

Undercurrents to Independence:
Plantation Struggles in Kenya's Central Province 1959-60

David Hyde
University of East London [UK]¹

Abstract

The avalanche of plantation strikes which took place during early months of 1960 initiated the successive strike waves which plagued Kenya's decolonisation process. The lifting of the Emergency and the announcement of a transition period to African majority government in January 1960 was marked by a new confidence. After years of draconian discipline, estate workers embraced trade unionism and moved into their first organised struggles over wages and conditions. They were joined by unrestricted former Mau Mau detainees and the victims of land consolidation who entered the plantation work force. The arousal of high expectation fuelled the strikes that engulfed the plantation districts of Kenya's Central Province during the approach to independence. These events took place against a background of severe crisis within world coffee markets. Faced by this, European coffee growers attempted to compensate themselves by rationalising the plantation economy at the expense of their workers. This was met by fierce resistance from plantation labourers which was only eventually tamed as union leaders struggled to arrest the movement and surrender organisational autonomy to the state.

Keywords: plantation, coffee, union, state, strike, spontaneity, bureaucracy.

Correspondence Address : David Hyde, International Development Programme, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of East London, 4-6 University Way, London E16 2RD. E-mail: d.hyde@uel.ac.uk

Introduction

The spread of plantation unionism during the Kenya's approach to independence [1963] was propelled forward by the generalised upsurge and recovery of the colony's trade unions from the repressive conditions of the Emergency which was lifted in January, 1960. However, the emergence of trade unionism within the coffee plantation districts of Central province was also fundamentally rooted in the global crisis of the coffee commodity and its impact on the fortunes of Kenya's principal industry.

Following the 1930s depression, the recovery of Kenya's coffee production was lifted by wartime price supports until international commodity prices rose in the late forties. The demand for coffee kept well ahead of supply and led to peak prices in 1955. Thereafter, the sellers market came to an abrupt end and the ensuing period became one of deepening financial crisis for most coffee producing countries, who nonetheless continued to increase their production bringing on a glut in world markets.² This unleashed internecine struggles amongst coffee producing states for larger slices of a contracting market. The gargantuan stockpiles of Brazil and Columbia in particular, overshadowed the stability of world markets. The prospect of an economic catastrophe, following the release these surplus stocks, increasingly preoccupied Kenya's colonial government which was dependent on tax revenues derived from the coffee industry. Nonetheless, the increased costs incurred by the Mau Mau Emergency made

the government less able to support the industry. This left the settlers exposed when coffee prices fell from the mid-fifties, with many barely able to recover their costs of production. From then on, the colonial government, in a bid to save its tax base, was compelled to promote the African peasant producer, who had the potential to cultivate Kenya's reputedly high quality coffee much more cheaply. However, the subsequent restructuring, facilitated by the Swynnerton Plan, risked unwelcome and untoward changes as European growers and plantation companies, in a desperate bid to keep their heads above water, were pressured into passing their crisis onto the African workforce.

For producers of high-quality *arabicas*³ such as Kenya, maintaining and improving their quality became a particularly important, though difficult task under adverse conditions of falling prices when competition was at its fiercest. There were several reasons for the drop in quality. Alongside the increased incidence of leaf rust and coffee berry disease, coffee growers had suffered bad weather for several seasons and there was a marked tendency amongst growers to allow their trees to overbear.⁴ Then there was also a widespread incidence of hard pressed casual field workers picking unripe green cherry to make up a *debe*⁵, thus undermining the crops reputed quality. This was in response to low picking rates and rationalised working practices brought on by the productivity drive on Kenya's coffee plantations.⁶ These issues were compounded by the persistent problems that had arisen during the Emergency relating to the increased employment of female and child labour which was extended to fill the huge gap in the workforce left by the mass detention and restrictions placed upon the employment of Kikuyu males, amongst whom were a substantial cadre of experienced plantation workers. This had left a skills deficit as they were withdrawn from the labour market.

