

A History of the Labour Movement in British Colonial Africa: Origins, Organisation, and Struggle

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THE PANAFRICAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

Various sources. Decolonization: Politics and Independence in Former Colonial and Commonwealth Territories

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ORIGINS — ELEMENTS — CONFLICTS



A REPORT
published by
the
AFRICAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
27 bis, rue Victor Hugo
DAKAR

Co-Founder of the
Confederation of Congolese Free Trade Unions
General Secretary of the
National Trade Union of Congolese Workers

With the declarations of :
Ahmed Tlili, General Secretary, UGTT, Tunisia
Tom Mboya, General Secretary, KFL, Kenya
L.L. Borha, General Secretary, TUC Nigeria
Ene Henshaw, Acting General Secretary, TUC Nigeria
E.W.W. Nakibinge, General Secretary TUC Uganda

(1961?)

MSS African TU'S III

MSS African TU'S II

CSA. ①
over to the

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CAC 4/1 (1958-59)
February 4, 1959

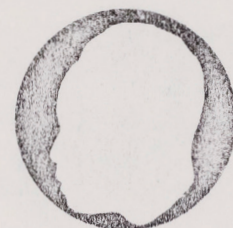
TRADES UNION CONGRESS
RE-ASSESSMENT OF SITUATION IN BRITISH AFRICA

1. This memorandum is prepared in accordance with Minute No. 32 of the Committee passed as a result of a general discussion which took place at their meeting on January 7.

Our Approach to Colonial Problems

2. In the work of developing trade union organisation in the various territories in Africa the general policy of the TUC has been that organisation must take place from the bottom up and, although help and advice have been given to national centres in the territories, our main purpose has been to help individual unions.

3. I have often emphasised that practical experience shows that problems of tribal, religious and other background factors, such as the degree of illiteracy, make it necessary to deal in different ways, even in adjoining territories, with what



LAYING OF THE FOUNDATION STONE

24

A History of the Labour Movement in British Colonial Africa: Origins, Organisation, and Struggle

The development of extraction economies in colonial Africa relied heavily on the mobilisation and control of African labour. Coercive labour practices were crucial in the early years of colonialism to facilitate the functioning of plantations, mines, and infrastructure development. Direct recruitment of African labour by colonial administrators and private capitalists was prevalent for building essential infrastructure and extracting and transporting primary commodities, such as copper, gold, rubber, and agricultural commodities. In addition, Europeans used indirect forms of coercion, such as taxation, to induce people into the labour market, including migratory labour.

than half to £181 million; and by 1922-23, after two further drastic reductions, expenditure on the army had declined to £45 million.

The British Government in the new democratic era was unwilling to impose a financial burden on the electorate in order to sustain the Empire. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Henry Wilson, was forced to undertake a careful reappraisal of Britain's military commitments. Curzon and Churchill's extravagances of 1919 had to be abandoned. The preservation of law and order in Britain against Red Clydeside came first. Europe was second. India, the jewel in the Imperial crown, third. In the last analysis, the newly secured empire in the Middle East was expendable. Informal control through alliances and trade would prove as effective and much less costly than a formal presence. Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey, which Britain had attempted to gorge immediately after the war, had to be discarded. Iraq was promised progress to independence under the terms of the League of Nation's Mandate within ten years, and Britain withdrew from Egypt, except for the Suez Canal zone, despite the Wafd's refusal to sign a formal agreement. Even Ireland could go. The burden of attempting to hold on against the IRA was too great.

In 1922-23, therefore, the Empire seemed to be disintegrating. Even in East Africa, mission educated Kikuyu, members of the most sophisticated African community, who had been drawn into the wage economy in Nairobi and on European owned farms, such as Karen Blixen's coffee estate, had organised themselves under the leadership of Harry Thuku, in the Young Kikuyu Association, and a wider pan-tribal East African Association, to challenge the authority of the Government nominated chiefs. Like their British and Indian counterparts, after labouring in the Carrier Corps against the Germans in Deutsche Ostafrika, now mainland Tanzania, in appalling conditions, they expected a better deal. With the onset of the slump of 1920-22, however, European settlers had reduced their wages by one-third, the Government had introduced compulsory labour, and a work pass and identity card, the *kipande*, without which they could not secure new employment or remain without permission outside of the African Land Unit. Eventually in March 1922, Thuku was detained, a general strike was proclaimed, and a crowd outside the main police station was dispersed by force. Twenty-two died, Kenya's equivalent of General Dyer's Amritsar Massacre.

