

# WEST AFRICA AND THE SEDITION ORDINANCES

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[*The LABOUR MONTHLY is glad to afford an opportunity to the Secretary of the Delegation of the Gold Coast Aborigines Society to express his views on the recently held National Peace Congress and, in particular, on what he regards as essential in order to ensure peace in West Africa. While it considers that peace in West Africa cannot fully be attained, such as exists at present in those colonies which were formerly part of the Tsarist Empire and now are part of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, until the colonies in West Africa are also free from imperialist domination, the LABOUR MONTHLY considers that the writer is fully justified in his exposure of the increasingly repressive measures now being imposed on West Africa in general and the Gold Coast in particular. It would therefore like to join in the appeal of Mr. Wood to all readers to do everything in their power to bring pressure on the British Government to secure the complete repeal of all such measures.*]

**A**S members of the Gold Coast Aborigines Delegation in London, my colleague, Mr. Moore, and I had the opportunity of attending the National Peace Congress held at the Friends' Meeting House from June 28 to July 2, and had the honour of speaking at the Sunday evening session when Mr. Leonard Barnes and Professor Norman Bentwich spoke on the so-called "Racial Problems" (but as we would prefer to call them—National Problems).

Invited as I am, to write my impressions on the question of war and, in particular, how the National Peace Congress struck me as an African, I feel that a good opportunity has been offered me of bringing West Africa and the Gold Coast, particularly, within the purview of the aims and objects of the National Peace Council. The problems of "Peace and the Pacific," which were discussed by the Chinese Ambassador, Dame Rachel Crowdy, and others, referred purely to China and Japan. On the subsequent days when themes like the "Peace and the Empire," "The Ethics and Politics of the Empire," "The Economics of Empire," "The Racial Problems" and "Education and Peace" were discussed, West Africa was conspicuously absent from the considerations of the speakers. The plight of the natives of South Africa as about the greatest national

problem discussed generally by Mr. Barnes, and in detail, by Mr. Ballinger, appeared to have drawn from the audience practical demonstrations of sympathy. One questioner elicited from one of the speakers on these so-called "racial problems" the mistaken statement that in West Africa the people were contented and were more or less satisfied with local conditions and with their respective governments.

Here, at this stage, the writer who was seconded by his colleague, addressed the meeting within the few minutes allowed him, and emphasised that although the plight of the Gold Coast African as to his right to his ancestral land was not as precarious as that of his South African brother, yet there had been such grave and acute grievances and disabilities as had impelled, within one single year, the despatch of two separate deputations to the Colonial Office. He also stressed the point that no reliance should be placed by the British public on the "Impressions" of Mr. Charles Roden Buxton (published in the *Labour Magazine* and elsewhere) who, after an absence of only nine weeks, four of which he spent on the high seas, leaving him barely five weeks to travel the length and breadth of the four British dependencies and the French Ivory Coast and Liberia, without any opportunity of seeing any distance beneath the surface, returned to record that the people of West Africa were "happy and contented" when, to his knowledge, there was one of the deputations still in England pressing for certain reforms essential to the happiness, contentment and progress of the people. The political position of this personage as the "Adviser" of the Labour Party and President of its Advisory Committee on Colonial Affairs would appear to reassure the public of the soundness of any opinion that he might express as to the condition of the people of West Africa.

Throughout the course of the Congress the speakers focussed their attention more on the affairs of Europe and the East, less on the Native peoples of South Africa, and still less on West Africa. The essentials of the peace of these places were also discussed. But in view of the absence of proper information the peace and contentment of other parts of Africa were taken for granted. In West Africa, and particularly on the Gold Coast, there has been for many years a gradually increasing economic exploitation of the people. Administratively the Government has assumed autocratic tendencies, and there is now an open attempt to interfere with the customs and institutions of the people in a manner which is greatly endangering the peace of the country. Labour is so mercilessly exploited that, for an instance, although the Ashanti Goldfields Ltd. have become so prosperous and successful as to pay dividends ranging from 75 per cent. to 130 per cent. within the last four years, yet there is hardly a living wage paid to the Native labourer. A recent attempt at a strike with a view to securing a more satisfactory scale of wages was deemed a

“ treason ” and many of the leading workmen were imprisoned by the Government.

Another feature of the administration of the Gold Coast is the attempt gradually to introduce into the country the systems of government obtaining in East and South Africa. This has led to the passing of the Sedition Ordinance in the teeth of the protests of the people and the unanimous opposition of the African unofficial members of the Legislative Council. Examining closely the provisions of the Ordinance, at once its intentions to humiliate and oppress the people and to muzzle the press so as to prevent articulation in times of oppression become vivid. Under the Sedition law passed as far back as the year 1892, and under which not a single prosecution has taken place, “ sedition ” was defined as an “ intent to bring His Majesty into hatred, contempt or ridicule,” and the publication of “ any defamatory or insulting matter, whether by writing, print, word of mouth, or in any other manner, concerning His Majesty.” This is in keeping with the English law. It is not an offence in England to be in possession of seditious literature, but in the local law the importation of any books, newspapers or documents which in the opinion of the Governor in Council contain seditious writings, or the possession of them, would render such importer or possessor liable to imprisonment for three years. The innocent receiver of such “ seditious ” or prohibited publication is also liable to imprisonment for one year. By this law the jurisdiction of the Courts to determine what is a seditious matter is removed and vested in the Governor. There could be no greater instrument of oppression.

