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AND THE

FAILURE OF COLONIAL LABOR REFORM

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The Iva Valley Shooting at Enugu Colliery, Nigeria: African Workers' Aspirations and the Failure of Colonial Labor Reform

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After World War II African workers expected to be awarded for their loyal support of 'Empire' during the war and anticipated radical social and political changes in compensation for their loyalty and to compensate for the conditions they endured during the war. What they confronted instead was half-hearted political reforms that failed to pave the way for independence and more sophisticated attempts to create stringent production regimes in the colonies in which managers, with support of the state, resisted workers' demands for increased wages. Britain's Colonial Office, anticipating an outburst of pent-up grievances, tried to coax local managers and colonial governments to use 'modern' systems of industrial relations and labor control to channel worker unrest through manageable organs of workplace consultation. This, they felt, was key to insulate industrial disputes from the volatile political context of decolonization, a context which Britain neither understood nor yet controlled. Smarting under the anti-colonialist critique of its wartime allies – the USSR and the US – Britain began to put 'old wine in new bottles' by refocusing the imperial mission to emphasize the economic and social 'development' of colonial societies. 'Development' was a vaguely construed ideology which hid the economic motives of the imperial state [and its desperate post war need of colonial resources] – to develop more efficient ways to capture scarce and hence highly valorized colonial resources for use in Britain's post war recovery. In Nigeria groundnuts and palm products now commanded prices higher than during the war. They were wonderful sources for earning hard currency, i.e. U. S. dollars, paying off loans from the U.S. and purchasing capital goods needed for the reconstruction of its devastated industrial base. Moreover by getting them from the colonies within the sterling area, Britain needn't spend already scarce hard currency purchasing them on world markets.¹ If only colonial workers could be made to be more productive and more docile. The various reform proposals of the post war period were an attempt to resolve these contradictions.

¹ Michael Cowen and Nicholas Westcott, "British Imperial Economic Policy During the War," in *Africa and World War II*, ed. David Killingray and Richard Rathbone (London, 1986), 44. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 203.

ended.

In Enugu workers' understandings of these ideological changes and debates were enriched by the discourse of the nationalist movement, which was particularly popular in this the 'city of clerks'. The influence of literate nationalists on Enugu's miners, encouraged by the membership of both in the urban improvement unions⁸², made Britain's goal of depoliticizing colonial unions more difficult. A district officer commented in 1947:

Divisional politics in Udi Division are always strongly influenced by the views of the intelligentsia in Enugu as interpreted by the illiterate colliers, who, coming home at weekends, and particularly at month-ends with cash wages, are able to pay the piper and call the social, and to some extent the political tune.⁸³

Finally, despite the deprecating ways that colonial officials and managers viewed African working class men, the men themselves understood their prominent role in their communities as well as the workplace. Colonial racism may try to treat the 'African worker' as an African 'boy', but the workplace also validated them as brave and skilled men. The work place was a site of a masculine work culture, in which solidarity with one's work mates challenged colonial industrial despotism. Additionally, this masculinity was further validated in the communities and villages where these men used their incomes to become "modern," progressive, and politically powerful. Contrary to colonial perceptions of their inability to project into the future these men positioned their children to assume positions within the Nigerian nation. Today the imprint of their sacrifice and vision is clear in Enugu.

⁸¹ This is a paraphrase of Frederick Cooper: "The governments which ruled French West Africa and British Africa during the early war years had one characteristic in common: both were planning for futures that did not exist." Chapter IV, "Forced labor, strike movements, and the idea of development, 1940-1945", *Decolonization and African Society*, 110.

⁸² Urban ethnic unions were village-based groups who developed ways of influencing rural politics and development. Many of them raised money from member contributions to launch ambitious community development efforts. Today they are formed in African immigrant communities throughout the world and contribute far more to development initiatives than the foreign aid budget of the developed capitalist states. For one discussion see E.P. Oyeaka Offodile, "Growth and Influence of Tribal Unions," *West African Review* (August 1946): 937-41.

⁸³ NAE, Uddist 9/1/1, "Annual Report 1947—Udi Division."

of the shooting in a central market place in Enugu.⁷⁸

What does this incident tell us about this period and about the beliefs, assumptions and actions of its key actors - African workers and British colonials – during the period of imperial labor reforms? In the volatile period of decolonization, contextualized by the East-West conflict of the ‘Cold War’, the ‘best’ way of controlling African workers had yet to be determined. The labor ‘experts’ in the Colonial Office bumbled along, experimenting with the shell of British industrial relations weakened by the content of colonial authoritarianism.

The contradictions of colonial society – race, class and gender – were far stronger than any British imported industrial relations system. Processes that worked in England did not create the same results in Enugu. Most political and managerial officials refused to accept African workers as ‘employees’ in the fullest sense. Moreover no matter how many times BTUC advisors came to the colonies they could neither convince African workers that they could trust trade unions nor could they convince European employers that systematizing industrial disputes was in their interests. There were too many uncertainties in the transition to independence and too many deep contradictions within colonial society. White officials could not process these changes and Africans did not trust the state. Africans would not channel their discontent into institutions, especially when state-sanctioned, that they did not trust.

Africans heard and understand the critique of colonial rule from Britain’s war allies – the USSR and the US. The tension focused on the application of Article II of the Atlantic Charter, signed in August 1941, to Britain’s tropical colonies. Conceived as a statement to Nazi-occupied Europe, it was quickly embraced by Africa’s nationalists.⁷⁹ It floated many ‘dangerous’ ideas such as the right of self determination, in Article II, which declared:

the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.⁸⁰

In Nigeria there was an air of anticipation that since the country had remained loyal to England and had proven so indispensable to the war effort, major improvements, both political and economic, were in the offing. Moreover working class men expected that they would have the income to assume new leadership roles as family heads and modernizers. Unlike the Nigerian government, they were *planning for a future that would exist*.⁸¹ Personal, village and family improvement became ever more compelling goals as workers expressed their expectations of a better life, of a *future* when hostilities

⁷⁸ See the cover of C. Brown, *We Were All Slaves*.

⁷⁹ For the fullest discussion see Adi, op cit. The nationalists were prolific writers leaving a generous record of their thought on the charter. For one discussion see A. A. Nwafor Orizu, *Without Bitterness: Western Nations in Post-War Africa*, New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1944.

⁸⁰ William Roger Lewis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1954*, New York: Oxford University Press. 1978, 124.

As against these imperial plans stood an expectant population of colonial workers with their own plans for the post war future. The propaganda of the war encouraged colonial workers to claim their right to develop their own interpretations of ‘development’ and these were often at odds with imperial plans. Throughout colonial Africa workers mobilized to² insure that this new, ‘modern’ Africa fulfilled their needs and many poured their energy into preparing their children for positions within an independent nation. These expectations fueled a wave of largely urban post war protests that engulfed the colonies throughout Africa. In Nigeria the first sign of these new worker protests was the 1945 Nigerian General Strike which launched a national wave of industrial unrest that continued through the end of the decade. The political context of the Cold War made these protests particularly bothersome to the imperial state because it was in a weakened condition to monitor both the influence of Communists in these volatile colonies and respond to the post war expectations of the metropolitan working class.

The entire enterprise of reform and development was ad hoc and fraught with contradictions. In the colonies managers and state officials pushed a productionist ethos and tried to seize a deeper control over the labor process by introducing subtle and more obvious changes in the labor process that reduced labor’s autonomy in the workplace. The Colonial Office urged local officials to institute the types of industrial relations processes that had proven of some success in the metropole. But most colonial officials and managers gave only nominal acquiescence to these reforms while trying to retain old methods of workplace control based on coercion and brutality. However, the political context necessary to sustain such colonial despotism had changed. Officially racist practices were difficult for the state to support, a reality that many colonial managers found hard to recognize. While the Colonial Office eventually prevailed and some form of ‘modern’ industrial relations were transferred to the colony neither metropolitan nor local officials were really committed to supporting meaningful organs of worker representation or just rules for disputes management. In the colonies local officials developed a myriad of ways to subvert these ‘modern’ industrial relations processes, often stimulated an industrial crisis which, in the context of the decolonization spilled over into the political arena. And the Colonial Office developed empire-wide strategies to subvert the development of strong trade unions. This was the case in the Enugu Government Colliery in 1949 when police shot miners engaged in a peaceful demonstration transforming an industrial protest into an icon of the struggle for independence.