Egypt and Ireland had gone. Iraq followed in the early 1930s. India and Africa, Palestine and Trans-Jordan remained.

Thrup, David. "The historiography of decolonisation", 31 January 1991 (p. 21). *Decolonisation*. 1959-1991*. Marjorie Nicholson Papers Subject File [930]/3.

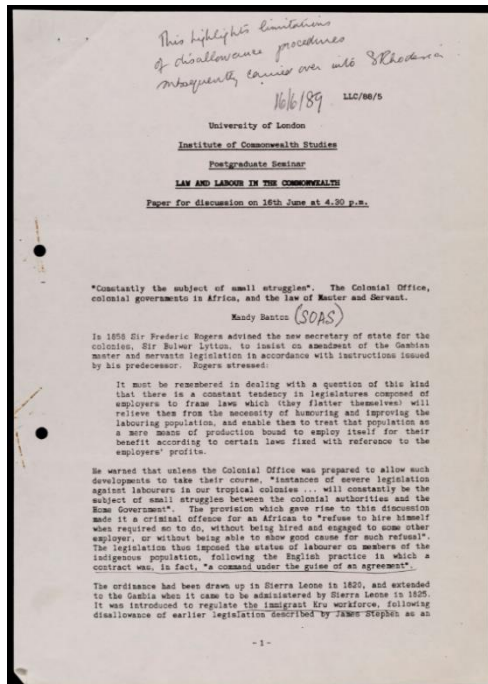
In settler colonies, like Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, colonial authorities often used pernicious measures such as land expropriation to recruit and regulate wage labour movements and migration. During the 1920s in Kikuyuland, Kenya, settlers introduced a new labour regulation system called the *kipande* system. The *Kipande* was an identification document that laborers in colonial Africa were obligated to always carry. The *Kipande* contained information

about their employer and employment terms, and its main objective was to confine the native population to specific settlements to provide cheap labour to settlers' farms while limiting their bargaining power.ⁱ In some cases, companies established labour recruitment organisations with the active support of the colonial government. In Southern Africa, the Natives Recruitment Cooperation and the Witwatersrand Labour Association played a significant role in recruiting workers for employment in the Rand Mines. While the former was in charge over local labour recruitment, the latter recruited foreign labour from countries including Northern Bechuanaland, Basutoland, and Swaziland.

The labour situation in colonial West Africa was distinct from that in Southern and East Africa where there had been a longstanding tradition of labour migration, following established routes used by traders such as the Hausa and Yoruba, Moshi cloth weavers, and pilgrims from Sokoto, Kano, and Ouagadougou, who regularly travelled throughout the region. This tradition is especially notable in the cocoa production areas of Ghana and Nigeria, where migrant labour played a significant role in local economies. Unlike in Southern, Central, and Eastern regions, where African labour was predominantly engaged in European-controlled plantations and mines, laborers in West Africa were more often employed by African farmers.ⁱⁱ However, despite this difference, the working and payment conditions in European controlled commercial farms producing cocoa, oil palm, cotton, and groundnuts, as well as in extractive industries such as mining, timber, and rubber, were frequently harsh and characterised by low pay.