The government's attempt to harness the productive energies of African farmers, intensified the economic pressures on European coffee planters who then lobbied for the lifting of outstanding Emergency restrictions on the employment of former detainees which had prevented them from entering plantation employment. The demand for Kikuyu labour power was largely determined by a pressing need to tap their rich experience of coffee growing and plantation work. This was an abrupt departure from previous settler demands on the government to remove 'Mau Mau' from the coffee estates. This about turn was brought on as the employers, compressed in a vice like grip between overseas and domestic competitors, struggled to sustain the reputed high quality of Kenya's coffee. However, their attempt to put higher quality labour power in place was coupled with a generalised productivity offensive to achieve lower production costs. This involved a drive to increase the rate of exploitation by lengthening and intensifying the working day with no proportionate increase in wages. This course provoked an avalanche of plantation strikes fuelled by the unrestricted entry of thousands of erstwhile Mau Mau detainees onto the labour market in Central province, the site of the colony's coffee plantation districts.

Overall, the globally induced crisis of the coffee commodity coalesced with the lifting of employment restrictions on former Mau Mau detainees, many also victims of land consolidation, a process which proceeded apace as the Emergency period drew to a close. As thousands of unrestricted landless Kikuyu poured onto the labour market and into plantation work⁷, the employers and the Labour Department were confronted with wage dependent labourers with little or no subsidy from the 'native land unit'. These workers tended to regroup and reorganise themselves, a process which stirred the resurgence of the labour movement⁸, which spread onto the plantations. Changes in the organisation and regulation of the commodity chain, which were globally driven, were decisive in reconfiguring the economic and social relationships in which an organised working class emerged throughout the plantation economy. Overall, the transition to independence was characterised by successive and widespread strike waves which presented the outlines of a developing working class movement which was subsequently straitjacketed by a panoply of repressive labour laws, a move initiated by Tom Mboya, Kenya's foremost labour leader.⁹

Origins of the Plantation Unions

Towards the end of the Emergency representatives and spokesman for agricultural employers were anticipating an upsurge as they witnessed the recovery of Kenya's trade unions from years of repression evidenced by the dramatic and escalating number of working days lost to strikes after 1957. There was evident dismay amongst those who had actively lobbied for the lifting of restrictions on former detainees, expecting recent experience to have cowed the latter into submission. At a meeting of the Coffee Board of Kenya [C.B.K.] in March 1958, some delegates argued that if employers should organise themselves ahead of the workers, 'they would only invite and speed-up workers organisations'. The majority however, 'emphasised urgency' and were 'completely in favour' of establishing a standing committee concerned with industrial relations to confront their new adversary, and 'that this act by the Coffee Industry would give a lead to other agricultural employers to do the same sort of thing.'¹⁰ This resolve was strongly underlined by the President of the Kenya National Farmers Union who warned farmers in August 1958 that "growth of African trade unions in farms is a greater challenge than anything we have met in this country before". Appealing to farmers everywhere to close ranks, he exhorted that the "threat to you of agricultural trade unionism is greater than that of drought, disease or flood", and warned his audience that "we must therefore have a weapon to meet this challenge of trade unionism on the farms. The K.N.F.U. is the farmers only weapon to meet this challenge. Union must be met with union ...".¹¹

Whilst the Labour Department shared these anxieties, it embraced the inevitability of agricultural trade unionism. The key issue for the department was managing grievances by transforming them into

negotiable issues. To this end, it attempted to steer restive plantation labourers into an architecture of wage fixing and industrial relations already established elsewhere¹² during the Emergency under conditions where the trade union movement had been severely weakened with many militants and officials locked up in detention.¹³ The Labour Department now faced the more formidable task of putting this apparatus of formal bargaining machinery into place in the face of an expectant upsurge, under conditions where erstwhile restrictions had been lifted. Otherwise, it courted the risk of independent workplace organisation emerging, beyond the reach and beneath the vision of the state, with its roots in migrant labour and community networks that had been politicised by Mau Mau. How could labour officers manage the conflicts to come where no organisation was visible and where no obvious leadership could be identified?

