

The forces of the African Revolution¹

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SOME sixty to seventy-five years of imperialist rule have been sufficient to produce deep changes in African society, and the speed with which the national movements in Africa have surged forward is in part due to the very rapidity of these transformations.

The destruction of African traditional agriculture, the drawing of millions into migrant wage labour, the formation of an African intelligentsia and capitalist class—all constituting a process which is by no means complete—have undergone acceleration, particularly since the end of the Second World War. Old forms of society are collapsing and new class forces are being thrown up, forcibly and ruthlessly. And as they emerge from the crucible of colonialism they press ever more persistently against the barriers which would hold them back.

The interests of colonialism have hindered and delayed the economic development of the African territories, prevented their industrialisation, ruined their agriculture, and left them with a distorted economy. Thus all national development has been throttled and the whole people, including often the chiefs, have been hurled into the struggle for national liberation as the essential pre-condition for the advancement of their own class and sectional interests, as well as for the common patriotic interests of them all.

African Workers—the Pace Setters

The working class is still a relatively small minority of the African population, constituting some 12 million to 14 million out of a total population of more than 200 million. Moreover, it is a young class, most workers being of the first generation. But it is a growing force and it has grown, particularly during the last two decades. Most of it, it is true, is migrant labour, but labour migration has a two-fold effect. While, on the one hand, it has delayed the emergence of a large, permanent, stabilised modern proletariat—and this has meant a weakening of the working-class movement—on the other hand it has resulted in the majority of African males, in most of

Africa, having experience of wage labour at some stage or other in their lives. In the mines, on plantations, in railways, in factories and on construction sites, they have met migrants from other African territories. They have exchanged experiences, found that they suffer the same common exploitation at the hands of the same masters, and that they have the same aspirations. This has helped to develop a feeling of all-African solidarity which is such a powerful force in present-day African politics.

In many cases the workers have joined trade unions, taken part in strikes, become members of political parties, marched in political demonstrations and voted in elections. Thus, in the busy market-of-ideas in the urban centres they have become new men, with enlarged horizons and an awareness of class interests and class solidarity, and a new national consciousness. On return to the villages they have taken with them their new-found knowledge and experience. The migrant worker is also a migrant peasant, and the African worker-peasant, with knowledge of both worlds, is able to bring to the countryside the spirit and political consciousness that has grown in the towns.

Labour migration exists on such a large scale that millions are involved in this cycle of movement, which brings with it a heightening of political consciousness. Thus the very migrant-labour system, the curse of Africa, becomes the basis for an alliance between workers and peasants, the essential foundation for a powerful national liberation movement.

To maintain their rule over the African workers and to continue their system of exploitation, the imperialists established autocratic rule, introduced pass laws, enacted anti-strike legislation, clamped down a system of racial discrimination which eats into every political, social and economic aspect of the people's lives, and, even when compelled to make some small concessions in the franchise, hedged them around with so many educational and property qualifications as to exclude practically the whole of the working class. The restrictions on the normal functioning of trade unions, which exist in almost all territories in Africa, and the lack of political rights, have

¹ This article is based on the last chapter of the author's recently published book, *Africa—The Roots of Revolt* (Lawrence & Wishart, 21s.).

only served to make the African workers understand more clearly the connection between politics and their own miserable conditions of life and labour. Twentieth-century Africa, especially in the 1950's and 1960's, is very much a political Africa.

The conditions under which they live act as a most rapid educator of the African workers. Every day of their lives the African workers come up against the realities of European exploitation. Ironically enough, the very absence of large African companies—a natural consequence of colonial oppression—turns the African workers in an anti-imperialist direction. It is the European government officials and advisers who back up the employers against the workers and their unions. When the workers go on strike against their shameful conditions, it is European-run newspapers which distort their case and European-led police and troops who fire on the strikers, and arrest their leaders. European warders control the prisons, and if the arrested worker is lucky enough to come up for trial, it is a European judge who passes sentence. All the laws which render the Africans impoverished and deny them justice and human dignity, are the laws of the white man's government. Thus the politics of national independence are driven into the heads of the African workers by their everyday experiences. They cannot avoid it. Starvation wages, national humiliation, batons, bullets, prison—this is commonplace experience for so many workers that inevitably they soon come to realise that no fundamental change in their lives, no social and economic advance, is possible without *political* change, and that the essence of this political change must be national freedom and the ending of the rule of the white overlords.

In Africa, where so many have gone to work at some time or other, and where frontiers are crossed so often by workers seeking employment, the migrant-labour system has become a yeast fermenting not only dissatisfaction but an ever-wider and deepening understanding. The knowledge, the experience, the bitterness and the determination spreads. Unity grows apace, and out of this growing anger, this shared bitter discontent, arises a solidarity of a new kind—a class solidarity intertwined with a strong feeling of common national bonds.