In the early stages of colonisation, there was a lack of class consciousness among workers, and wage labour movements and migration were largely unorganised, with individual workers seeking employment on their own. While colonial authorities recognised the need for a migratory labour force to address the inadequate labour supply in the colonies, they also began to worry about its consequences. They were particularly

troubled by the high mobility of workers and the potential social distress and disruption of agricultural productivity and village life resulting from the expansion of the migratory labour force. Nevertheless, the Colonial Office regarded migrant labour to be a transitory stage in economic and social development of the colonies. The colonial office recognised the importance of finding efficient ways to engage African migrant labour in colonial endeavours during this period while simultaneously trying to reduce the dependence on migration.ⁱⁱⁱ



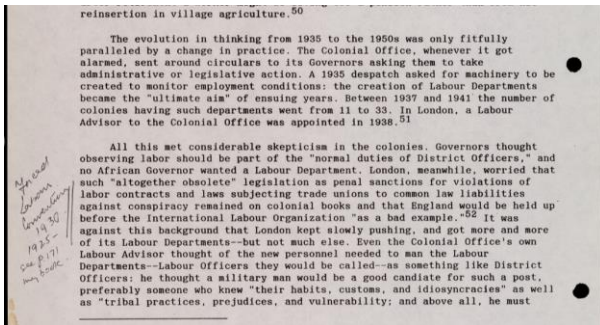
Banton, Mandy. "Law and Labour in the commonwealth", 16th Jun 1989. MN Papers Subject File 40/1. (TUC, LMU).

The development of labour rights and unionism in colonial Africa was slow. Early colonial labour laws on the continent were simply transposed from the master and servant framework of medieval and early modern English legislation. In places where these laws were first introduced, such as Sierra Leone and Gambia, they were initially harsh, and only in the 20th century were they amended by new enactments. However, even with amendments, employers still wielded significant power, leaving workers vulnerable to penal sanctions in various African colonies, including the Gold Coast, Transvaal, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and East Africa.^{iv} In early

1930, Lord Passfield, Secretary of State for the Colonies, issued a directive to colonial governors to decriminalise and register trade unions and recommended that they assess the 'desirability and expediency' of adopting UK labour laws in the colonies. At the minimum, this mandated the enactment of legislation declaring "trade unions are not illegal or unlawful for civil purposes."^v

After the directive was issued, legal rights and protections such as safeguards against coerced labour contracts were increased, and the number of authorised trade unions began to grow. However, they remained industrially weak and had little political influence. Colonial authorities were generally hostile to the idea of introducing trade unions in the colonies. The predominant view among colonial officials was that colonial workers were 'creatures of impulse' interested only in 'immediate financial and other gain,' with a 'complete absence of a sense of responsibility' when negotiating wages and conditions of work.^{vi} However, the emergence of organised labour as a social force brought a slow but steady shift in the political landscape, promoting class consciousness and industrial collective action. Throughout the 1930s, there were sporadic movements across Africa where workers started to organise themselves into unions and demanded better working conditions, higher wages, and the abolition of restrictive labour systems. The fledgling labour activism and workers unions, however, encountered significant challenges and opposition, facing resistance from both colonial governments and hostile white workers. Meanwhile, there was a growing apprehension by the Colonial Office but also the Trades Union Congress (TUC) with respect to the severe working conditions, payment inconsistencies, and under compensation of African workers. The Colonial Office was concerned that this would be viewed as a negative example by the International Labour Organisation.^{vii} In 1937, the TUC put forward a recommendation for stronger unionism in the colonies, but it also expressed scepticism about the feasibility of unionism in Africa due to the perceived underdeveloped state of African economies. As an alternative, the TUC proposed

the appointment of qualified labour officials to help guide the transition towards industrial relations.^{viii}



Cooper, F. 'Defining the Working-class labour codes and practices in French and British Africa after World War II,'

Despite TUC's reservations, global events and local activism propelled labour issues to the forefront of colonial concerns. The post-Great Depression era saw a decline in global economic conditions and demand for industrial raw materials, resulting in widespread labour issues throughout the British Empire. Workers became increasingly dissatisfied with their wages and working conditions, leading to protests such as the Mombasa dock workers' strike of 1939 and widespread grievances about poor living conditions and low pay in urban areas of West Africa. Violent riots erupted in different parts of the empire, including the West Indies between 1936 and 1938. In response to these challenges, the British government introduced the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, which aimed to improve the living standards of colonial peoples.

