

British Labour Movement Responses to Strikes and Riots in the English-speaking West Indies 1934-1939: Solidarity with strings

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Abstract

This project traces the reaction of the British labour movement (pressure groups; political parties; and trade unions) to the strikes, riots, and 'disturbances' in St Lucia, St Vincent, British Honduras, Trinidad, Barbados, British Guiana, St Kitts, and Jamaica. There were deep-seated differences as between Leninists views on imperialism; and social democrats who viewed colonialism as acceptable if reformed with the right to set up trade unions, to bargain collectively, to strike, and to have state-backed labour standards. Plantation economics dominated these lands, and there are case studies of the strikes and riots on the sugar plantations of St Kitts, Trinidad, British Guiana, St Vincent, and Jamaica; the banana plantations in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados; and in the oil fields of Trinidad, the docks in St Lucia, and the forests of British Honduras.

The earlier strikes in 1934/5 and those in smaller countries (St Kitts, St Vincent, St Lucia) were not widely reported in the UK. But those in 1937/38, especially in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad, were openly discussed. Some MPs raised issues in Parliament; there were motions of support (few and of limited scope) at TUC and Labour party meetings; some individuals visited the West Indies under their own steam; labour movement activists wrote plenty of articles and pamphlets; and invited representatives from the West Indies to attend meetings.

Keywords: British labour movement; colonialism; imperialism; labour history; strikes and riots; capitalism

to ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace (Tacitus, c.98: 23)

Introductionⁱ

This study traces the reaction in words and deeds of the British labour movement (pressure groups such as Fabians; political parties, Labour and Communist, also the Socialist League and Independent Labour Party; trade unions such as the TGWU including the TUC) to the strikes, riots, and 'disturbances' in eight case study countries in the English-speaking West Indies – St Lucia, St Vincent, British Honduras, Trinidad, Barbados, British Guiana, St Kitts, and Jamaica – from 1934-1939. Its relevance today lies with the British labour movement's serious difficulties in resolving policy issues around the legacy of slavery, racism, empire, colonialism, and currently neo-colonialism and the Commonwealth – see the reaction to Windrush, Black Lives Matter, immigration, and the toppling of slaver statues.

It has the dual aim, therefore, of linking all the disputes in these years with each other, and then to examine how the British labour movement acted and reacted. This should throw light on the policy direction of British Labour Governments and Labour in Opposition on a range of areas: trade union roles at home and in former colonies; worker rights at work and beyond; and the splits inside the labour movement, between Leninists and social democrats.

Three related issues also arise from this study: a general proposition on the nature of employment, namely that whoever 'pays the piper calls the tune' – if I pay your wages then I assume the right to determine what you do, when you do it, and how you do it. This leads to the second point, the 'Oliver Twist' moment – here a challenge for 'more' is met, not just with a refusal, but with the full force of the political and judicial system as such a challenge raises questions of who decides, and who has the right to decide, the distribution of income as between wages, rents, and profits. In this mix emerges certain types of leaders – in a society with poor communications and a semi-literate population, those able to present a coherent joined up story with a powerful voice rise to leadership positions. Many of the strike leaders went on to lead their countries to independence and to become Presidents and Prime Ministers.

The central arguments start with the causes, conduct, and consequences of the strikes and riots in the eight countries examined from 1934-1939. These include the link of industrial disputes over wages with political calls for the vote and independence (**Cole, 1924**). Along the way intermediate civil society demands included better health, housing, education, and access to justice. The response at home was partly driven by mass

unemployment and impending war in Britain wherein the role of the state became part of the fierce political battleground. Within labour the Leninists fixed on anti-imperialism with revolution at home and in the colonies. In contrast the social democrats, while appalled by the treatment of colonial workers, were not anti-imperialist and were more concerned to fight the communists inside the unions than with fuller worker rights.