The collusion between the employers and the Labour Department in founding rural trade unions¹⁴ was also bound to political concerns. There was a concerted effort to insulate workers from political organisation by reducing their horizons to the sphere of 'industrial relations'. As plantation workers began to organise themselves against the employers productivity drives and to advance their own demands for improved wages and conditions, they also became politicised by the moves towards independence. Furthermore, the reintegration of large numbers of Mau Mau detainees into the workforce¹⁵ stood to heavily influence the political direction that plantation labourers would take. This proletarianisation was brought on by the land consolidation of the previous decade which left thousands of Kikuyu landless and available for work.¹⁶

Prompted by the Labour Department, the move to form plantation unions seems to have been the outcome of exchanges within the Federation of Kenya Employers [F.K.E.] Rural Employers Committee with some involvement from the Kenya Federation of Labour [K.F.L]. Whilst these employers were often at odds with each other in their scramble for labour power from the reserves, they came together to arrest the spread of agricultural trade unionism by establishing 'unions' under their wing from the start. A decision was reached to form individual plantation unions for the tea, coffee and sisal sectors. Three organising secretaries were appointed and financed by the International Federation of Plantation and Agricultural Workers and a British T.U.C. official, David Barrett, was seconded to assist the fledglings.¹⁷ The three plantation unions emerged almost simultaneously, all with identical constitutions. The K.F.L. was closely involved from the outset and assigned Jesse Gachago¹⁸ as its plantation organiser to shepherd them. The headquarters of the newly formed coffee and sisal unions was established in Thika township where they shared the same office. Thika was already developing into a locus of union power where branches representing workers in transport, distribution, retail, construction, tailoring and textile industries had recently established themselves and formed a trades council to coordinate their activities.¹⁹ As the plantation unions emerged, the district's Labour Officer John Watts, in a tone of

resignation, reported that 'employees in these industries will give considerable support to the unions, and it is apparent that the Kikuyu is becoming increasingly conscious of the power that might be exercised through organised labour movements.'²⁰

The earliest battles of the plantation unions were fought over the right to organise and freedom of assembly. They ran up against considerable obstacles 'as the administration were not prepared to give permission to hold open air meetings'²¹ and there were no halls large enough for an indoor convention. This was affirmed in the K.F.L.'s request for the use of Thika Football Stadium for a mass meeting which was met with a 'blunt refusal' from Thika Urban District Council, which discounted trade unionism in declaring the stadium's use for solely African 'welfare purposes'.²² The District Commissioner, fearing that an uninvited audience would show itself, refused to grant the unions' a licence for an 'open air'²³ convention anywhere else in the area. Jesse Gachago anticipated a gathering of about 5,000 workers, of what was to be the inaugural meeting of the coffee and sisal unions, but no hall in the township could possibly accommodate such a number. The gathering was eventually held at Kenya Cannery Hall, on November 22nd 1959. By restricting the unions to an enclosed venue, the intention was to reduce the size of the audience and the impact of trade unionism, so that what was to have been a mass meeting became a much smaller affair with 'about' 400 persons inside the hall and 'approximately' 290 persons outside.²⁴

During the course of the meeting the aims of the organisations relating to wages, pensions and improved working conditions were explained and there were appeals to the assembled workers to join up. Union constitutions were also read out. The speakers were Barrett, Gachago and the newly founded Coffee Plantation Workers Union [C.P.W.U.] general secretary Godwin Wachira. Barrett drew attention to the growth of the plantation unions in Tanganyika which had emerged 'in a very short time' and enrolled 60,000 workers, and that similar developments were expected in Kenya. Barrett also referred to the Kericho Valley where despite stiff opposition from the tea plantation companies, 'most of the workers' were willing to join the union. Gachago 'asked the audience if they had understood and if they agreed to join the unions - they all replied that they were willing to join the unions', and then appealed to everyone 'to recruit as many members as they could.' Entrance to the Union was set at 5/- a head and monthly subs were fixed at 1/-. The plantation unions were shortly registered under the Trade Union Ordinance.²⁵