In 1942, the Labour Committee was merged into a new committee, the Colonial Labour Advisory Committee, to offer direction on labour policies in colonial territories.^x The Labour government eventually reorganised and expanded labour departments in African colonies and began rapidly appointing labour officers who possessed extensive experience in British trade union movements. As part of this initiative, the TUC sent organisers and union officials to many British colonies, where they facilitated the formation of African unions. By 1946, the British government had sent experienced trade unionists to Kenya,

Nigeria, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Gold Coast (now Ghana).^x Paradoxically, these labour officials were expected to approach African labour problems from the perspective of 'the workers' point of view' and share their experience on matters of procedure and organization.^{xi} Nonetheless, it is hardly surprising that in the process of transplanting British labour organization and structure, little attention was paid to the unique circumstances and situations of African workers, as well as to the broader structural issues of foreign capital and colonial governance.

The recognition of trade unions was intricately connected to the strategy of maintaining stability in the labour force and exerting broader social control in African societies. Colonial officials sought to regulate the growing migrant labour, which was perceived as difficult to control and potentially disruptive to village life. In 1946, Creech Jones, the newly appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies in the Labour government, issued a circular to colonial governments proposing an organised shift towards settled urban life in mining towns. This approach aimed to create a "new African man"^{xii} who would be an industrial worker living with his family at his place of work, providing better control over labour recruitment and population management while preventing the spread of diseases across territories. In this colonial vision, trade unions would serve as a mechanism for channelling workers' grievances and frustrations in a controlled and manageable manner, while also preventing them from joining nationalist movements that could pose a challenge to colonial authority.

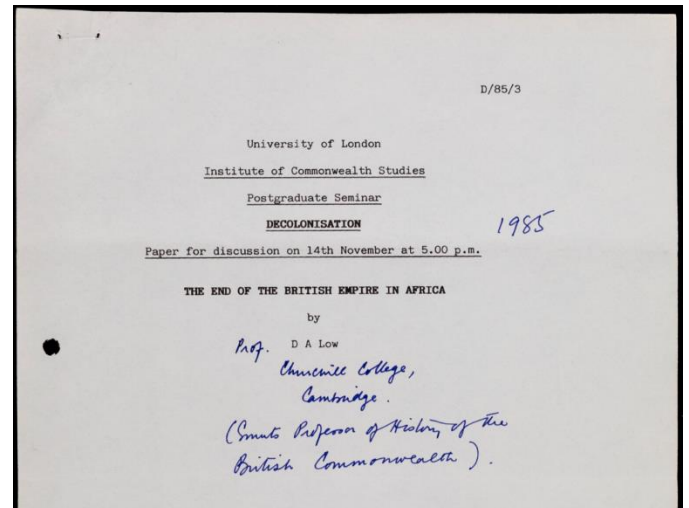
Following World War II, the development of unionism in Africa underwent a significant transformation, with a marked increase in the number of unions, union membership, and political mobilisation. There was a proliferation of professional associations, and specialised unions throughout British Africa. Nevertheless, there were notable regional variations in the development of wage earners and trade union growth across the colonies. For instance, Kenya

had an estimated population of 480,000 wage earners in 1954, comprising 8.33% of the total population. However, the number of members in the registered 20 trade unions was only 8.77%, equivalent to 42,112 individuals. In contrast, Nigeria had a relatively lower percentage of wage earners, with only 286,820 individuals, accounting for a mere 0.91% of the total population. Despite this, the number of union members was significantly higher, with 36 out of the total 70 registered unions having 142,467 members, representing 49.63% of the wage earners. Notably, Somaliland had no registered trade unions during this period.^{xiii}

In contrast to French African unions, the unions in British Africa were generally organised in a loose manner at the national level, often with weak central organisations and little inter-territorial activity. This approach was encouraged by both the TUC and colonial administrators on an industry-by-industry basis to prevent large-scale strikes and opposition. However, the policy of compartmentalisation did not prevent the desire for and creation of politically strong national cross-industry and cross-boundary unions. As resistance against colonial rule grew, African workers became more nationally united and politically powerful and there was a growing concern that this would lead to a surge in anti-colonial nationalism similar to what had occurred in India. This concern was amplified by a series of large-scale strikes that were organised by unions in various colonies, including the Mombasa dock strikes of 1939 and 1947, the rail strike in the Rhodesias in 1945, the Nigerian general strike of 1945, the 1948 strike that led to the Enugu Colliery shooting, the strike on the railway system of French West Africa in 1947-48, and the general miners' strike in the Gold Coast in 1947.