The experience of the African working class, the growth of their understanding and of their organisations, and the great struggles they have waged have, in a very real sense, been the forerunners of the present national movements which are sweeping the continent.

The struggles that have shaken Africa in the past decade—and that will shake her even more in the next ten years—are not purely proletarian struggles, important as may be the participation of the workers in them. They are *national* movements, movements in which whole peoples are involved and in which the aim is not the particular interests of one class or section but the common aspiration of all to end imperialist rule, destroy the colonial system, and open up the way to the *national development of each territory*.

African Bourgeoisie

An important role in these movements is being played by the African bourgeoisie. It is, of course, true that the national bourgeoisie is still not a powerful force. Its main spheres are agriculture, trading and commerce, and to some extent transport; but as an industrial and manufacturing bourgeoisie it is naturally in an embryonic stage, for industrial development in Africa is everywhere held back by imperialism, and even where it does take place, it is almost completely in the hands of European monopolies.

The small, yet growing, African capitalist class cannot but find itself constantly at loggerheads with the colonial system. As a capitalist class it is naturally concerned with profits. To make profits, it needs control of its own domestic market, and it needs, too, a considerable expansion of that market. No less, it requires to build up its own industry in order to make the goods to supply to that market. But everywhere the African bourgeoisie turns, it finds the imperialists holding the controls in their hands, dominating the market, owning the raw materials of which they rob the country, and shipping in the manufactured goods with which they flood and monopolise the local market. Even where Africans own the raw materials, such as cash crops (only rarely do they own minerals), they find themselves at a great disadvantage, for the imperialist monopolies, which control the world markets, compel the African growers to sell their crops at a low price but to pay highly for the manufactured goods which they need to purchase.

But it is not only through their control of trade within the African territories that the imperialists restrict the growth of African capitalism. By their domination of world markets they are able to manipulate prices in a way which reacts most unfavourably on the African territories. Forced to "sell cheap and buy dear", African territories are robbed of millions of pounds a year through this unequal exchange. This open theft—referred to euphemistically as "unfavourable terms of trade"—enables super-profits to be made by Wes-

tern monopolies, and is a root cause of African poverty. And the very poverty of the African people becomes a further preoccupation of the African bourgeoisie, for the abysmally low purchasing power restricts severely the market which African producers wish to expand.

Just as African producer and trader comes up against the imperialist monopolies and the colonial system within the sphere of trade, so too, in the sphere of production, especially industrial production, there is the same conflict.

Thus the colonial system weighs heavily on the African capitalists who are constantly impelled to raise the banner of national independence in order to further their own class aims and develop the national economy.

However, although cribbed, cabined and confined by the colonial system, the African capitalist class has nevertheless become stronger, especially in the post-war period. In Nigeria, for example, in addition to farming, trade, banking and commerce, a considerable share of road transport is in the hands of African entrepreneurs, albeit small-scale. (This, incidentally, is also true of Ghana.)

The growth of the African bourgeoisie is also particularly marked in Ghana, of course, and in certain regions of French West Africa, notably the Ivory Coast. It is noticeable, too, in Uganda, and to a somewhat lesser degree, in Kenya and Tanganyika, where one should not ignore the effect of land-consolidation schemes in these territories which have made possible the emergence of a stratum of African freehold farmers growing coffee and other cash crops. In the Belgian Congo, the Union of South Africa, and in the Central African Federation, it has been extremely difficult for an African capitalist class to appear. Yet even here African enterprises have emerged, despite political and legal limitations.

Generally speaking, however, the African bourgeoisie is a weak force *vis-à-vis* imperialism, especially in east, central and southern Africa.

But, despite its weakness, it is a force which has entered the political arena and which has begun to play an important part in the national movement. In fact, in most territories it is taking a leading role and exercises a political influence far in excess of its numerical or economic strength. Even in those territories where the African bourgeoisie is weakest, and where the movements tend to be led by doctors, teachers or lawyers, these professional and petty-bourgeois sections often reflect much more the outlook and class aspirations of a would-be national bourgeoisie than they do that of the workers and

peasants who constitute the majority and the main force of the national movement.

This influence of the national bourgeoisie over the whole movement, including, to a considerable degree, over the working class and trade unions, arises partly from the fact that the imperialist rulers give a certain encouragement to this class, in the hope that it will be more ready to compromise, and partly owing to the stage reached by the African working-class movement, which, in most territories, has not yet been able to develop its own political party nor to create, on a wide scale, a clear-cut, defined and mature class outlook, as distinct from a purely anti-colonial one.