The C.B.K. believed it 'hardly a coincidence' that 'within a matter of days' of the C.P.W.U. opening its offices in Thika 'the labour on several estates came out on strike although the union officer denied that any strike had been called'. The C.B.K. referred disparagingly to 'the present level of education of many coffee labourers' to whom 'union membership and strike action are synonymous terms.'²⁶ This was entirely true, though what the inverted logic of the employers presented as backward represented a leap

forward. However, whilst workers claimed the union as their own, there was as yet little consciousness of its designated role as a responsible managing agent of discontent, since once they enrolled, the union apparatus worked overtime to arrest the spontaneity of the movement entering its ranks.

A Qualitative Leap Forward

The Labour Department thought that 1960 'was remarkable for its unprecedented number of trade disputes'.²⁷ More than half of all strikes occurred in agricultural undertakings, mostly on coffee estates in Central Province. These were initially, 'almost exclusively'²⁸ in Thika district where the months from January to April were the peak period of strike action. During this time, the district was the site of 42 strikes involving 12,239 workers, as a result of which some 1,038,245 hours were lost.²⁹ Whereas in 1959, just eight strikes had occurred in the district with the loss of 12,401 man hours, the initial eight disputes alone of 1960 incurred a loss of 48,847 hours. Notably, there were two major industrial strikes during the course of the year at Kenya Cannery and E.A. Bag and Cordage, both processing factories situated in the heart of plantation country. Those estates which had parallel coffee and sisal plantations were the most prone to concomitant strike action.

The Labour Department believed that such a 'terrific spate of strikes' was due 'partly to the advent' of trade unionism, 'which served to give rise to a new spirit of militancy among workers.'³⁰ In Thika, the Labour Office reported employers 'grave concern' at the way plantation unions were developing in the district, and were convinced that 'they are more political than anything else.'³¹ The combativity of workers was awakened everywhere as the last repressive constraints of the Emergency were lifted. This new mood was infused with political immediacy by the British Government's declaration of intent to hand over power to an African majority administration. The arousal of expectations of land and jobs to follow had an inestimable impact.³² Taking stock of the upsurge, the Governor of Kenya, Sir Patrick Renison, was in 'little doubt that political fever sweeping the country throughout the year had a deleterious effect on farm labour'.³³ Towards the middle of the year, the general state of labour unrest on coffee estates 'had assumed serious proportions', evidenced by widespread go-slows and wild cat strikes which posed a direct threat to the coffee harvest.³⁴

These disputes contained powerful strains of retribution directed at nyaparas³⁵, 'usually a long service headman with loyal emergency record'³⁶, and demands for their dismissal came to the fore in more than half the plantation strikes that occurred. The increasingly harsh nature of supervision compounded the depth of grievance against such individuals.³⁷ This was of course bound up with the increased rates of productivity that coffee planters were attempting to impose in order to compete with African smallholders and their overseas rivals in a declining world market. Typically, where labour officers were able to ascertain grievances, wage claims and demands for the reduction of tasks and hours

were advanced alongside this challenge to supervision. Calls for the removal of nyaparas were, in some instances, also bound to challenges for some control over the labour process itself, with workers on several estates insisting on setting tasks themselves independently of the management. Many strikes were also provoked by victimisations and advanced demands for the reinstatement of sacked activists.³⁸ Overall, the Labour Commissioner, W.R.C. Keeler, and his deputy, Ian Husband, were deeply concerned by the difficulties faced by field officers in determining particular causes and grievances. They were uneasy at the evident determination of the many strikers to risk their jobs in a struggle for union rights, and acutely aware of the political context of the disputes and their spreading potential during a volatile period of decolonisation.³⁹