The British government had a mixed response to the emergence of labour unions as a political force in Africa. On the one hand, they had already decided to come to terms with nationalist elites on social and constitutional reforms, including revising Lord Lugard's imperial orthodoxy of indirect rule by co-opting African nationalism by bringing the educated class into colonial

governments.^{xiv} On the other hand, having long accepted the goal of independence in some colonies such as the Gold Coast and Nigeria, the Colonial Office sought to introduce the model of liberal unionism to the colonies, which was part of a broader effort to establish British institutions, such as the parliamentary system and local government, in the colonies and secure a British sphere of influence after independence.^{xv}

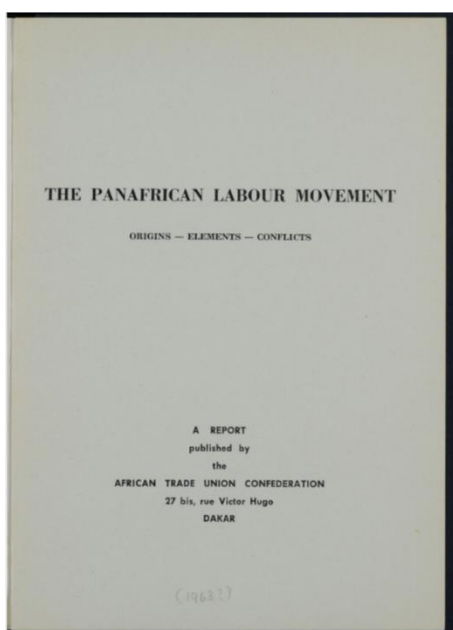


Low, D.A. "The End of the British Empire in Africa", Institute of Commonwealth Studies 1985 (p. 108). MN Papers Subject File 960/1. (TUC, LMU).

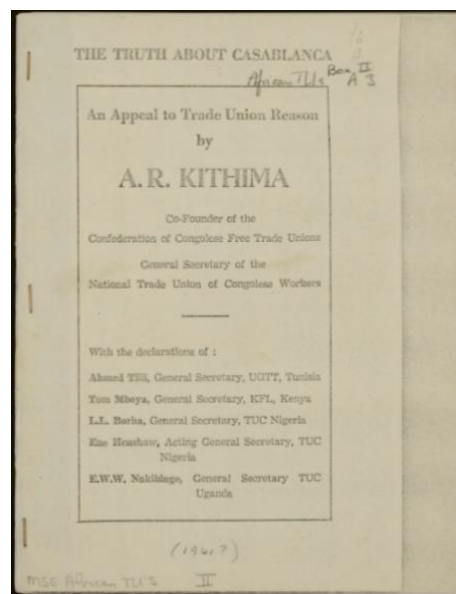
Liberation, Pan-Africanism, and trade unions

The wave of labour strikes that swept across the African continent during the mid-1940s represented a significant shift in the political landscape and marked the beginning of the end of European colonial systems. In the following decade, anti-colonial movements surged in popularity across the African continent, African colonies seeking to free themselves from the oppressive grip of colonial rule. In the 1950s, Trade Unions played a significant role in these movements. Some African nationalists, such as Tom Mboya and Seku Toure, rose to prominence from within the Trade Union movements. The TUC felt that politicisation of unions and ideas of national independence within the unions were inspired by the ideology of Pan-Africanism. The TUC lamented the exponential expansion of African political consciousness that took place in the late 1950s, extending beyond the West Coast