In its campaign to promote a modicum of reform the Colonial Office was forced to seek the collaboration of a ‘partner’ formerly viewed with suspicion during the war – the British Trades Union Congress. Eager to be accepted by the state the BTUC dispatched hundreds of men throughout the empire to establish labor departments, launch

² Most of these strikes were in transport. See Timothy Oberst, “Cost of Libing and Strikes in British Africa c. 1939-1949: Imperial Policy and the Impact of the Second World War,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1991. For summary treatment of these revolts see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. See chapter 6.

disputes management systems, teach the principles of industrial relations and promote 'responsible' trade unionism to a restless and newly empowered working class. Making African workers more 'productive' was not just a technical process but involved a definition of productivity that often disadvantaged workers. Given the irregularities of the colonial labor process the means of measuring and assessing 'productivity' were far from objective. Moreover, colonial managers could easily obscure their resistance to new systems of industrial control if they could produce output and cost-of-production figures that suggested new economies. As industrial relations strategies were applied in the colonies this obscurantism was far more difficult to insure with workers whose perspective was shaped by an awareness of the conditions of their metropolitan counterparts, a factor of increased importance as the communications avenues of war propaganda were seized by nationalist leaders. The experience of industrial workers in Enugu indicates that it was often from the most remote workplaces that the most serious attacks were launched.

As a state enterprise the Enugu Government Colliery was considered an important site for the Labour Party to promote its ambitious plans to contain and reform colonial labor. It involved the legalization of trade unions, the deployment of cooperative BTUC advisers to coach 'responsible' trade unionism, the prodding of colonial governors to modernize labor policies, the endless proposals and convoluted procedures designed to diffuse industrial conflicts and the various 'enlightened' social welfare policies. But rather than prevent disruptive industrial disputes they led to the very type of excessive brutality that threatened to catapult industrial dispute into a broad-based political crisis, the type that could threaten the pace of decolonization.

Enugu was just that type of city that would generate Colonial Office concern. It was the seat of the regional government and had the highest literacy rate in the east. Forty percent of its population of 10,000 were literate and supported a vibrant and radical nationalist press owned by a prominent nationalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe. The city's role as an administrative and industrial center gave it a social composition that was politically volatile. With its hundreds of discontented clerical workers, unsatisfied with the pace of political change and thousands of industrial workers, trying to scrape together a living with wages that had deteriorated since the Depression the city was a hotbed of nationalist activity. The clerks³ made Enugu a center of a militant nationalist group, the Zikist movement, which included among its members several prominent Marxist Leninist. The Zikists appeared to be teetering dangerously close to encouraging mass protests of 'positive action' in Nigeria similar to the protests in Ghana. On October 27 1948 Osita Agwuna, a member delivered a speech called "A Call for Revolution" which made thirteen proposals for civil disobedience. The government became alarmed and arrested the major members of the group.⁴

³ The classic studies of this period are Richard Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963 and James Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958.

⁴ Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties*, 75; J.O. Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria, 1939-1953*, London: Evans Brothers, 1973, p. 116.

locations of the demonstrations as well as the composition of the crowds which were exclusively urban, suggested that the incident ignited deep-seated grievances that accumulated during the war. Declining wages, high prices and the stranglehold that the expatriate firms continued to have over the Nigerian economy were all opposed by the urban groups that joined in the riot. This was indicated in most cities where the targets of the demonstrations were the expatriate firms which were looted and burned.

The state's response was predictable. Within weeks the British government had convened a commission of two British⁷⁵ and two African judges. Despite the dispute's character as an industrial dispute there was no representation of trade unionists, British or Nigerian, on the panel. Predictably the hearings became a magnet for nationalist politicians, many of whom were lawyers. As an historical event the hearings themselves are deserving of serious analysis. They expressed the contradictions of colonial society in its demise. What is especially telling is the extent to which the official report, called the Fitzgerald report,⁷⁶ veered beyond a commentary on the actual event and became a critique of the state of industrial relations in Nigeria as well as the Nigerian state's reticent response to the political demands of the nationalists. Again, the separation of 'economic' from 'political' was quite difficult to create in reality. We cannot comment fully on the contents of the report here. However several observations are pertinent. First, the trade union leader, Isiah Ojiyi became a scapegoat of the shooting. The government report adopted the dissidents position that he had mislead the miners into expecting additional arrears from 'rostering'. As was the case with several other militant trade unionists at the time, he was jailed, conveniently for other charges associated with the dispensation of the 1947 award.⁷⁷ Upon his release several years later, he was banned from Colliery property. He never again lead the workers. However, most of my interviews indicated that even today workers attribute their gains to the strength of his leadership and his willingness to sacrifice his individual gains to that of the workers.

The shooting became emblematic of the excesses of colonial rule. Today it is still cited as the incident that the Nigerian independence movement. Residents of Enugu proudly cite it today to claim pride of place in contributing to the collapse of British rule in Nigeria. And the event is enshrined in popular memory in a dramatic bronze sculpture

⁷⁵ The chair, W. J. Fitzgerald, was former Chief Justice in Palestine where he had recently served on a commission of Enquire on Local Administration of Jerusalem. The other was P.W. Williams, representative of Wigan in the House of Commons and legal advisor to the National Union of Mineworkers. The two African members, S. O. Quashie-Idun of the Gold Coast and N.A. Ademola of Nigeria sat on the Supreme court of their respective countries. Despite protests by socialist and communist MP's, no British or Nigerian trade unionists were selected. Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Biographical Dictionary of the British Colonial Service, 1939-1966*, London: Hans Zell, 1991. *London Times*, 28 November 1949.

⁷⁶ Colonial Office, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Disorders in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria*, Col. No. 256. London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1946.

⁷⁷ Apparently the union leadership asked the members to pay them a small amount for their role in the negotiations. This practice, which fit well within the acceptable boundaries of Igbo leadership and its reciprocity, constituted 'corruption' in the eyes of the state. For a discussion see *'We Were All Slaves'* 293-297.

horror . Many were shot in the back.⁶⁹ The volley kept coming for a good two minutes spending some eighty-seven rounds.⁷⁰ R.A. Brown, Assistant Superintendent of police, Kano, shouted the order to stop shooting and went along the line of fire and deflected the rifles into the air. But Superintendent Philip, was still shooting, having completely lost his wits, after being terrified by the native ‘ with the machete, ... dancing round and round , and slowly coming towards us, circling round and round’.⁷¹

The men fled in all directions as the dead and wounded collapsed on the ground. Many fled into a nearby stream, while others retreated back to the mines. The shooting continued for several minutes. Many anticipated more shots. Emmanuel Okafor, a blacksmith, asked Philip to take him to the hospital, ‘I surrender. Take me to the hospital’. He alleges that Philip answered ‘I don’t care’ and left him behind.⁷² After the barrage the troops calmly fell into formation and marched back to their depot in Enugu.

Informants alleged that the commanding officers made no arrangements to care for the wounded and the dead remained on the ground for the rest of the day. Villagers, hearing of the slaughter, lay in wait to ambush the troops as they returned but lost their courage. Sunday would become famous as the first one shot. Nationalist leaders said the shots were the inaugural bullets of Nigeria’s nationalist struggle. The days of colonial rule were numbered.⁷³

Conclusion: The Aftermath: Labor, Militance and Tragedy on the Eve of Nigerian Independence

From November 18th through 26th only the cities of eastern Nigeria were in revolt despite the nationalist assertion that the massacre was the death knoll of colonial rule in Nigeria. In the five largest cities in the east—Enugu, Aba, Umuahia, Port Harcourt, Onitsha and Calabar⁷⁴ the Zikists moved to the forefront of organizing mass demonstrations which quickly exploded in attacks on British property. The targets and

⁶⁹ When questioned by H. O. Davies as to how six men could have been shot from the back, Phillip testimony said that a ricocheting bullet could strike another person. Phillip testimony, testimony, 488

⁷⁰Proceedings, 541.