Capitalism and Slavery

Eric Williams (1944) and CLR James (1938) were West Indian writers and activists in the 1930s with links to the communists (CPGB). They shared a Marxist-Leninist approach to the exploitation of workers in the plantation economies and beyond in the docks and offices of the towns. They emphasised that it was slavery and post-slave economies that created racism, and not racism that brought forth oppression; and they accepted the dictum that people make their own history even if not under circumstances of their own choosing (Marx 1852, 1859).

In contrast most of the mainstream labour movement, especially the Labour Party, TUC, and Fabians, took the view that empire and the colonies were acceptable, and used their non-conformist moralising, linked with social Darwinism and civilisation stage theory (Gupta, 2002) to push for trade union and social reforms along the lines of British traditions: right to form trade unions, to bargain collectively, to strike, and to have state-backed labour standards.

The class context of both Britain and in the eight case study countries is explored as one basis for a developing class consciousness and thus possible routes to solidarity. Information flows from the strikes and riots to Britain through newspapers, eye-witness accounts, and official reports were sporadic and until the 1937 strikes in Trinidad slow to emerge. Once it became clear what was happening and why workers were on strike, and why the strikes turned into riots after the violent reaction of the authorities, then the labour movement started to act. It sent out delegations and supported Commissions; asked questions in Parliament; held meetings; passed motions at conferences; set up committees and sub-committees; and invited West Indian activists to attend in person.

Cricket, Christianity, and Calypso

The cultural context included forms of Christianity that had evolved and fragmented between groups and nations, with, in some incarnations, anti-colonial and ancestral practices becoming widespread and forming uneasy links with the wider independence movements. Equally, sport was always an area of contention with British white settlers indulging in a variety of activities, widely reported in the local press, including shooting, horse

racing, and the ubiquitous cricket. Underpinning these deeply ambiguous cultural mores lay music, song and dance. Associated with religion, paganism, revolt, and colonial hegemony, music came to represent both distinctive regional and class formats but also controlled and distorted colonial norms. Calypso music was one such manifestation of identity that become more than its own words and sounds.

Plantation Economics

Adam Smith (1776) argued that once colonialists had plenty of land in which to cultivate sugar, bananas, tobacco and other crops then their problem was recruiting labour. They tried to import poor Europeans to work for wages, but that failed and so they turned to slaves. Once slavery was abolished, they needed 'wage slaves' captured in a vicious circle of poverty, deprivation, oppression, and immobility. This allowed planters such as Leonard Lyle of Tate & Lyle, Conservative MP, to present to the British public a racist-based argument that to keep cheap subsidised sugar the country needed profitable businesses that required a low wage, poorly educated, and low-cost colonial working class. By the 1930s the world slump in trade had driven down the price of most commodities and crops, causing greater hardship than usual among fragile working-class lifestyles when wages and hours were cutback.

King Sugar was the dominant commodity for most of these countries, and the planters destroyed huge swathes of forest and indigenous flora and fauna to develop more efficient plantations with associated refining factories and means of transport to the ports. With the end of slavery there developed a post-slavery captive labour system whereby the workforce had little choice but to work in the fields for the planters, who used their political influence to force workers back to work from self-employed enterprises.

A similar story is told for banana production. In this case the USA-owned United Fruit Company dominated the industry and the political systems, giving rise to the term 'banana republic'. Important developments in refrigeration, speed of ships, and dock facilities, made the one type of banana favoured by United Fruit the dominant strain and the single best seller. This again depended on a captive labour force whose rights were curtailed by a political and judicial system dominated by the so-called 'plantocracy'.

There were also smaller but more strategically important groups of workers in oil, timber, transport, and on the docks. In Trinidad, for example, there was oil and asphalt, and these products attracted a different kind of corporation and management of production. Elsewhere, timber production in Honduras illustrated the great importance of road

and rail links. This meant that transport workers, including those in the docks, had more bargaining power than agricultural workers.

Context

The 1929 economic crash meant commodity prices fell and, in the scramble to maintain business profits, planters cut wages, laid off workers, and argued for a reduction in the meagre social wage. The rise of fascism in Europe spilled over to the West Indies, especially with the invasion by Mussolini of Abyssinia. The Spanish civil war also contributed to ideals of the popular/united front and international solidarity. The Russian revolution and the spread of communist ideas, alongside experiences of fighting in the Great War and trade union syndicalism in the USA, penetrated some of the movements in some of the countries under study.