Silhouettes of the Strike Movement

Of the many strikes that occurred, the significance of the dispute at Shortlands estate in Thika district, which began on January 2nd 1960, when eighty-four Kikuyu labourers came out on strike, was widely recognised. The strikers included 49 men and 36 women, were mostly members of the C.P.W.U. They later complained that the headman had refused to issue their rations and warned them against the union and because 'it was the same thing as joining Mau Mau'⁴⁰. The local chief, Pithon Macharia, made his way to the estate and 'started interrogating the workers one by one', questioning them about their union membership. He then ordered them back to work and 'installed a guard of Tribal Police as riot squad around the workers housing' on the estate, a move which drew the union's protest to the District Commissioner at the interference 'with workers affairs by your chief'.⁴¹

When the manager rejected Gachago's assistance to resolve the dispute, on the grounds that the union was not recognised by the coffee industry, the strikers stood firm and insisted that they would only go back after the manager had met with Gachago to investigate their grievances. John Watts, the district officer then intervened in an attempt to bypass the union by supervising the election of workers representatives for a meeting with the manager and Colonel C.V. Merritt, chairman of the C.B.K.'s labour committee. When the district's labour inspector arrived for the meeting⁴², he found Gachago 'delivering two bags of posho, one bag of potatoes, and a debe of cooking oil' to the strikers. Seeing his car in the labour lines, the estate owner went after Gachago and reproached him for venturing onto the estate 'without permission....'⁴³. Merritt later insisted that he would not invite Gachago to 'any discussions' until the union had been officially recognised.⁴⁴ As both sides locked horns, the manager issued a return or be sacked ultimatum, but the strikers were in no mood to back down. Gachago's ambition to broker the dispute remained as undented as Watts' desire to exercise mediation as he persuaded Colonel Merritt to meet them at Thika's Labour Office.⁴⁵

This was the union's first formal contact with an employers' representative, and the 'informal discussions'⁴⁶ which followed almost certainly influenced Thika's planters as their representatives arranged to convene 'as result of the considerable increase in trade union activity in this district of late...'⁴⁷ On January 13th, the Thika Area Labour Committee went into session with the Shortlands strike and the issue of union recognition dominating the agenda. The delegates from Makuyu, Mitubiri, Donyo Sabuk, Ruiru and Kiambu together with officers from the Labour Department were preoccupied by 'the situation brought about by the development of this union.' The C.P.W.U. was believed to be taking up a 'large number' of grievances and to have a membership of around 1,700.⁴⁸ Merritt reminded the assembled that only 30% of planters in the district had fully implemented the C.B.K.'s proposals for wages and conditions of employment published in July 1959, a situation which he believed was fuelling the growth of the union. The meeting backed the Shortlands refusal to negotiate with the C.P.W.U. until it was recognised, urged that strikers 'could not be allowed to remain on the estate indefinitely', and recommended that the manager instruct them 'to report first thing Friday morning for discharge' whilst offering to take back anyone 'electing to return to work', otherwise everybody else was 'to be off the estate by Monday morning.'⁴⁹ The committee was adamant that eviction orders be served on anyone refusing to comply.

The issue of union recognition was to be postponed until the employers had recovered their strength sufficiently to dictate its terms, as there was a general consensus that to make concessions during a period of instability would pose great dangers to themselves. The meeting finally agreed to form an employers association, the Kenya Coffee Growers Association [K.C.G.A.], 'with the least possible delay'⁵⁰, which 'made rapid strides' during March-April. In response to the spread of the C.P.W.U. on the plantations, the owners flocked into the organisation. During the course of July 1960 the K.C.G.A. swelled from 170 members representing some 28,500 acres of coffee to 249 farming an acreage of 39,251 from a total of 50,700 acres under coffee plantings. While the planters were often at each others throats in a competitive sense, the role of the K.C.G.A. was to uphold and preserve their essential interests in face of both the working class on the plantations and the state when it strayed from acting in their interests. The advent of the K.C.G.A. was essentially a move to represent the interests of the planters in face of heated competition at home and from abroad, to regulate conflicts of interest between themselves, to centralise industrial relations in the industry, and to defend their position in trade disputes with their workers.