⁷¹ Phillip testimony, p. 458

⁷² Interview with Emanuel Okafor.

⁷³ There are many accounts of what happened after the shooting began. It has remained as a traumatic memory in popular consciousness in Enugu. Today informants speak of the event as if it just happened. The entire incident deserves more thorough investigation.

⁷⁴In Calabar the ethnic divisions between the Igbo urban working class and the Efik descendants of former slave owners led to a wave of ethnic violence immediately following the shooting. Calabar was a city that was deeply involved in the slave trade and had developed a class structure that reflected the position of the interior people, the Igbo, as slaves in this trade. The Ekpe Society, a secret organization of elite men, also derivative of the slave trade, joined police in dispersing the predominately Igbo demonstrations.. Anti-Igbo violence continued for several days in December. *The Times of London*, 19 December 1949.

This was the political context in November 1949 when police shot 22 miners engaged in a sit-in at the Iva Valley mine. This paper argues that the shooting was a product of these processes that shaped post-war labor policy and stoked African working class men’s aspirations. In the workplace both labor and management anticipated changes but their vision of the desired nature of these changes was in conflict. In the post war period management and the labor ‘experts’ in the Colonial Office expected to finally bring African workers under managerial control and to encumber their disputes with elaborate bureaucratic processes designed to reduce disruptions of production.

But miners had no intention of allowing their labor power to be quietly appropriated to fulfill the project of metropolitan reconstruction. During World War II Enugu workers became more aware of their conditions *in comparison with* those of similar workers in England and elsewhere. This awareness was expressed in the demands that workers made, collectively and individually, to bring their conditions and pay schedules in concert with those in the metropolis. Having lived through the war, when they were told that they were equal to metropolitan workers they raised demands that expressed new ideas about their responsibilities as working men during a period of intense anticipation of the future of the colonial state. Wages provided a sure means of preparing their families for future opportunities, since decolonization was eminent. Others sacrificed to construct schools and health clinics in natal villages. The fulfillment of these responsibilities was reflected in workplace struggles and the demands miners placed both on their employers and the colonial state.

This paper argues that the post war period is a time when the state’s interventions, to ‘modernize’ the means of controlling African labor and the social context in which workers lived, were themselves the cause of the rash of industrial disputes that riveted post-war African societies. In one of history’s great ironies the task of creating the post-war empire fell on the Labour Party. Pushing a package of labor rights while custodian of the imperial state had its contradictions and these contradictions bubbled up and slapped Labour in the face.

The paper is built upon the elements of this reconstruction: the flawed introduction of state sanctioned trade unions, the emergence of a politically sophisticated union leader, the introduction of a legal framework to decasualize labor but not proletarianize labor and the intervention of the state to reorganize the trade union according to foreign principles. These elements of the policy of labor reform are discussed in outline form. The concluding section describes the shooting itself and suggests areas of further exploration most specifically the hearings of the investigative commission as text for examining decolonization. Preliminary analysis indicates that the commission, led by W. J. Fitzgerald formerly of the Palestine Land Commission, was far more than a body constituted to investigate an industrial dispute but was a vehicle used by the Colonial Office to distance itself from the bungling political proposals of the Nigerian state.

Introducing the Enugu Colliery: The Mines After World War II

Please note that in [the] future the designation "men" must be substituted for "boys" in all communications referring to the Colliery labour either collectively or individually. No person employed by this department must be addressed as "boy." Announcement by Colliery Manager, 23 December 1941⁵

The governments which ruled French West Africa and British Africa during the early war years had one characteristic in common: both were planning for futures that did not exist.

Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*⁶

Enugu Government Colliery was a state owned enterprise and a strategic resource during World Wars I and II. The mines were located in southeastern Nigeria, in a region populated by the Igbo people, one of the three largest ethnic groups in contemporary Nigeria. Its coal was the main fuel source for the Nigerian Government Railway and, during the war, the railways of other West African colonies as well as England itself. The coal market included steamships that plied the West African coast and the tin mining companies of northern Nigeria as well. Although the work force was small, ranging from 5,000 to 7,000 in this period, the central position of the industry in West Africa amplified the power of its workers, and disputes attracted the attention of the Colonial Office. The miners were very aware of this centrality.

There were two mines operating during this period, Iva Valley and Obwetti. Both used the *pillar and stall* system of extraction in which miners divided the entire mine into sections (as if on a grid), a process called *development*, which they extracted later, in *robbery*. This system of extraction encouraged a series of values that became important for the development of miners' self-identity. In the Enugu mines the division of tasks followed the Derbyshire system used in the northern coalfields of Northumberland and Durham, the home of the Colliery's first manager. In this system all preliminary tasks to the actual coal getting were performed by specialized workers who set timber (timbermen), lay the rails (railmen), remove stone to make roadways of sufficient height and build packing walls (special labor).⁷ The hewers (miners) only cut the coal and put it in the tubs which tubmen pushed. Management assumed that this fractionalized division of labor was appropriate for "the African worker," whom they deprecated as incapable of

⁵Nigerian Coal Corporation Files, (hereafter NCC) New No. P.1, "Letter from Colliery Department to All officials and staff—European and African," 23 December 1941.

⁶Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 110.

⁷For a good discussion of the system of work in the Northumberland fields see M.S. Daunton, "Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coal Fields, 1870-1914," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 34,4 (November 1981), 582.

bows, arrows, machetes, long steel bars'.⁶⁰ Curiously, many of the men had red pieces of cloth tied to their miners' helmets, wrists or knees which Philip assumed to be the signs of "some organization along military lines"⁶¹ As the minutes passed the men began to sing hymns and songs of solidarity - 'We are all one!'⁶² But the Captain only heard a 'tremendous howling and screeching noise going on'⁶³ to which several men danced in a 'dangerous' way.⁶⁴ After giving the order to shoot Philip himself aimed his revolver at a dancer immediately in front of him who "was jumping up and down and his eyes were popping out of his head - like a lot of the others."⁶⁵ Within a second he had shot Sunday Anyasado in the mouth.⁶⁶

Sunday Anyasado was the first to fall dead. He had been among the miners who came out of the mines when the train approached the explosives stores. He was a hewer and the brother of B.U. Anyasado of Mbieri, Owerri, a prominent clerk and union dissident. Sunday was in the front of the crowd outside Iva Mine. He was a young man, recently married, who had come to Enugu to earn a living. He occupied the mine to prevent a repeat of the 1945 lockout and had come outside when the black shirted Mushi troops from northern Nigeria disembarked from their transport lorries. Sunday joined his brother miners chanting and singing and danced in front of the crowd facing the troops and their commanding officer. He probably did not hear the warning shots, nor did he expect that the police would fire. Philip aimed his revolver at Sunday, shot him in the mouth, killing him immediately. Phillip then shot Livinus Okechukwuma, a machine man from Ohi, Owerri, killing him as well. Hearing the noise, Okafor Ageni, an Udi tubman ventured out of the mine and asking 'Anything wrong?' A bullet killed him on the spot.⁶⁷

The shots were barely audible over their singing and the men pushed closer and closer to the action. Philip saw "an avalanche coming down from the back, rolling on top of us".⁶⁸ But as it became clear that shots were fired and men were dying they ran in

⁶⁰ The presence of weapons was challenged by many witnesses. I have included it here because it is part of the testimony and because it attests to the level of hysteria state of mind of the officers. See testimony of Phillip testimony above.

⁶¹ Phillip testimony, Proceedings, 485.

⁶² Interview with Emmanuel Okafor.

⁶³ Phillip testimony, 460.

⁶⁴ Phillip's testimony was challenged in this characterization by Quashie-Idon, a lawyer for the men. Proceedings, quote from Phillip testimony testimony, 483.

⁶⁵ Phillip testimony, 457.

⁶⁶ Phillip testimony, 477.

⁶⁷ This account is based on the Proceedings.