of Africa and reaching East and Central Africa.^{xvi} This expansion was largely driven by nationalist movement leaders who were described by the TUC as 'young and inexperienced' and were influenced by 'Pan-Africanism propaganda'^{xvii}. The TUC perceived Pan-Africanism, which originated from the USA and Caribbean islands, as having little relevance to the African experience and even less significance for African workers. They viewed Pan-Africanism as an exclusivist ideology that hindered the progress of democratic trade unionism and race relations within unions.^{xviii} Colonial authorities and the TUC generally wanted to confine trade unionism solely to industrial relations issues. In what appeared to be a commitment to maintaining the status quo of British imperial rule, the TUC expected African unions to avoid politics and concentrate on technical capacity building activities, including opening branches, managing finances, developing effective industrial relations, and serving members.^{xix}



'The Panafrican Labour Movement: Origins, Element, Conflicts', Report by the ATUC. 1963. *Papers of African Trade Unions: All African Trade Union Federation (AATUF) and Confédération Syndicale Africaine (CSA) / African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC)*, Box 3 H2.



Kithima, A. R. 'The Truth about Casablanca: An Appeal to Trade Union Reason'. 1961. *Papers of African Trade Unions: African Trade Unions: General Box 2 A3*.

Indeed, the idea of trade union unity was a central aspect of Pan-Africanism, as it sought to bring together African workers across national boundaries to work towards the goal of mutual support. The fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945 played a key role in developing this concept, and the organising efforts of the 1951 Confédération Générale du Travail (GEC) in the French colonies were instrumental in promoting trade union unity. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) encouraged inter-territorial cooperation among labour unions. Despite the TUC's preference for supporting individual national unions, the ICFTU, which was predominantly led by Americans, supported the creation of a West African regional centre and also adopted a more accommodating stance on anti-colonial sentiments.^{xx} It was however the All-Africa People's Conference (AAPC) held in Accra, Ghana in 1958, under the leadership of Ghana's first President Kwame Nkrumah, which called for the creation of an all African union that provided a more concrete structure to the idea of Pan-African unionism. The activities of the AAPC's Trade Union steering committee led to the first All African Trade Union Federation conference May 1961 in Casablanca. The conference did not achieve much in terms of unity but instead

solidified divisions within the Pan-African labour movement along political lines, such as the Casablanca and Monrovia groups. The main point of contention was the issue of disaffiliation from labour internationals, which was a source of controversy before the conference. In November 1960, the Ghanaian TUC leader, John Tettegah, and Tom Mboya of the Kenya Federation of Labour signed a declaration supporting AATUF and agreeing that it should not be affiliated with any international organisations, recognising the right of each national centre to decide on its international relations.^{xxi} However, during the first meeting in Casablanca, Ghana put forward the principle of non-alignment and insisted that disaffiliation from international organisations was a prerequisite for AATUF membership, leading Kenya, Tunisia, Nigeria and Tanganyika to leave early.^{xxii} Only the Casablanca states of Ghana, Guinea, Morocco, and UAR passed the resolution to give members ten months to disaffiliate. In response, despite the Casablanca group's protests, the Monrovia group decided to set up a rival pan-African trade union organisation, African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), at a conference in Dakar in January 1962.^{xxiii}

The split in the trade union movement in Africa can be seen as mirroring the onset of the Cold War, which saw Western countries withdraw from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and establish ICFTU in 1949. This division created a complex battleground between the USA and Russia for influence in the continent, with African trade unions caught in the middle. Some unions aligned themselves with the ICFTU, while others remained with the WFTU or tried to remain neutral. Notwithstanding the dispute over issues of international affiliations, the biggest setback for the labour movement after independence in Africa emerged from the nationalist governments that the unions supported during the anti-colonial struggle. Trade unions in newly independent states across the continent struggled to maintain their independence from the government, as ruling political parties infiltrated and imposed significant restrictions on their autonomy. For example, in Ghana, the TUC became a part of the ruling party, with Nkrumah referring to it not only as an affiliate but as a 'composite part of Convention People's Party' along with farmers council, the council of women and cooperative council.^{xxiv}

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