When the Shortlands manager instructed the strikers to return 'at once' or 'be discharged accordingly' not a single worker turned up, all remaining 'in their homes'. They were then ordered to 'get off '⁵¹ the estate by January 17th. In a letter to the manager, Godwin Wachira, the C.P.W.U. general secretary, 'regretted that such a thing should have happened' and pleaded for discussions 'formal or informal'

as 'a means of easing the tension'. Recognising the spreading potential of the dispute he made warned of the union's limited ability to contain the strike, that it could 'not be responsible for any necessary action deemed fit if the situation does not improve.' Apparently, workers were willing to resume their duties 'provided your headman is suspended'. In an attempt to clear a path for recognition, Wachira requested that the union officials be given 'unrestricted access into the workers homes for easy consultation.'⁵² These efforts though were to come to nothing.

All the strikers were duly signed off but 'refused to come for their pay.' As the estate management took legal action for the eviction of twelve of the eighty-four resident labourers in Thika's Resident Magistrate's Court, 'a dozen Kamba employees'⁵³ were taken on as replacements. The Tribal Police were again called to protect them and other estate workers who had refused to join the dispute, 'to prevent them being intimidated by the strikers'. Far from containing the struggle, the court action served to broaden it, as a 'crowd of people' from the estate marched through Thika township early in the morning of January 25th to their union's offices 'singing as a protest at the management's action.'⁵⁴ By this, they had taken their struggle out from the estate and into the town. The police arrived at the estate on February 6th to evict the workers but found they 'had removed themselves.'⁵⁵ The magistrate shortly gave final judgement in favour of the plaintiffs and awarded costs against the union. Still unrecognised, but with its finances threatened, the union reported an official dispute to the Labour Commissioner.

During February there was a short lived recession of the movement with fewer but more qualitative strikes. The events at Mongalia Estate reflected the social polarisation which was beginning to show itself during the strike wave. The workers at this coffee estate, mostly union members, had come out on February 1st with no initial demands though these were later advanced with the removal of a headman featuring prominently, supported by a reduction in tasks and shorter working hours. Ironically, whilst the Union was quick to deny responsibility for calling the strike it was keen to claim credit for achieving a return to work after the strikers were instructed by the employer to 'go back or be sacked.'⁵⁶ The management sought to take full advantage of the dispute to shed labour, a course rationalised by Watts to whom it was 'abundantly clear' that many estate workers were 'redundant' and that the work force could be 'considerably reduced.' However, this course was frustrated by serious fissures in the apparatus of control as eight headmen sided with the strikers, now considering 'themselves as labourers as opposed to managerial staff.' These desertions undermined the management and created much unease that divisions within authority would give more confidence to the strikers and make it more difficult to impose a programme of redundancies without escalating the conflict. Following a union instruction to their members to return, the headmen were taken back on the understanding that they were to 'reprove' themselves 'by their application and honesty to their work in the future.'⁵⁷ Like almost all other plantation disputes during this phase, union officials were able to entice inexperienced strikers

back to work empty handed on the understanding that they would sort out their grievances once recognition had been granted.

The Rise of the C.P.W.U.

During the course of February the C.P.W.U., lifted by the strike movement, was 'the most active' of the unions operating within the district. Union branch offices now existed in Thika township and Ruiru with others planned in Makuyu, Donyo Sabuk, Kiambu and Nyeri 'in the near future.' It was able to organise several public meetings during the month with recognition, strikes and victimisations featuring high on the agenda. The district labour officer was reassured after hearing Gachago and Wachira at one such gathering on February 14th, and was able to record that 'the speakers all adopted a more responsible attitude than has been recently shown at such meetings and were at pains to point out that strikes should only take place when all other constitutional means had first been tried in an attempt to obtaining a peaceful solution.' Even with its cautious posture, the union's recruitment campaign met a great response with 'considerable numbers' enrolling.