⁶⁸ Proceedings, 412.

interval one worker was given the key to lock the magazine and did so with no resistance.

⁵⁵ By that time seven to eight hundred men had gathered at the mouth of the mine to watch.⁵⁶

At the investigative commission hearings one Constable Okolie described friendly discussions between the workers and the constables. In fact he overheard one policeman saying

We do not come to shoot you people. You are demanding your rights from the Government. The Government will pay you people this money.⁵⁷

To this he alleged that a worker replied “We are glad you people know this, but you people should remember we be brothers”⁵⁸ The men had little indication that they were in danger.

As against the perceptions of Nigerian policemen of an atmosphere of fraternity was the perception of a near hysterical British police officer. The split second decisions made by British officers reflected their own insecurities and simmering anger at the state’s handling of this period of political transition. The atmosphere of cooperation was not the scene that the Assistant Superintendent of Police, Enugu saw or understood. The chatter, singing and fraternizing appeared threatening to him. He felt hemmed in by the miners who were so numerous that he noted ‘the whole place was black with them’.⁵⁹ Similarly, Captain F. S. Phillip, Senior Superintendent of Police, saw only menace.

In this crucial the racialized figure of the ‘African worker’ emerged in the imagination of the British officers and fused with the stereotype of the ‘primitive native’. To Captain Phillip these were not industrial men conducting a protest but savage, hysterical natives, doing ‘dangerous dances’, screeching unintelligible noises poised to attack his troops. At about 1:30 pm he got to Iva Valley mine and became worried about the numbers and the mood of the crowd. They seemed to be ‘pouring’ out of the mines by the hundreds. Despite his assumptions that they were hostile he nonetheless he felt sufficiently confident of their cooperation to solicit their assistance in removing explosives from a nearby magazine.

In many ways the Captain appeared ensnared in misleading colonial stereotypes about African men. Ignorant of the Igbo language and unfamiliar with the traditions of Colliery protest he panicked. To him they became an angry mood, brandishing ‘weapons-

⁵⁵ J.E. Nzerogu, 761.

⁵⁶ Proceedings. 519.

⁵⁷ Testimony of A. Okolie, Lance Corporal Police Force, 782.

⁵⁸ Okolie, 782.

⁵⁹ Testimony of E.J.R. Ormiston, Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police, Enugu, Proceedings, p. 435.

handling more than a single task. However, despite these assumptions that the workers’ lacked skill, the Derbyshire system encouraged the men in various points in production to recognize the intuitive knowledge required of their jobs. This awareness gave them power and personal pride, which was expressed in their demands during the war.

Both the system of extraction – pillar and stall – and the particular composition of the work group had implications for the calculations of productivity. During the war these calculations were used with deceptive intent by a management seeking to roll back miners gains before the war. Pay systems for colliery work are exceedingly complex and a central element in managerial control over the production process. They usually used a combination of piece and day rates with underground allowances for various categories of labor in ways that created incentives for production. This was especially important with the pillar and stall system which opened far too many work faces for management to supervise. Thus miners’ wages were based largely on ‘piece rates’ while the men who pushed tubs, ‘tub boys’ were on daily rates because the number of tubs they pushed were determined by the amount the hewers produced. However, in the settlement of a trades dispute during 1937/38 the hewers won a significant day rate⁸ which gradually came to be the dominant percentage of their wages. This became, in effect, a minimum wage.

Mine engineering principles established an ideal ratio for the miners deployed in ‘development’ as against ‘robbery’. In 1943 the manager distorted the ‘ideal’ ratio of (1) workers in ‘development’ and ‘robbery’ and (2) of miners to other underground labor in order to respond rapidly to an emergency request for coal from England.⁹ He expanded the size of the workforce, putting the majority on ‘robbery’. The favorable impact on output and labor costs was dramatic with a 220% increase in output with a 40% lower the price per ton.¹⁰ The problem was that eventually extraction reached the limits of existing *development* and it was necessary to re-deploy men to carve out new pillars for future extraction. Instead of retrenching workers who were no longer able to perform *robbery*, they retained them, and the number of men exceeded “the demands of *development* and got out of proportion with the strict needs of the circumstances.”¹¹ Only 1 hewer was assigned to *development* for every .7 hewers in *robbery* as against the ideal ratio of 1 in robbery for every 2.26 in development.

⁸ This settlement was granted by the Director of the Railway, the administrative unit of the Colliery, who was unfamiliar with the more conventional systems of pay that mine management employed to increase productivity. For a discussion see my C. Brown, *‘We Were All Slaves’: African Miners, Culture and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery*, Portsmouth, N.H.: Heineman/Greenwood, 2003.

⁹ This request was from the Combined Coal Board of London, which was reeling from labor shortages in the British coal industry. For a discussion of this crisis see Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Vol. 4, 1913-1946: The Political Economy of Decline*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

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¹⁰ Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, (hereafter PRO) C.O. 583/261/30425 23, Governor Bourdillion to Stanley in Colonial Office, January 1934.

¹¹ Ibid.

The estimated costs of this imbalance was over £17,000 per year.¹² Since the hewers were the actual coal getters any deployment of labor that decreased their numbers in relation to other classes reduced OMS. The hewers' proportion of the total work force declined from 20.54 percent in 1940/41 to 14.43 percent in 1946, as is seen in the graph below.¹³ Conveniently, management ignored these calculations when linking any future wage gains to increased productivity.

This period of extensive 'development' for future extraction also created an additional source of increased costs by lowering of the ratio of miners to other underground workers. Underground miners were already outnumbered by other workers. Work groups were composed of one railway-man, two timber-men, eight tub-men, and eight hewers. The primary coal producers, the hewers, were less than half of this nineteen-man group. In fact, the ratio of hewers declined relative to other underground workers because of the necessary maintenance of the large number of worksites in operation under the *pillar and stall* system. As the management opened new work districts or "robbed" those in *development*, more and more men were needed for "dead-work," i.e., the maintenance of roadways, pumping of water, and replacing timber. With the opening of new areas by 'development' the ratio of productive to non-productive face workers reduced output by 30 percent, and added 9d to the total cost of production per ton. Hewer's wages were only 3.9d of this amount, while the remaining 5.1d was paid other underground workers. In this case the hewers' output was not high enough to compensate for this large number of workers, and it distorted the productivity calculations. Moreover, as additional men were deployed for surface tasks, the hewers' proportion of the work group declined.

The financial impact of these managerial decisions was obscured while wages were low, or when only the hewers received a basic daily tub rate. The full consequence of this decision would become obvious after the war when, in 1946 the tub men, as well as hewers, received piece rates.

¹² This ratio is an ideal that cannot be attained given the real conditions in the mines. However, by approximating this ratio the management could significantly reduce labor costs, and thence, costs of production. Powell Duffryn Technical Services, "First Report to the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, on the Government Colliery, Enugu, The Characteristics of the Coal Produced and the Investigation into the Other Coal and Lignite Resources," London, 1948, Mimeographed, "Characteristics of the Coal," D-12, D-14, D-15.

¹³ Powell Duffryn, "Characteristics of the Coal," D-18.

disdainful manipulation of procedures and obfuscation by management to stall the workers. Ojiyi, while alert to this crass manipulation, was caught in the position of being a part of a negotiating team while the branch representatives assumed they headed *their own union!* The hewers no longer accepted the central executive as representing their interests. On November 8th in the midst of negotiations, they began a 'wild cat' go slow. The crisis escalated when the manager suspended 50 workers which, far from stopping the protest, only expanded the strike to the tub men. When the government began to recruit new workers, in anticipation of a lock out, the men occupied the mines.

The immediate cause of the shooting was an attempt to remove mine explosives from the Iva Valley mine. The series of decisions taken by the political officials – the Chief Commissioner, manager, head of the newly formed coal board – from November 16th through 18th, either arose from a determination to finally discipline the coal miners or a confusion of this industrial conflict with a political crisis. The group declined the assistance by the only person trained in labor relations, a senior labor advisor from the BTUC, who was the newly appointed labor director. Once they had made the decision to call in the police the situation rapidly deteriorated under false assumptions, misunderstandings and enshrined derogatory ideas about African workers.