These countries were characterised by low wages, high unemployment, under-employment, poor colonial administrators, and in most cases terrible employers and their overseers. These problems were linked with poor housing and health, lack of education, and little access to justice. The British labour movement spent much time debating infant mortality rates, poor sanitation, lack of teachers and schools, shack-like accommodation, and poor nutrition. These matters fitted well with their moral position on fairness. Furthermore, there were no clear paths to address and redress any of these issues. There was no collective bargaining, no union recognition, and no political voice for dissent. As such, grievances were left unattended, and when strikes did flare up, there was no dispute resolution mechanism at hand. These were matters understood by British trade unionists and formed part of their programme for colonial reform. Other sources of reforming zeal came from the West Indian diaspora in London focussing on the League of Coloured People (**Killingray, 2018**) and its influential journal, *The Keys* (**Duffield, 1978**).

Hart (**1999, 2002**) has written extensively about the resultant disputes. Wage and benefit cuts, unemployment, and a lack of bargaining created the conditions for strikes; and when these were brutally suppressed, there followed general strikes and riots. The British government and the Colonial Office had been warned that trouble was brewing in the region (**Basdeo, 1985**). Several Labour MPs raised specific issues in Parliament, the TUC and individual unions had started passing more strident motions at their conferences, and more pamphlets were being circulated by the Communists.

As wages were cut and jobs lost, the local workers began a series of spontaneous riots and strikes, which were mainly suppressed by violent force, sometimes with British marines supporting local militia. The workers started to form trade unions linked in some cases with nascent political

parties demanding greater voice in the country's affairs. The British state backed local initiatives to ban books and newspapers, imprison the leaders, and shoot and injure those taking part.

By 1934/5, when the first strikes and riots took place, there was very little information available in Britain about any of these 'disturbances'. By 1937, the CPGB launched its Colonial Information Bulletin. This alongside the Daily Herald and Daily Worker provided more information about workers' struggles in the West Indies. The dual concepts of solidarity and fraternity developed through, for example, the International African Service Bureau (IASB) which included in the leadership CLR James, Jomo Kenyatta, and Amy Garvey. They held meetings and rallies which attracted the notice and support of sections of the labour movement and helped spread both information and ideas.

The mainstream Labour position supported the Colonial Office's efforts (after the 1937 strike wave) to strengthen labour legislation and set up Labour Departments in the colonies with competent officials. Both the Labour Party and TUC had some internationalist credentials as part of their 'brotherhood of man' ideals, and in practice had close ties with the unions in Trinidad and Guiana. The Labour Party set up a sub-committee on the West Indies which busied itself with defining the 'native interest' in the colonies. This hint of racial superiority was in part due to the Fabian flirtation with eugenics. There were pamphlets written and motions passed with increasing frequency as the decade went by, and figures such as Creech Jones, Leonard Woolf, and Arthur Pugh played leading roles. Labour remained wedded to trade and tariff policies, however, that favoured the large corporations. Then, as now, it took the view that workers' welfare was dependent on the success of private enterprise. It was also alarmed by the spread of communist support, and was resolute in its anti-communist policies, especially among the trade unions.

'For the overwhelming majority of the people, the Empire is a vast slave colony' (**CPGB CIB, 1937: 1**). This was the Leninist line backed by the communists and their allies with strong anti-fascist and anti-imperialist policies, espoused by their leaders such as Harry Pollitt and Raj Palme Dutt. The links with the Comintern in Moscow provided support for both British and West Indian communist and communist-front organisations, and this made them both more effective and more dangerous in the eyes of the British government.