African Intelligentsia

The post-war period has also seen an increase in the number of African intellectuals. The African people have made heroic efforts to secure education for themselves, even on occasions setting up their own schools to make up for the appalling deficiencies in official education for Africans. Many an African mother has slaved from morn to night doing domestic work, taking in laundry, making some native brew on the side, all to earn money to give her son an education. Something of the heartbreaking sacrifices which this entails have been described with great vividness and poignancy by Ezekiel Mphahlele in his *Down Second Avenue*. Dr. Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah worked as dish-washers in the United States in order to complete their education. Dr. Hastings Banda walked hundreds of miles, as a young man, from his native Nyasaland, to seek education in the Union of South Africa and later to complete it overseas. Many a national leader in Africa can tell similar stories.

Cultural organisations have come into existence and national newspapers been established in the past twenty years. Some institutions for higher education have been set up in a number of African territories, and this too has resulted in an increase in the number of African intellectuals—although as far as the British, or former British possessions are concerned, it is noticeable that it is in Ghana and Nigeria, where more control over such matters has passed to the African people themselves, that the most progress has been recorded.

Of course, the imperialists, in their hope of encouraging a section of educated, "responsible" Africans who would act as political allies, have unavoidably played a certain role in the establishment of higher education. But it has been for a handful only—and its aim has been to turn out an African photograph of a European original,

rather than to assist the cultural progress of the African people themselves.

But as against this tendency, there is also the gradual identification of the African intellectual (especially in those territories in southern, eastern and central Africa where white settler domination and extreme racial discrimination exists) with the African masses and with the struggle for national independence and advancement.

For colonialism in its own way presses just as heavily on the African intellectual as it does on the worker, the peasant and the African farmer and capitalist.

The humiliations, insults and indignities suffered daily by African intellectuals cannot but play their part in impelling them towards involvement in the struggles of the whole people. When white doctors from Southern Rhodesia came to work in Nyasaland, following on Federation, they insisted on African doctors no longer being permitted to wear white medical coats, as they had done previously. Frequently, the trained African, with many years' experience behind him, sees a raw, white recruit step ahead of him—at several times the rate of pay. The struggle for the Africanisation of government departments in Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan—and soon to open out in other territories—is one long story of stubborn resistance by entrenched interests against ending a situation of white privilege based on no other consideration than those of racial discrimination.

It is the two-fold nature of the pressures on African intellectuals—to have privileges over the rest of his people, yet be subordinated to the European rulers—that explains the hesitations, indecisions, or sudden shifts of position from one extreme to another which so often characterise their role in the national movement. Yet their influence is a very important one, and there is not a single national political party of the African people, in any of the territories, in which intellectuals will not be found playing a significant and often leading role.

One has only to enumerate some of Africa's most prominent national figures—Dr. Nkrumah, Dr. Azikiwe, Dr. Banda, Dr. Chirwa, the late Dr. Moumie, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenneth Kaunda, and so on—to see how important is this participation.

The Peasantry

What of the rural African, the destitute land-hungry peasant, and the cash-cropping farmer? For these constitute the majority of the African people. Seventy-five years of imperialism have

dealt them devastating blows. The robbery of land, sometimes of most of the land (as in the Union of South Africa or in Southern Rhodesia), and always of the best land (the Kenya White Highlands symbolising this land-grabbing), has been accompanied, especially in East, Central and Southern Africa, by the herding of the Africans into the worst lands, frequently swamp lands, or just as often waterless, certainly with poor soils, and always away from the line of rail or the main roads.

Thus, in much of the continent the African people have been pushed into land which, even with enormous capital resources and the utmost use of modern machinery and technique, would require a prodigious effort to make fertile. Without such resources, and with the added burden of discriminatory price and credit policies and frequent restrictions as to which crops he may grow, the African peasant sinks deeper and deeper into the mire.

Compelled by absolute poverty as well as the necessity to obtain cash to pay the poll tax (obligatory on all adult males) and to buy clothing and other essentials, including simple farm implements, the African male is compelled to leave his land periodically in order to **take up** wage labour in European mines, plantations, or urban enterprises.

As a consequence, the villages and Reserves are largely populated by women, children and old men. Traditional African agriculture involves much heavy work, including the climbing of trees to lop off branches for burning to make ash for seed beds, the construction of fences to keep out animals, and so on. Women, children and old men are unable to cope with this work. Thus, the decline of African agriculture becomes a catastrophe.