On November 17th there were 900 policemen⁵² in Enugu, many of them Hausa soldiers from the North. On the 18th they came to remove all the explosives, because officials feared that they would fall in the hands of radicals. The miners, believing that the removal of the explosives signaled a "lock-out," appeared hesitant to permit the operation. Several eyewitnesses said that the miners' crowd was not unruly but only curious about the commotion of the police arrival and the unusual color of the policemen's black uniforms. Neither witness considered the crowd to be as hostile.⁵³

The men refused a request that they help in removing the explosives, not because they intended to retain them but because the request ignored their job hierarchies. A witness noted:

What they said was that they were not carrying men. They are tubmen and pickboys and have nothing to do with the carrying of the magazine... This job is for timbermen, some special laborers. He should call them.⁵⁴

The initial plan to remove the explosives proved unworkable because there were more than anticipated. Officials then secured a train to transport the explosives. In the

⁵² The account that follows is based on oral history collected in Nigeria and the commission proceedings. Colonial Office, "Enquiry into the Disorders in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria: Proceedings of the Commission," Vols. 1-2. London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1950. Mimeographed..

⁵³ Interview with Emanuel Okafor, Uwani, Enugu, 10 July 1975; Interview with Peter Afemuefuna, Tinker's Corner, Enugu, 26 July 1975.

⁵⁴ Proceedings, Testimony of J.E. Nzerogu, Screen Foreman, , Proceedings, p. 763.

indeed a political danger.

The Shooting of November 18, 1949: The Failure of Labor Reform

By late 1949 the Colliery was teetering on the edge of another labor crisis. Ojiji was struggling to keep his reputation amidst a labor consultation process *designed* to prevent worker activism. The dissidents were spreading rumors that the workers deserved more money and the management was angry that these ‘impudent ‘natives’ had succeeded in getting a settlement in 1947. The political environment was becoming increasingly radicalized. The European community viewed nationalist agitation with dread and reacted hysterically to rumors about radicals who might, in fact, have communist connections. The Colonial Office had just weathered a major crisis in the Gold Coast where the ex-servicemen’s riot at Cape Coast Castle ⁴⁸ succeeded in strengthening Kwame Nkrumah’s ‘positive action’ campaign, which was inspired by Ghandi’s strategy. This made the Nigerian government even more concerned about the political radicalism of veterans, many of whom lived in Enugu and worked in the Colliery. Some six hundred lived in the rural area.⁴⁹ Many had been trained in guerilla warfare in Southeast Asia ⁵⁰and were among the most vociferous critics of the slow and unenlightened pace of political change.

There was an atmosphere of mass hysteria among many of the expatriates in the city. Some were reacting to the general change in race relations, in which the government refused to support customary racist practices, such as the use of the term ‘boy’ to describe occupational categories. (‘Pick boys’ (hewers), ‘tub boys (tubmen) and so forth.) Government intelligence in Lagos had been alerted that “extremists” had been attempting to acquire arms and explosives to be distributed to “terrorist parties” (i.e. Zikists?) to use in a “positive action” campaign. Some thefts had evidently occurred including 30 cases of Colliery explosives. Eleven had never been recovered.⁵¹ By the time of the Colliery’s November 1949 crisis the government anticipated the possibilities of radical disruptions through the Zikist linkages with the trade union movement.

This was the political and industrial context in which the hewers began to evaluate the veracity of the rumor that they were due arrears from the period of ‘illegal’ ‘rostering’. For much of September and October 1949 they were very restive and their representatives raised the issue repeatedly in the conciliation discussions which were improperly being used for collective bargaining. Minutes of the Council meetings show a

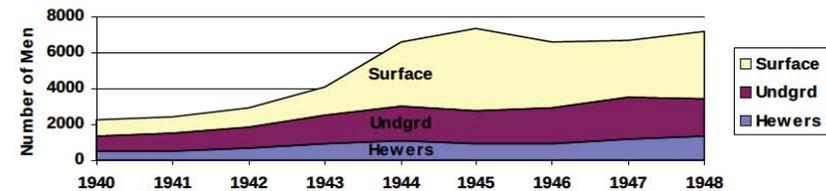
⁴⁸ Unrest among ex-servicemen began in 1946 when they demanded better conditions of life and payment. The contrast between their living conditions and those of Europeans increased their ire. Great Britain. *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948*. Colonial No. 123.

⁴⁹ Akpala, “Background to the Shooting Incident”, 351.

⁵⁰ Over 100,000 West Africans fought in Burma during the war.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 34; *The Times of London*, 6 January 1950.

Graph 6.1 Hewers in Relation to Other Categories of Workers



One of the ways that the industry ‘hid’ this superfluous workforce is through the practice of ‘rostering’. This was a system of ‘sharing work’ in which numbers of workers are kept on the roster in excess of daily needs. Each day management posted a list or *roster* of the group of men selected to work that day. Only those men whose name appeared were employed for the day. In many respects this constituted a ‘registration’ system, a method that management could use to seize more control over the *supply* of labor. The system invited corruption and led to urban overcrowding as workers flocked to the mine site to present themselves daily for work. This system, which instituted casual labor, was attacked by the state in its reform legislation because it

Colonial Systems of Worker Representation: the Troubled Birth of Colliery Trade Unions, 1941-1946

War conditions had indicated the need for some type of worker representation and a reluctant management acceded to the Colonial Office demand that it establish the industry’s first trade unions. In 1939 the Colonial Office had pushed colonial governments to establish unions as “the surest means of securing industrial stability and the removal of extremist tendencies.”¹⁴ As Ormsby-Gore had noted earlier, not to do so would “encourage the formation of illegal organizations which may easily develop into “secret societies” and extend their operations into the political field.”¹⁵ However, most colonial authorities ignored his request to establish labor departments and to authorize trade unions. It was only after the war began and authorities tried to insure that disruptions in production did not occur, that these directives were taken seriously.

Two unions were established in 1941 at the Colliery: on the surface, the Colliery Surface Improvement Union (CSIU) and underground, the Enugu Workers Trade Union

¹⁴ Great Britain, West India Royal Commission Report (Moyné Report), HMSO, London, 1945 (CMD.6608) Royal Commission on disturbances in Trinidad as cited in Peter Weiler, “Forming Responsible Trade Unions: The Colonial Office, Colonial Labor and the Trades Union Congress,” *Radical History Review* 28-30 (1984) 374. For the most authoritative study see, Ken Post, *‘Arise Ye Starlings’: The Jamaica Labor Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978.

¹⁵ PRO, CO 1766/37, Ormsby-Gore, “Circular,” 24 August 1937 as cited in Weiler.

(EWTU).¹⁶ Both were plagued by leadership opportunism and manipulation as well as corruption. They replaced indigenous workers' organizations, called *Nzuko*, that had successfully led the workers through several decades of protest. The unions reflected the occupational division in coal mining between underground and surface work. Management encouraged its collaborators from the clerical, in the case of the Enugu Surface Workers Union, and the 'boss boys' with the Enugu Coal Miners Union to form the unions. Predictably, they manipulated the workers and attempted to use them to increase their power with management and the state. Although privileged by their literacy, clerical workers were not successful in winning the loyalty of the key underground workers – the miners.

Like colonial unions everywhere Enugu's unions were deprived of with the full rights of metropolitan unions and these penalties made it difficult for them to function effectively. They faced compulsory registration under terms to be decided at the discretion of the government and were subjected to special restrictions: a six month waiting period, frequent imprisonment of militant leaders, and a close monitoring of finances.¹⁷ Additionally, they confronted skeptics in the Colonial Office who felt that African 'workers' did not *deserve* unions because they weren't actually 'industrial men'. In fact the debate about race and class was one of the crucial intellectual discussions that impacted upon colonial policy.¹⁸ Nonetheless, throughout the war workers made their support for the unions contingent upon their success in representing their interests. From the very beginning trade unions were seen as instruments of government control.

