

In these last years important changes occurred in the structure of Nigerian society. There was not merely an increase of the population by at least a quarter (now estimated to be over 25 million), but the gearing of Nigeria's economy to the world market as a raw material base has had the effect of driving increasing numbers of peasants off the land and into the towns to swell the ranks of the working class and the unemployed†. In the absence of any social security (no unemployment, sickness or old age benefits) this has

†A memorandum of the Commissioner of the Colony on Unemployment in Lagos admitted that in 1945 'a figure in the region of 30% of the employable persons in Lagos are unemployed' and that 'in general there is evidence of the intensification of those causes which had led to the pre-war level of unemployment and overcrowding'. This problem is not confined to Lagos but applies to all important towns. It has since been further aggravated by the failure of the resettlement scheme for ex-servicemen: by September, 1948, out of a total of over 116,000 demobilised, only some 40,000 had been placed in employment or re-enlisted.

meant simply an increase in the number of dependents for whom a wage earner or working peasant has to provide.

All these factors combined to produce a drastic rise in the cost of living which began in 1940 and continues to the present day. The Lagos cost of living index, which has been severely criticised for not taking into account the true needs of the workers, rose as follows:

1939	100	
1942	147	(Tudor Davies report)
1945	176	
1947	224	(‘Nigeria 1947’)

Of the housing conditions the official report ‘Nigeria, 1947’, calmly gives this picture:

According to a report of the Medical Officer of Health, of the 9,673 dwellings on Lagos Island a total of 5,756, or approximately 60%, are either unfit for human habitation or are constructed of prohibited materials, i.e., bamboo or galvanised iron. In the poorer parts of the town the narrow and tortuous alleys wind through a labyrinth of crazy shacks with dark, cavernous rooms, each of which may house several families; every inch of space is utilised and in some places noisome corridors are partitioned into living rooms by the simple expedient of hanging grass mats at intervals from the roof.

For a room like that, 10 feet by 12, rents of 10s. and more were demanded already by 1945. Nowadays a worker’s family is hard put to it to find a room for less than £1. In Enugu rents range from 25 to 35 shillings per month. Only a few of the colliers can afford accommodation in the housing estate built before the war when the labour force employed in the colliery averaged 2,000. Most of the 6,000 miners working there now have to live in ramshackle, barrack-like structures occupying a single room eight feet by ten feet or at most ten feet by ten with their entire family, or walk for miles every day to and from the farms.

Of the workers’ diet Major Orde Browne, in his report on Labour Conditions in West Africa (1940), had this to say:

There is almost universally a shortage of animal protein due to the limited amount of meat and fish available except in a few favoured localities; dairy produce is rare and must be regarded as negligible as far as the manual labourer is concerned. The ordinary diet consists therefore of large quantities of farinaceous food with a proportion of vegetables, including green food and some fruit; small quantities of meat and fish form a relish rather than a constituent. The result is that . . . he shows clear signs of deficiency as soon as he accepts employment involving strenuous exertion. Consequently, there is a marked degree of inefficiency obviously due to lack of stamina; in the case of exacting tasks, such as coal hewing, men will profess themselves unable to work every day, so that employment may only amount to 15 or 16 days a month.

By 1949, it has been estimated, the cost of the diet described by

Orde Browne, plus rent and the scantiest clothing (shoes or protection against the tropical rains do not figure in a worker's budget), for an average family is at least £7 per month in provincial towns (Kaduna, for instance), while in Lagos 'if a person earning £7 desires to maintain a normal balanced diet he must, in addition to his salary, owe or borrow £3. If he has a son to educate in any secondary school he must in addition seek a loan of £30, bringing his total indebtedness to £66 a year' (Article by Mbadiwe, *West African Pilot*, 27.5.49). The fact that wages have failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living is driving the workers more and more into the hands of the moneylenders, of whom there are some 300 registered in Lagos alone. That is the bitter experience of thousands of workers, who need no 'political agitators' to tell them so.