Sources

The research is based on local accounts in the eight countries from newspapers (e.g., Trinidad Guardian, Jamaican Gleaner), official reports, eyewitness statements, and materials housed in local archives. These are supplemented by national newspapers (Times, New York Times, Manchester Guardian, Daily Herald, Daily Worker); Hansard reports; pamphlets; minutes of committees and sub-committees especially from the Labour and Communist Parties, and TUC. Union journals, pamphlets, and reports in other outlets such as Labour and the Communist Information Bulletin were accessed in the British Library, MRC at Warwick, and People's History Museum in Manchester.

Cases

Many of the strikes were triggered by low wages, but without any channel for grievances to be heard, the strikes became widespread and ended with riots. These were met with lethal force by a combination of local police, estate managers, and British marines. Below are very brief summaries of some of the events discussed.

The strikes and riots in British Honduras started with a march of the unemployed demanding better relief on 15th February 1934. The Governor made some minor concessions, but the movement spread throughout the colony under the leadership of Tony Soberanis. In this case, an inspirational leader, able to hold and enthuse rallies of workers and their families made a real difference. In all cases, the British sought to arrest and/or kill the leaders, which nearly always backfired. The dispute ended with a partial victory for the workforce, and substantive labour reforms. In St Kitts, sugar plantation disturbances started on 20th January 1935 with a strike of cane cutters, and became more serious when they set fire to the cane fields. It spread to workers in the sugar factories, and the grievances over low pay and long hours again had no legitimate outlet. With workers' voices unheard and unheeded, strikes and subsequent sabotage were the only routes open. The riot at the Buckley Estate saw the shooting of unarmed demonstrators by local militia, and the British press started to report the causes of the strikes and the violent response of the planters and the local police. Questions were asked in Parliament, and this was the beginning of a rapid rise in awareness of the conditions of sugar workers and their families.

In British Guiana in September and October 1935 and again in March 1939 there were riots on various sugar estates – strikes started on the Demerara coast in the autumn of 1935 and spread rapidly, which culminated in the burning of cane fields. This marked the start of radicalisation among the workforce and the wider community, and by March 1939 a much more

serious strike at the Leonora plantation spread rapidly, and the violent police response left several dead and wounded. This time, reforms were forthcoming, and the Guiana trade union movement grew and linked up with nascent labour and socialist parties.

In St Lucia on 4th November 1935 about 100 colliers loading coal went on strike over low wages. They were also concerned about the coal being used to help Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. This unusual twist underlined the role of racial and religious affiliations spreading through the region. The excessive use of force by marines further fuelled the discontent, leading to stronger calls for union recognition and political reform. St Vincent's population was very poor even by regional standards and with high levels of unemployment and depressed wages, people were near starvation. At that time the Governor sought to increase government revenues by hiking tariffs on imported foods and clothes. This meant higher prices, and that led to riots on 21st October 1935. Immediately, the marines killed and wounded protestors, leading to the spread of riots throughout the islands.

Trinidad witnessed a range of disputes from 1934-1937. The strikes and riots in 1937/8 shook the British government and rocked the boat of fictionalised stability and working-class quietism. On 19th June 1937, after the company had failed to answer his demands for wage increases, 'Buzz' Butler called a strike of oil workers at the Forest Reserve premises of Trinidad Leaseholds Limited. A warrant was issued for Butler's detention but an attempt to arrest him while he was addressing a public meeting was frustrated by the crowd. A police corporal was beaten, soaked with paraffin and burned to death. Within two days a strike had engulfed the oilfields. Strikes in other industries and occupations soon followed and before long the entire economy had been paralysed by a general strike. According to the Port of Spain Gazette, it was a situation 'which assumed a proportion previously unknown in the history of labour agitation' in the colony (23rd June 1937). A state of emergency was declared, and two British warships were rushed to the island. Marines landed, and in addition to the constabulary the local military forces were mobilised. In the latter half of June 1937 there was an intensification of struggle as 'tension increased in Trinidad's oil fields tonight as sit-down strikes spread to embrace workers in almost every oil area. Heavily armed police and deputized volunteers patrolled Fyzabad ... Scores were injured.' (**New York Times, 1937a: 4**). Numerous arrests and imprisonments followed, but Butler was not arrested until September. He was subsequently tried and sentenced to two years imprisonment for sedition.