How near the edge of catastrophe African agriculture has been forced by the land robberies and the devastating blows of the migrant-labour system which, like a giant grab, constantly dips, scoops and denudes whole villages of their manpower, is strikingly indicated by a United Nations Report in 1953,² which says:

“ . . . where migrant labour has been drawn from the indigenous agricultural economies in high proportions, this has often had a deleterious effect on output and on farming practices, giving rise to a vicious circle in which the outflow of labour reduced productivity, and falling productivity increases still further the pressure on workers to seek wage employment.”

² *Aspects of Economic Development in Africa*, March 20, 1953, p. 67. U.N. Document E/2377.

Much of the African countryside lies in ruins. Soil erosion spreads like a foul disease, and on his dwindling lands the African peasant sinks deeper and deeper into poverty. His very poverty becomes an additional barrier to economic development, preventing him buying implements or seeds to improve his farming, denying him the possibilities of fertilisers or irrigation projects, and periodically compelling him to abandon his poor fields to seek wage labour.

The widespread agrarian crisis in Africa, which is a natural consequence of colonial rule, has been to some extent concealed by the migrant-labour system, just as emigration over the years successfully masked the agrarian crisis in Eire.

One result of this is that the African peasantry has not yet taken part in the national movement as a separate, conscious and organised political force. No large-scale, sustained peasant revolts have taken place in Africa as they did, for instance, between the two world wars, in China, Burma, the Philippines, Indo-China and Indonesia, although there have been, in the last thirty years, a number of local, sporadic outbursts in Africa, often against taxation or land seizures by European settlers.

The African peasant has, in the main, done his fighting against imperialism in the towns, as a migrant worker.

Thus it is that the names associated with the history of Africa's anti-colonial struggles are mainly those of urban or mining centres—Accra, Lagos, Enugu, Jos, Johannesburg, Mombasa, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salam, Tanga, Wankie, the Copper Belt, Douala, Dakar, Conakry, Leopoldville, Freetown, and Bathurst. Only more recently, as in Kenya after the 1952 emergency, in Algeria and the French Comeroons (now the Cameroun Republic) in the past few years, and in Sekhukhuland, Zeerust and Pondoland, in the Union of South Africa, has the rural African, *as a peasant*, begun to be drawn more directly into the anti-imperialist struggle.

Even the better-off African farmer, growing cash crops for an export market, lives in constant fear and insecurity, his life dominated by the big imperialist monopolies who determine the price they will pay him for his crops and the price he must pay for the manufactured goods he needs to purchase.

The same difficulty faces African farmers in every territory under imperialist rule. In every direction they turn they come up against the realities of white domination—their best land taken by white settlers, or given as concessions to big European monopolies, the imposition of restrictions regarding what they may grow, how

they may market their crop and the price they will get for it, denied the right to move freely throughout the land of their birth—in every way oppressed by conditions from which there is no escape while imperialism continues its rule.

The Chiefs

There is an assumption among many people that all African chiefs are on the side of reaction, that they represent the forces of feudalism and tribalism and are therefore hostile to the struggle for African independence. Many chiefs do, of course, play such a role, not only relatively powerful ones in West African territories, but even lesser chiefs who are often mere government appointees. But to dismiss all African chiefs as reactionaries would be a distortion of fact.

From the very start of Africa's resistance to European imperialism there have been kings and chiefs who led their people in opposition to foreign rule. Yet it was not merely in the first stage of resistance to imperial conquest that many chiefs played a progressive role. Throughout the twentieth century there have been examples of chiefs siding with their people against particular exactions or acts of repression by the authorities, especially in defence of land or in opposition to taxes, as, for example, Chief Bambata's anti-tax rebellion in Natal in 1906, when the Government forces massacred four thousand Africans, including Chief Bambata. Seven years later the African National Congress was born at Bloemfontein, and among its first supporters were a number of chiefs.

Notwithstanding these examples, it can be said, broadly speaking, that for the first half of this century imperialism was able to make use of the institution of chiefs for its own ends. The introduction of indirect rule, combined with the deposition of unwilling chiefs, and backed by imperialist arms, proved sufficient in this period to preserve the colonial system.

In the last decade, however, as the movement for national independence has grown stronger, and as the issues around which this struggle is being fought have pressed sharper and sharper, so have the chiefs found themselves, in a number of cases, placed in an acute dilemma.

In many territories the use of chiefs, converted into paid Civil Servants to act as imperial puppets who would hold the African people in check, is no longer possible to the extent that it was in the past.

The dilemma of the chiefs today, and the attitude taken by many of them in Nyasaland towards the national struggle of their people is well expressed in a letter in which Chief

M'Mbelwa explained to Kanyama Chiume his opposition to Federation:

"I am a Paramount Chief of 190,000 people, and how foolish I would be to support the Government and be pleased to see my people being terrorised with guns and shot! *Can I be a Paramount Chief of dead bodies?*" [Own italics—J.W.] (Sangor, Clyde: *Central African Emergency*, London, 1960. p. 9.)