A mass meeting held at Ruiru Stadium on March 20th was attended 'by about' 3,000 workers. In a leave it to us appeal Gachago urged them to join their appropriate unions, so that better terms and conditions of employment could 'be fought for them by their union leaders'. He declared to the crowd that the C.P.W.U. now had 7,000 members, and condemned as 'purely absurd' accusations by government officials that workers' subscriptions had 'been lavishly spent by the union officials' since the organisation had been officially registered. However, the K.F.L. general secretary Tom Mboya, bowing to the Labour Department officials in attendance, lent credence to accusations of union corruption as he warned workers to ensure that they got proper receipts for their union dues, and urged collectors to work 'hard and honestly' for their fellow members. He finished by calling on workers to pay their subscriptions regularly instead of spending their money 'on buying beer'.⁵⁸

During April, Thika's labour office again reported 'a considerable amount' of trade union activity in the area, especially by the C.P.W.U.⁵⁹ A new branch was formed in Kiambu where workers came forward to join at an 'astonishing rate'. Apparently, few workers 'had any idea' of the functions of a trade union, and 'they thought' that by paying their subscriptions 'their future was assured when the day of "freedom" arrived'.⁶⁰ Other unions were also taking a hold around the district. The Domestic and Hotel Workers Union and the Tailors and Textile Workers Union were 'extremely active' in organising public meetings and recruitment. Riding the strike wave, the T.T.W.U. was able to seal a recognition agreement with East African Bag and Cordage, a major factory which drew heavily upon on the sisal industry and its many plantations in the area. Unions representing transport, timber and furniture, construction and allied trades were also active in enrolment and establishing branches during the early part of the year. The Kenya Distributive and Commercial Workers Union was also successful in sealing

recognition agreements with Kenya Cannery and the Kenya Tanning Extract Company. During May and June, the local government and civil servants unions followed suit with recruitment meetings of their own.⁶¹ Recognising the spread of trade unionism throughout the area, the K.F.L. gave approval to the formation of Thika Trades Council and assisted by drawing up its constitution.

During the course of March the strike wave reached a new peak, with twelve disputes officially reported involving 3,563 workers and a loss of 106,691 man hours. The movement had spread beyond Thika division and into Ruiru, midway between Nairobi and Thika, where most of the strikes were concentrated taking in coffee, sisal, pineapples, mixed farming and textile manufacturing. Some of these disputes were fuelled by the disappointment of 'many Kikuyu' who had been repatriated during the Emergency and were now returning to the area after "goodwill visits"⁶² to former employers in the Rift Valley who were unable or unwilling to take them back.

Relationships between workers and employers were 'deteriorating' everywhere, even on the Socfinaf plantations, reputedly the most 'enlightened' in the area, where the company had granted the union 'every facility'⁶³ to hold estate meetings. The general manager reported that on two of the company's estates union meetings had prompted 'a noticeable change in atmosphere'. Whereas before employees had 'appeared happy and cheerful, they are now disrespectful, "going slow", and demanding that they themselves should set the tasks in future.'⁶⁴ Here was a desire to control the labour process itself, a demand far ahead of the minimum programmes of trade unionism and further evidence that some sections of workers were maturing well beyond the raw spontaneity that was evident during the initial strike wave.