The Nigerian state and the Colonial Office had reconceptualized colonial labor within an existing context of improved social welfare, increased worker productivity, and controlled systems of representation. The elaborate legislative structures that bureaucratized worker protest encouraged workers to seek out their own "interpreters" of this administrative maze. Most often these 'interpreters' were charismatic, contemptuous of white bosses, relished their position leading the "masses," sufficiently educated to comprehend and simplify the labor legislation, and usually very attracted to the nationalist movement. Nigeria had many such leaders—Michael Imoudu of the Railway Workers Union, and Nduka Eze and A. A. Adio—Moses of the Amalgamated Union of UAC African Workers (UNAMAG) to name a few.¹⁹ In Enugu this leader was from

¹⁶ The union became the Colliery Workers Union during the war.

¹⁷

PRO, CO 554/132/33729, Sec. of State Oliver Stanley, to H.V. Tewson, Assistant Secretary, BTUC, 8(?) July 1943.

¹⁸ For a discussion of this in the context of the coal mines see, "A 'Man' in the Village is a 'Boy' in the Workplace: Colonial Racism, Worker Militance and Igbo Notions of Masculinity in the Nigerian Coal Industry, 1930-1945", L. Lindsay and S. Miescher (eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann 2003, 156-174.

¹⁹ Wogu Ananaba, *The Trade Union Movement in Nigeria*, New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969, 75; Robin Cohen, "Nigeria's Labour Leader No. 1: Notes for a Biographical Study of M.A.O. Imoudu," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, 2 (1970) :303-08; Wale Oyemakinde, "The Nigerian General Strike of 1945", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7, 4 (June 1975), 693-771.

reorganization initiated a process in which the union executive had little if any centralized power. Moreover it challenged the union leadership's ability to retain standing with the membership.

Almost immediately there were signs that the award was still unacceptable as groups of workers raised complaints about the calculations of their wages. Additionally, the consultative aspects of the agreement required that Ojiyi be engaged in daily joint consultations with management over unresolved issues from the 1947 Agreement. However, these new requirements created suspicions from among his members, that he was betraying their interests. His attendance in these largely fruitless meetings were cited by dissidents as evidence that he had become a 'friend' of management by union. The meetings themselves were to resolve errors in the calculation of overtime and seniority allotments. More importantly, the union tried to challenge the production minimums for hewers and tubmen which each was required to attain in order to remain employed. In the midst of all of these negotiations Ojiyi was fighting attempts to undermine his authority among workers from the clerical and 'native' supervisory staff.

Negotiations continued rather uneventfully⁴⁵ until September 1949 when the manager, in violation of the 1947 agreement, announced he would resume 'rostering'. The impact was overwhelmingly negative because rumors were circulating among the men that the Colliery owed an additional £180,000 in back pay to compensate for hours of work lost during the interval between the outlawing of rostering by the June 1946 Trade Union Ordinance and the Colliery's suspension of rostering under the 1947 Agreement.⁴⁶ These rumors, which were promoted by union dissidents, were based on a logical application of the principle of retroactivity so prominent in the 1947 Agreement and caught the government by surprise.

Using his interpretation of Sections 31 and 36 of the new Trade Union Ordinance, effective June 1, 1946 Ojiyi he argued that it prohibited 'rostering' and established penalties for employers who persisted in using it. Section 31 stated that an employer was obligated to give *all workers* on oral contracts seven days notice before their contract could legally be terminated. Under Section 36 employers failing to follow the period of notification must provide work for all physically fit employees who show up for work or *pay wages equivalent to the amount they would otherwise earn*.⁴⁷ Again, Ojiyi demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the labor legislation than did local industrial or political officials. As a piece of legislation the law was attempting to reduce employees use of casual labor, which by the post war period was associated with uncontrollable migration to the cities and threatened political unrest. The nationalist parties political base was in these cities and with the economic contraction after the war and the priorities of the 'productionist' project, large numbers of unemployed men was

⁴⁵ Actually, these negotiations were anything but uneventful. Given the racial contradictions of the decolonization period they became an arena of intensive class struggle and racial tension. See the file

⁴⁶ Agwu Akpala, "African Labour Productivity – a Reappraisal", *African Quarterly*, 12, 3 (1972), 239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

work day comparable to that of the Europeans. Additionally, the agreement prohibited the hated 'rostering' system.

The most important provision of the agreement was its wage award which granted over £150,000 in back wages to most categories of workers retroactive from January 1, 1946. The settlement illustrated the benefits of accepting the state's industrial relations procedures but also established the principal of retroactivity in the calculations of wages.

The agreement also included a provision to reinstate the union following a process of reorganization according to the branch system. From its inception the union had evolved into a structure while 'western' in form, was Igbo in function. The previous CWU structure was unitary with all classes of labor relating directly to the executive committee. There were mass meetings, largely dominated by Ojiyi's charismatic presence. In many respects the union leadership resembled that exercised by powerful and influential men in the village. But there was nothing in Igbo organizational culture that resembled the representative structure implicit in the branch trade union model.

The real aim of the restructuring was to reduce the access of Ojiyi to the underground rank and file. But the process used imported organizational principles that had a different meaning in Igbo culture. Robert Curry, a British TUC advisor, restructured the union along a branch organizational model,⁴⁴ which he hoped would reduce the direct control Ojiyi appeared to exercise over the rank in file. However, this model had a different cultural meaning to the Igbo labor force with tragically unintended consequences. While Curry thought he had created branches rooted in job distinctions that introduced a new layer of officers between Ojiyi and his base among underground workers, to the men he had created *five* independent unions! There was no such principal as representational organization within Igbo culture.

The restructuring also had other consequences. It gave each job group an equal number of representatives in the union executive and in each category of work had its own organization expression. The consequences were to introduce a level of organization decentralization that strengthened dissent and isolated the union leader, Ojiyi, from his base. The clerical and mine supervisory staff, the center of opposition to the union leadership, now had an 'independent' organization. Moreover, they had the same number of representatives in the union executive as their more numerous (and more militant) miners. The underground workers – hewers, tubmen, railmen and special labor – each had an autonomous organizational unit. Finally, in December 1948 the union's recognition was restored but the seeds of fragmentation were embedded in the new structure. Because of the different meaning of the branch structural model the

⁴⁴ Curry divided the union into branches, each with its own officers dealing independently with management. These branches were for Surface workers, Hewers, Mechanics and Fitters, Underground Workers and Clerical. The new Executive Committee was composed of elected branch officers who formed a Representative Committee from which the union's Executive Committee was elected for negotiations with management. Such negotiations, however, would only occur if branches were unable to resolve grievances with management. Thus, these various branches assumed many of the functions formerly held by Ojiyi and the union executive. For a full discussion see, Brown, *We Were All Slaves*, 297-301.

among the 'Junior Technical Staff', that group of Africans being trained, in a type of 'industrial decolonization', to assume responsible positions in the industry. In 1943 Isaiah Ojiyi, a former school teacher, became the General Secretary of the EWTU. His emergence was one of the contradictions unleashed by the Colonial Office labor reforms.

Unlike many of the other African staff who saw their posts as opportunities for personal advancement, Ojiyi used his training in Nigerian labor law to develop demands that fully exploited the legal parameters set forth by the state. His contempt for the racial culture of the mines and his arrogance toward his European superiors made him a natural hero of the workers and a *bête noire* of European bosses. One informant recalled that before Ojiyi's ascent workers were forced to bribe European bosses:

This age is also known as the turkey getting age because without being able to give present of turkey and possibly money and pay inhuman adoration to the European Over manager one cannot aspire to have a penny increase on his salary.²⁰

Ojiyi had nationalist sympathies and enjoyed challenging European bosses who were accustomed to near total power over their workers. To European staff the erosion of their privileges to physically and verbally abuse Black workers appeared as the loss of work discipline and they complained to management that 'their boys' were exhibiting a new, and dangerously recalcitrant attitude. Ojiyi typified these intolerable forms of 'cheeky' behavior which he appeared to have enjoyed.