The detailed account of the strike wave provided by the press and a series of activities in Britain by sympathetic labour movement figures and organisations created pressure for an official commission of inquiry, which was damning in its views of both employers and the Trinidad government (**Forster Commission, 1938**). Reforms, focussing on labour issues and housing, were recommended and trade unions subsequently recognised and involved in wage bargaining.

In Barbados, fourteen people were killed and forty-seven wounded in protests in 1937. At the end of July:

News was received ... that in 'minor disorders' in country districts two people were killed, three critically injured, and 12 other men and four women were injured. There were only minor casualties among the police ... HM cruiser Apollo arrived here this morning and landed marines. Tension has been eased by a proclamation by the Governor ... in which he appealed for the restoration of order and offered his services in investigating and attempting to remove any grievances the rioters might have. (The Times, 1937: 13).

There was a further flare up when the marines arrived to quell 'a mob of rioting laborers [who] smashed shop windows in the main street ... and pushed automobiles into the sea' (**New York Times, 1937b: 6**).

Jamaica was by far the most populous country in the region and the one best known in Britain. For several years there had been a series of outbreaks, as in 1935, when there were strikes, riots, and lower-level disturbances. The underlying economic and social conditions saw the worsening of the already poor living standards of most workers and their families. Throughout, industrial disputes were linked with politics, and it was this merging of demands for better pay with those for more democratic rights that so alarmed the colonial administration. Early in the year:

the riot act was read, and the police fired two rounds of ammunition to drive away a crowd from an election meeting at Trelawny today. The mob bombarded the building in which the meeting was being held, hurling rocks and stones (New York Times, 1935: 34).

The first week in May 1938 saw the most important outburst of discontent among the working-class in Jamaica. It laid the foundations, already emergent, of the Jamaican labour movement and ultimately for independence. It was a stark reminder that British colonial rule was enforced by armed police and marines on behalf of the millionaire plantation owners. On May Day:

...a large body of armed police raced from Kingston at noon today to reinforce a small party that was holding 1,000 armed strikers at bay on a sugar cane estate owned by Tate and Lyle near here. The strikers, demanding \$1 a day and the removal of an official to whom they object, surrounded homes and offices and threatened the management of the estate. The trouble began yesterday, but armed police kept order last night. (New York Times, 1938: 5).

These are just glimpses of the fuller story...

In Conclusion

The main formal outcome from British labour movement pressure on the government for reform in the West Indies came in the shape of the Moyne Commission of Inquiry launched in 1938 and officially reported in 1945 (**Moyne, 1945**). The labour movement was represented by Walter Citrine (the powerful General Secretary of the TUC). He accepted the Fabian position that what was needed were labour reforms along the lines of the UK model -- trade unions legally free to organise, to strike, and to collectively bargain (**Basdeo, 1983**). This was linked to labour standards upheld by government appointed labour commissioners. These were major issues and were intimately linked with wages, employment rights, housing, health, education, and civil rights. He broke ranks with other members of the commission and spoke independently to a range of trade union gatherings in different countries. Although his position was progressive and radical by local standards, he was determined that trade unionism in the West Indies would discourage rank-and-file activism to keep the communist at bay. This limited the impact of the labour reform movement and meant that British labour solidarity came with strings attached.

Professor Roger Seifert read PPE at Oxford University, then a MBA at London Business School, and then a PhD at LSE. He worked as a management consultant before becoming professor of industrial relations at Keele (1992-2008) and then Wolverhampton (2008-2018). He specialises in public sector, strikes, trade unions, role of the state, and labour history. He has acted as an adviser/consultant to unions (RMT, UNITE, UNISON, FBU, PCS); large corporations (Unilever, Bank of China), and government departments (giving evidence to select committees). He is frequently interviewed on radio and TV, especially over strikes.



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Endnotes

ⁱ This paper is based on a talk to the 50th anniversary MRC conference at Warwick University, and both are based on a forthcoming book of the same title.