In West Africa the essential element of peace is the preservation of, and the non-interference by government with, the native institutions of the country. It is remarkable how flagrant abuse of this fundamental principle is gradually endangering the peace of the Gold Coast to such an alarming degree as would in the near future cause open revolts in several native States. Recent instances are the enforced ent stoolment through Government influence of an undesirable candidate as the Paramount Ruler of the State of Lower Wassaw, and the Asamangkese Division Regulation Ordinance, 1935. The former relates to the open Government support of a small minority of sub-Chiefs in that State who had pledged themselves to accept the Sedition Ordinance, to place on the Paramount Stool a person not immediately connected with the reigning family, out of whom only an election could, in the Customary law, be made. The result of that illegal act was the deposition by the people of all those supporting Chiefs and the substitution in their places of eligible Rulers who would strictly conform to the custom and law. After an interval of a year Government have now despatched a large complement of soldiers who have escorted the several deposed Chiefs from their place of refuge to their respective divisions, and who after molesting and beating the

people, and enjoying without payment their cattle and fowl and committing other atrocities, have removed by force the newly-elected Chiefs and physically restored the deposed Chiefs. So atrocious was the conduct of the troops that the Queen-Mother had to take refuge in one of the coast towns. The second instance relates to the passage in the Legislative Council of the law above referred to, by which for the ostensible reason of making provision for the control and regulation of the property, revenues and expenditure of the Stools of that Division, the Governor has been clothed with power to suspend or depose a Chief, and whenever in his own judgment alone it is considered necessary to order the Chief's removal from certain areas, and also his ultimate deportation.

This assumed power strikes at the root of the constitution of African States. According to that constitution the people alone are those in whom the sovereignty lies. They alone can create and depose a Chief. For more than half a century the Government of the Gold Coast have failed in their successive attempts to usurp this power of the people. It is certain, therefore, that this Ordinance which could be applied to other States on the flimsiest grounds considered necessary in the sole judgment of the Governor, is certain to disturb the peace of the country, create open revolts therein and endanger her economy. The National Peace Council should not concern itself only with the peace of Europe or the East or of South Africa, but also with the peace of all the integral parts of the Empire. It should therefore well inquire into the foregoing facts which in the near future will contribute to the detriment of the peace of that dependency.

The readers of this Magazine would be desirous of some authentic information as to the aims of our mission to London. Ours is a deputation of the Gold Coast Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, which is a federation of the natural Kings, Rulers and Chiefs of the Gold Coast, who in 1897 formed and established that Society for the mutual protection and constitutional conservation, so far as not inconsistent with a liberal regard for the march and advance of civilisation. In the year 1842 and again in 1865 resolutions were passed by a Select Committee of the House of Parliament to the effect that "Natives ought to be encouraged to exercise such qualities as might render it possible for the administration of the Governments to be transferred to them." But instead of the fulfilment of this promise there has been a grievous departure culminating in a complete reversal of the policy to the detriment and damage of the indigenous population and their natural Rulers. For instance, on the Executive Council where the Government policy is initiated there is not a single African representative. On the Legislative Council there are twenty European official and unofficial members as representing Government

and the interests of only two thousand Europeans, but only nine Africans representing the whole indigenous population of more than three and a half millions. The result is that however inimical to the African interests a measure before the Council would be, it is passed as a matter of course by means of the overwhelming official majority. A "Labour Ordinance" is threatened by the Government. That law would introduce forced labour into the country and would invest political officers with power to exact forced labour.

With the limitation of space at my disposal I could only just add that in November last our delegation submitted a petition to the King in Council through the Secretary of State for the Colonies, which was rejected on the curt reply that the King had given directions that no action should be taken thereon. Dissatisfied with the answer we presented a petition to the House of Commons, which has since been referred by the Select Committee on Public Petitions to the Colonial Office with a recommendation to deal with it. The prayer of the petition was that the House of Commons might institute a full enquiry into :—

- (a) The nature of the true relations between the British Crown from the year 1821 to the present time.
- (b) The justice and desirability of the Gold Coast (Legislative Council) Order in Council of April 8, 1925, and its amending Orders in Council in the matter of the adequate representation of Africans in the Legislative Council of the Colony, and on the Executive Council of the Colony, to the end that true and honourable co-operation between them and the Government of the Gold Coast may be furthered.
- (c) The whole of the history of the introduction and passing of the Native Administration Ordinance, 1927 (and its amendments) and into its provisions.
- (d) Generally into the administration of the country and into other matters and disabilities affecting the indigenous population, such as the inadequate Education Ordinance and Rules thereunder. And such other matters as arise on the petition and seem to be proper and just subject matters for inquiry, including the circumstances of the introduction of the Criminal Code Amendment Ordinance and its provisions.

Appealing as I am, to Labour through this medium, it is earnestly to be hoped that all who read this article would extend the right hand of comradeship and help to the oppressed Africans of the Empire, and, in particular, to the present distressed Natives of the Gold Coast.