Unlike the educated clerks, he did not look down on the miners and other laborers, but relished his role as their leader. He was a populist leader, quite similar to many trade union leaders of the period, men whom the Colonial Office viewed with suspicion. Nigeria had a number of such men leading Whitehall to conclude that the major problem in West Africa's labor relations was the irresponsible, inexperienced, and "politically minded leaders."²¹ But to the men he had *Ikenga*,²² a masculine Igbo concept expressed in a willingness to confront an unjust adversary even at personal risk, a stubbornness in attacking a problem, and a strength to take a stand for what was morally good. As he struggled against his detractors from within the CSIU as well as within his own union, he deliberately challenge the types of racial authoritarianism exercised by white staff underground.

²⁰ Personal Collection of David Smock. J. A. Diewart Typescript.

²¹ PRO, CO 554/129/33636 "Record of a Meeting Held on 23 June 1942."

²² For an extensive discussion of this concept, see '*We Were All Slaves*', Chapter 1.

In his confrontations with the state and the new Colliery management he often startled them with his knowledge of pertinent trade union ordinances and his awareness of the gains of the national and international trade union movement. In fact, he often had a deeper understanding of the labor legislation than did local managers and district officers. When the manager tried to fire Ojiyi for his trade union activities he cited the new labor regulations to argue that he needed three months written notification and an opportunity to answer the charges before any dismissal.²³ He persisted in believing, quite correctly, that he was being persecuted because of his union activities. He noted in a letter to the manager:

He also operated within an ethic that articulated a sense of leadership responsibility and the inevitability of conflict with management when working within the industrial relations structures:

I agree that, at trade dispute interviews held between the Manager and the Unions, I always possess strictness in my discussions, and that is a matter of duty, and should not be reckoned as evidence of unruliness and conduct to the Manager.²⁴

Ojiyi's political sympathies with the radical wing of the nationalist movement, the Zikist, led him to frame the workers' struggle in the rhetoric of radical nationalism. As a union leader, he articulated industrial grievances within the context of colonial exploitation. He characterized the relationship between the workers' political status as colonial "subjects" and the intolerable conditions in which they worked and lived. These linkages were even more obvious to workers in a state enterprise such as the Colliery. Ojiyi clarified the political contradictions in his presentation of the Colliery +-workers' demands. For example he used allegations of racial discrimination to link the workers' industrial struggles with the general nationalist campaign against colonial racism. A key component of his ideology was the expectation that those in authority—the state—had a responsibility for the social development their employee. These themes of racial discrimination and state responsibility to prevent it were echoed throughout the nationalist movement.

The Legislative Structure of Reform: Labor Stability and the 1945 Crisis

The 1949 shooting arose from a series of war time industrial crises that originated with grievances that the union raised in late 1943. Two factors converged and both were related to the process of labor reform initiated during the war. One was the legislation governing strikes, which included prohibitions and compulsory arbitration. The other was management's attempt to reduce the autonomy of the hewers by putting them fully on piece rates. These two factors were brought to a head by a union memorandum that raised demands that reflected the workers' awareness of the victories of British coal miners. Wages had been stagnant as against inflation that had reached 75% in Enugu by 1943. In fact 1943 was a critical year nationally for it was the time when the full economic weight of the sacrifices of the war hit the Nigerian working class. In Lagos, the

²³ NCC, P.2/1/1, Ojiyi to Colliery Manager, 19 October 1944.

²⁴ Ibid.

The workers ... believe that the approved Underground allowance is not only applicable to European Underground workers, but also to the African workers. If the Colliery Manager allows only the European workers to get their allowances... then he is showing a grim discrimination in that respect.³⁷

Like many educated trade union leaders throughout Africa, Ojiyi had rapidly mastered the legalities and structure of the Colonial Office's labor reforms, and manipulated them against the state. Citing Regulation 156 of the same Nigerian Defense Regulations that were used in 1945 he argued that the dismissal of the workers in 1945 was a lockout which was prohibited by law.³⁸ In taking this argument he caught officials off guard and sent them scurrying for interpretations of the law to their legal counsel, sparking a debate between regional and national officials.³⁹

The following month, February 1946, he discovered a legal way to circumvent the restrictions of the law. Ojiyi led the workers in a brief 'go slow'⁴⁰ which he called a 'ca'canny' drawing upon a term in English mining protests. To 'Go ca'canny' was a Durham (U.K.)⁴¹ term for 'go'slow or 'work to rule'. Ojiyi indigenized the term by calling it 'welu nwayo'⁴² in Igbo and spent many days in the mines teaching the men. Although the demonstration quickly folded in the face of a lockout, it nonetheless was a barometer of the levels of discontent simmering beneath the surface of industrial calm.

But in November of the following year the workers initiated another 'go slow' which was far more successful. Launched to reiterate the original grievances of 1944, against racial discrimination in wages, and for improved conditions of service, the protest was immediately thrust into the conciliation system authorized by the new industrial relations machinery.⁴³ The demands had included an underground allowance, the restoration of the hewers' daily rate and the provision of fringe benefits to staff. The latter was clearly a demand Ojiyi hoped would quell the dissent from within the staff and clerical ranks. Surprisingly, the workers won and the provisions were applied retroactively. Hewers received overtime pay for holidays and supervisory staff, a six-hour

³⁷ NCC, P. 1/3 "Memorandum of Agreement – 1947", 10 November 1947.

³⁸ NAE, NIGCOAL 1/1/21, CWU to Manager, 24 September 1945.

³⁹ NCC, P. 2/1/3 District Officer to Resident, 7 March 1946; Resident to District Officer, 11 March 1946.

⁴⁰ Agwu Akpala, "Background to Enugu Shooting Incident in 1949," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3,2 (1965), 355.

⁴¹ Miners used a term from Britain's north coalfields to describe this - *ca'canny*. 'Go an *canny*' is the Durham term for 'go slow' or work-to-rule. Dave Douglass, "Pit talk in County Durham," in Raphael Samuel ed., *Miners, Quarry men and Saltworkers. History Workshop Series*, History Workshop Series : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, 311.

⁴² Ananaba mentions that Ojiyi trained the men in this tactic for three weeks in the 1947 dispute. Ananaba, *Trade Union Movement in Nigeria*, 101.

⁴³ It is interesting to note that this time state officials stepped in when the manager tried to institute another lock out.

saw themselves as progressive men and often echoed the opinions of the ‘intelligentsia in Enugu.’ For example they, like the intelligentsia, rejected the government’s Mass Literacy programs³⁵ in favor of compulsory education. They emphasized their position by

a quite phenomenal outburst during 1946 and 1947 of building of large stone-built primary schools, paid for to a large extent from the wages of colliers and wage earners living in Enugu.³⁶

The specific grievances were related to the men’s assumed responsibilities in their communities. As men of considerable stature and prominence Colliery workers were also committed to support maternity clinics, build roads and to bring potable water to the village. These commitments were based on their ability to earn stable wages which were undermined by the unpredictability of work under the daily ‘rostering’. A man’s inability to meet these responsibilities became a source of shame and threatened his standing as a progressive force in the village. These sentiments were especially acute among the hewers, whose self image as working men was related to their role as the principal coal getters. They understood that the financial solvency of the industry depended on their skill and labor and they did not feel that they were being treated fairly.

By January 1946 the workers had been without a union for over a year and the issues that had led to the strike were largely unresolved. Additionally, Ojiyi was under attack by the erstwhile leaders of the trade unions – a group of dissident clerks and ‘native’ supervisors. It is important to remember, however, that workers support for any leadership was contingent upon their delivering the ‘goods’ – higher wages and improvements in working conditions. He could not assume that their support would be unconditional. It was therefore critical for him to be ‘seen’ as persistently presenting their issues before the management *despite* the fact that his union no longer had recognition. In 1947 he succeeded in addressing most of the workers’ concerns.