Mr. Crech Jones' statement on wages received by the Enugu miners fails to mention the numbers employed in each grade, making it impossible to check on his estimate of average earnings being as high as 7s. a day. But in 1948 (before the recent steep rise in prices of foodstuffs and rents) average earnings of underground workers, according to the Nigerian Department of Labour *Quarterly Review*, were 3s. 4d. a day, of surface workers 2s. 5d. per day.

Anyone acquainted with the elementary facts about the real situation in Nigeria must scorn the suggestion that their strike movement is anything but the response of ordinary human beings to intolerable conditions. He will be more surprised at their great patience, restraint and discipline in the face of provocation. The application for an increase in the basic wage to a mere 5s. 10d. a day is treated in the most high-handed manner. Only then do the miners decide to go slow—and dismissals and bullets are the reply.

The young Nigerian trade union movement is learning its lessons in bitter battles. The Government, which is incidentally the biggest single employer in the country, hiring 135,000 out of the estimated 250,000 workers, and the private companies have on repeated occasions employed similar tactics: studied contempt for the workers' demands; refusal to negotiate with the elected representatives of the workers; endless procrastination on the pretext of having to contact a higher authority or head office in London; dismissals and victimisation of trade union officials; and finally police baton charges and bullets for unarmed workers and their wives and children. In 1947 11 unarmed strikers were severely wounded by batons and rifle fire on the United Africa Company's private island of Burutu; early in 1949 a striker was shot dead in Kaduna; later in the year 800 War Department workers were batoned out of their workplace and locked out. But not since 1929, when police fired on the great demonstration of the women of Aba protesting against taxation, and killed 38, has police violence assumed such wantonly murderous nature as at Enugu.

Nigerian workers fought at the battlefronts and suffered privations at home in the war, at the end of which freedom was promised them. Instead they reaped the 'Richards Constitution' which threatens the country with dismemberment and strengthens colonial rule from Whitehall; invocation of 'sedition laws' for every word uttered in defence of freedom, and all kinds of manœuvres to sow dissension in the trade union movement and the national movement for liberation. Yet, despite all this, their movement has grown in strength and experience, their will to be free becomes so unquenchable, that at the slightest assertion of elementary, legitimate demands the authorities fly into a panic and run amuck.

The reaction to the events of that Bloody Friday at Enugu has been the coming together of all political parties and trade unions to form an Emergency Committee and set up an independent inquiry commission. Protest demonstrations and mass meetings continued in many parts of Nigeria for ten days. At the same time 20,000 Cameroons plantation workers came out on strike for a 1s. wage increase. Police in hundreds are rushed from one end of the country to the other; press censorship is imposed, state of emergency declared, more shots are fired, more innocent people killed.

The Nigerian Government and the Colonial Office hope to retrieve the situation by the appointment of a 'commission of inquiry' consisting of a tried colonial administrator, two West African High Court judges—known supporters of the colonial régime—and the legal adviser of the British National Union of Mineworkers. Neither the Nigerian nor the British working class are represented on this commission. But this kind of measure is too well known both here and in Nigeria to succeed.

The Nigerian people are not only backing the miners' wage claim, they are demanding adequate compensation for the dependents of the victims and trial and just punishment of those who authorised the shooting. They want to make sure against any recurrence of such wanton police terror.

These demands are supported by British trade unionists and all progressive people. The news of the Enugu massacre has roused an indignation which finds expression in protests in and outside parliament, messages of sympathy and support for the Nigerian trade unionists' struggle and donations for the dependents of the killed miners. British workers have made it known to the Nigerian people that they are not alone in their struggle for decent standards of living, for political liberties, for the liberation of their country from colonial oppression. New bonds of solidarity have been forged which neither the Anglo-American imperialists nor their stooges of various hues, from pink to yellow, can break. The Nigerian people know now more clearly than ever that their friends are those who march in the camp of peace, democracy and progress.