In many other territories the same trend is to be noticed of chiefs turning away from the imperialist governments; while those who remain "loyal" to their white rulers become so discredited that their utility and effectiveness is extremely limited.

As long as the struggle was at a more elementary stage, when the issues were not so sharp and clear nor the whole people yet drawn into battle, the system of indirect rule or native administration as a prop of imperialism was workable. But the strains and stresses have become too great. Now in this territory, now in that, the chiefs face the parting of the ways: To ally themselves with the new upsurge, or to remain with the sinking ship of colonialism? There is no third path.

Speaking historically, and looking at the entire period of imperialist rule in Africa up to the present great revolt against colonialism, it is clear that the use of chiefs as a mainstay of Western rule in Africa is dying. Some, of course, will remain with their colonial masters to the bitter end. Some, too, will try and evade the responsibility of choice even at this late hour. Some will resist authority—and be deposed. Others will attempt to hold back progress—and find their powers drastically curtailed by the forces of African independence, as in Guinea and Ghana. But in no territory, no matter what attitude they adopt, can the chiefs any longer be regarded as safe or reliable subalterns of imperialism. For them, too, the old world is dying.

The African People are Standing Up

Thus, Africans, as a whole, have reached the point of no return. The old life has been destroyed—and there can be no going back. Africa has been drawn inexorably into the money economy by the forcible actions of imperialism. The destruction of old classes and the formation of new ones is going ahead.

The system of imperialist exploitation and colonialism has brought the African people to the edge of the abyss. It has produced a discontented proletariat, a ruined peasantry, a cramped bourgeoisie and a thwarted intelligentsia.

It has become impossible for the majority of Africans to find a haven and security on the land. Nor can they find security in wage labour in the mines, plantations and urban areas.

The African intelligentsia and the emergent capitalist, too, find at every turn that their aspirations and advancement are checked. For them, too, colonialism offers little hope.

This shared conviction of all progressive classes in African society, the recognition that only through their joint struggle can they succeed in defeating their common enemy, engenders national feeling and speeds up the national consolidation of the peoples. Tribal loyalties, though still not without influence and utilised very often by imperialism for reactionary ends, are melting in the crucible of the anti-colonial struggle. The concentration of large masses of African people in towns and mining centres, the development of capitalist relations right in the heart of African society, the creation of national and class organisations which group people together independently of any parochial or tribal affiliations—all this is breaking down tribal barriers. National and class interests have now come to the fore, and nations are being formed. Class interests and aspirations have become merged with national interests, and the cry for national independence has been taken up by the whole people.

The people of Africa can no longer bear to go on living in the old way. Colonialism has squeezed them dry and life has become impossible. The daily humiliations to individual and nation alike can no longer be tolerated. Held back economically, culturally, socially and politically, each class and section is driven to the inescapable conclusion that if they are to live and grow, then colonialism must go.

But equally, the imperialist rulers can no longer rule in the old way. They twist and turn to seek a solution, the rifle in one hand and the restricted ballot paper in the other. They offer a political post under white domination or tutelage, coupled with the threat of prison. While they talk of advancing the people to independence, they lock up the people's independence fighters and strive to uncover a handful of African puppets who will help them to adorn themselves with the fig-leaf of democratic respectability.

But all this cannot stop colonialism hurtling down the road to ruin and disaster. Each fresh attack on the African people, each new wave of repression, only serves to increase the anger, the bitterness, the determination and resolve of the African people to win their freedom, now, "in our time," this year. As it feels the ground slip beneath its feet, imperialism attempts to keep

its grip by making a concession here and a concession there. But each paltry concession is taken by the African people and used as a platform for further demands, as a stepping-stone to further concessions. The imperialists hesitantly open the door an inch, hoping to keep it that way. But once ajar, the door can no longer be shut. The African stands with his powerful calloused foot firmly planted in the doorway, and at his back stands all the misery and horror of the sixty million who died or were taken in slavery, the centuries of massacres and robbery,

the whip-lash, the death camps, the finger-printed passes, the ruthless exploitation in field and mine, the starvation, disease and illiteracy, the cultural degradation and national humiliation, the attempt to crush the African personality and maintain Africa in perpetual helotage.

But twentieth-century barbarism, with all its Western refinements, cannot determine the course of history. Africa is not going back. It is going relentlessly forward. Africa, in fact, has reached the stage of revolution—of the overthrow of colonialism. The African people are standing up.