Lurching Towards the Iva Valley Shooting: The Contradictions of Metropolitan Labor Models

The dispute began in January 1946 when Ojiyi, besieged by dissidents from the clerical and supervisory staff, revitalized the unresolved demands that had generated the 1945 crisis. This time he tapped into the anti-discriminatory discourse of the nationalists and challenged the management to extend the recent award of a £5 underground allowance to British underground managers to African miners. Tapping into the discourse of parity championed so strongly by the propaganda of the war Ojiyi shrewdly argued:

³⁵ The government proposed mass literacy in which rather basic reading skills were taught. The nationalist demanded formal primary and secondary education, which they felt would better prepare the people for independence.

³⁶ National Archives Enugu, (hereafter NAE) UDDIST 9/1/1/, “Annual Report 1947 - Udi Division”. Both colliers resident in the villages and those who boarded in town held regular meetings to discuss their contributions to the school. P. 2/1/3, D.O. Udi to Colliery Manager, 12 February 1946.

workers movement mobilized against 150% inflation. Additionally, this was the year when Enugu’s miners were called upon to compensate for the crisis in the British coal fields where worker protest, manpower shortages and absenteeism exacerbated fuel shortages.²⁵

One of the subjective consequences of the war was colonial workers’ awareness of their role in the survival of Britain. When the capitulation of France led to a Vichy West Africa the Colonial Office felt that the colonies of Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria were in jeopardy. There was a perceptible shift in the content of propaganda²⁶ that targeted these populations. Rather than speak only to the ‘evils’ of Nazism, they now emphasized the ‘partnership’ and common suffering of colonial subjects and the metropolitan power. Similarly the war emphasized the commonalities of coal mining whether in England or Nigeria, and the men were even more interested in how their wages, conditions of service and living conditions compared to those of British and American miners. Increasingly they behaved as part of an international brotherhood, a ‘world’ that David Frank called ‘the country of coal’,²⁷ a brotherhood of miners acutely aware that they had produced the primary energy source for the nationals fighting the war.

Having legalized unions the state chipped away at the rights of organized labor through a series of wartime legislation covering “essential industries,” a rather broad category which, in an economy so dominated by the state, covered the majority of Nigeria’s workers. In 1942 the Nigerian General Defense Regulation prohibited strikes and lockouts,²⁸ mandated disputes procedures that included binding arbitration, waiting periods, and prohibited the right to strike.²⁹ Until 1945 the new legislation secured relative peace in the coal industry. But there were many signs of discontent. Conflict erupted on several fronts: for the right to work under ‘rostering’, against customary racist systems of industrial discipline, for wage increases, to secure recognition of

²⁵ For an historical summary of the proverbial crises in the British coal industry see Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Vol. 4, 1913-1946*.

²⁶ For a comparative study see Wendell Holbrook’s “British Propaganda and the Mobilization of the Gold Coast War Effort, 1939-1945,” *Journal of African History*, 26, 4, (1985).

²⁷ This phrase was part of a beautifully poetic section of his review of several books on coal miners, ‘The Country of Coal’, *Labour/Le Travail* 21 (Spring 1988): 234. It reads

The country of coal is a discontinuous land... it runs from the mining settlements of Scotland and Wales to the coal towns of West Virginia and Illinois...The power of coal has been a founding force in the development of industrial capitalism and the people of this relatively unrecognized country has shared much history in common.

Nigerian miners shared in this experience.

²⁸ Robin Cohen, *Labour and Politics in Nigeria, 1945-1971*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974, 159.

²⁹ Ibid.

workers' organizations and for improvements in conditions underground, etc. But the conflict that would plunge the industry into its most war time crisis would occur when a new manager altered the organization of underground work and the system of pay.

In August 1944 Ojiji submitted a memorandum that demanded increased pay and referred to gains of British coal miners who had secured a seven-hour working day, an underground allowance and improvements in occupational health.³⁰ When he threatened a strike, he was in violation of the Defense Regulations and the manager took the opportunity to restructure the labor process in ways that reduced the hewers control over production. Specifically he presented two options both instituting syndicates of 60 – 30 hewers and 30 tub men. Option one would institute group pay and option two, individual pay. Both options would remove the hewers daily rate, making their wages entirely dependent on productivity. The proposal would have constituted a deskilling of the hewer and was appropriately opposed for this reason.

The manager's proposal was far more than an attempt to enable the men to make more wages.³¹ It was a move to recapture managerial control over the labor process at a time when Enugu coal was of strategic value to the Empire. Workers recognized it as such and responded accordingly. In January 1945 he dispute was settled by compulsory arbitration, under the Nigerian Defence Regulations (1941), which resembled Britain's Essential Work (Coal Mining Industry) Order of 1941, which prohibited strikes in strategic industries. The issue went to binding arbitration and the settlement instituted the syndicates but with individual pay.

When the union refused to follow this unfavorable arbitration the manager fired the entire workforce and hired 1800 new men. Claiming that the union no longer represented these workers, he stripped the Colliery Workers' Union of its recognition. But the workers retaliated with a 'go slow' which, since technically not a strike, did not violate the Defense Regulations. In the second quarter of 1945 output had plunged from 151,664 tons to 100,539 reaching, by the final quarter, a record low of 16,546.³²

By the Armistice the industry was without recognized worker representation but clearly the trade union, and its flamboyant leader, Ojiji, were still popular. The task confronting both management and the colonial state, was how to create a credible workers' organizations *without* Ojiji's leadership. In other words, how to create unions with the shell of worker representation but without meaningful power? The postwar conjuncture would appear to present new opportunities to achieve powerless trade unions but in reality it created even more serious challenges to the colonial state.

³⁰ NCC, P.2/1/1, Ojiji to Manager, 16 August 1944.

³¹ For a fuller discussion of this crisis see my *'We Were All Slaves'*, Chapter 6.

³² Federal Government of Nigeria, Ministry of Labour Archives, (hereafter MLA) 3/S.2, Vol. I, "Colliery Manager Quarterly Reports, 1945".

The Post War Period in the Colliery: The Heightened Contradictions of the Colonial Workplace

When the Labour Party came to power in July 1945 it was confronted with the desperate task of rebuilding Britain's industrial infrastructure under the heavy burden of debt to the United States and fulfilling the political aspirations of colonial people. These two projects would prove to be quite difficult to reconcile. The previous concerns with organizing African trade unions, shaping industrial relations through the application of 'modern' process and institutions, and raising the productivity of African workers by improving the social welfare of the colony, gave way to a narrowed concern with output-productivity.³³ The role of colonial resources was clear. Labour planned to "incorporate the post-war colonial hinterland, now predominately Africa, as a source of food and raw materials to replace imports from dollar sources".³⁴ In the colonies management's struggle to control production - couched in the terminology of "productivity" – was an industrial expression of this 'productionist' development project.

While state officials in British West Africa muddled through the political transition to representative government, management stumbled from crises to crisis at the Colliery, arrogantly ignoring the indicators of impending disaster and confidently assuming that they could find a 'cooperative' alternative to Ojiji. To the Colonial Office this was a political context of dangerous possibilities. Many local officials saw Communist conspiracies behind every nationalist strategy and most believed that African workers were too unsophisticated to recognize their manipulations nor were they able to 'see through' leaders like Ojiji. Thus the Labor Party followed policy of depoliticized trade unions, without recognizing the contradiction in its own history. The challenge was how to insulate the trade unions from the political struggle and to insure that they focus on economic demands while channeling their discontent through bureaucratic procedures. Depoliticized trade unions, while quite difficult to effect in colonies, were especially impossible to create in a state owned industry, such as the Colliery. The connections between industrial grievances and the political status of Nigeria as a colony were not lost on the miners.

There were gendered dimensions to the workers' responses to the post war realities. As working men the miners were determined to fulfill their responsibilities to their families and communities. They came out of the war as different men. To the industry's workers this was a time of exciting possibilities which they had 'paid' for with their labor during the war. They were poised to demand wages that allowed them to prepare their families, villages and communities to accept more political responsibility within an evolving Nigeria. The post war struggles reflected workers' desire to settle unresolved claims and to revitalize their union, hobbled by the insidious manipulations of the metropolitan and colonial state and the industry's management. In the Enugu area colliery jobs were important in financing the large number of development projects these men organized in the villages. District Officers frequently commented that the miners

³³ Cooper, 204.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 59.