In April, the strike movement ascended to its highest point, surpassing the January explosion and negating entirely the February trough. Overall there were 22 reported strikes throughout the district with their epicentre again in Ruiru. In sixteen of these disputes, workers were ushered back to work by their union officials in all cases empty-handed on the pretext that their grievances would be looked into. In seven disputes, workers decided that faced with going back to work on these terms, it was not worth returning at all. However, on those estates where workers had been sacked as a result of a strike, the Labour Office reported that employers had 'found considerable difficulty in building up a new labour force', and that whilst there was 'plenty of labour in the district looking for work', some estates were blacklisted by work seekers.⁶⁵

Significantly, sympathy strikes were strongly in evidence on those plantations with concomitant sisal and coffee divisions. Sisal Ltd. Plantation in Makuyu was afflicted by a determined 43 day strike involving 1,100 workers during which over 200,000 man hours were lost, the longest running plantation strike of the period. The dispute devastated the company and reverberated throughout Kenya's plantation economy. The sisal cutters had articulated their grievances against abusive supervision and

'undertask', and advanced demands for increased wages and sick pay after striking in early March.⁶⁶ The manager promised to look into their complaints prompting a return to work but nothing more was heard from the company. Undertask was a widespread scam and chain of corruption involving all tiers of plantation management and supervision. The company had surreptitiously evolved a system whereby sisal was cut and tied into bundles of 25 leaves. Whilst workers were required to cut a 100 bundles a day, headmen commonly removed leaves from the completed bundles which disqualified workers from payment because they had 'under tasked'. Rejected bundles were then sent to the processing factory. With field workers dispossessed of their wages, the payments derived from the cumulative surplus were then distributed amongst managers, headman and field conductors. According to retired workers residing in Makuyu today⁶⁷, this system flourished at Sisal Ltd. on the 'nod and wink' from the European management. Variants of this scam were common throughout the plantation economy.

By late March, the dispute had erupted again involving the entire labour force of some 800 workers, including domestic servants. Whilst the estate management refused Jesse Gachago permission to address the strikers on the grounds that the industry had not yet recognised the Sisal Plantation Workers Union,⁶⁸ the strikers, in face of a return or be sacked ultimatum, insisted that he be granted access to the estate. By April 5th, the strike had spread to the coffee division when 300 workers came out in sympathy adding demands of their own for higher wages, but went back on April 8th on Gachago's own instructions.⁶⁹ At this point sisal workers representatives intervened independently of the K.F.L. official and presented the estate manager with an 'agreement' which dictated their conditions for a return to work. They demanded that labourers working without rations should receive 160/- a month, and those receiving posho 125/- a month. Masons, carpenters, sisal cutters, stone cutters, workshop mechanics and machinists were all to receive 310/- per month with a 10% annual increment. The agreement provided for a 45 hour week, gazetted holidays and that 'Sundays will be treated as a holiday, and will not be normally worked.' Overtime was to be paid at time and a half, and double time on gazetted holidays. Demands for leave were also forthcoming, 21 days every 12 months and 14 days sick entitlement on full pay. In contrast to past practice, workers also wanted work related injuries to be covered by the Workmen's Compensation Ordinance.⁷⁰ This was a programme of mature demands that went well beyond the singular focus on union recognition and access rights. Indeed, in virtually every dispute since January, union officials had been urging workers to accept nothing at all as a precondition for recognition. The 'Agreement', unconditional and confident in tone, took the K.F.L. by surprise and threatened to usurp its role. Like many employers in the district, the company was not ready to accept what the Labour Department knew to be urgent and essential if strike wave was to be extinguished, that unless union officials were allowed access and recognition the spontaneous upsurge would overtake any

belated mediation and present employers with maximum demands which were far beyond their means to concede.

Workers in the coffee division came out again in sympathy on April 11th, but now adopting the sisal demands as their own. The management reissued their threat but this time there was no response. The dispute, now involving 1,100 workers, entered its fourth week with no sign of resolution. The company, advised by the F.K.E., threatened to dismiss all the strikers unless they returned for work on April 25th⁷¹, but not a single body returned, 'neither have the employees reported for their discharge'. The manager then singled out forty five workers as the 'ring leaders' and prepared to evict them in the hope that 'once these people are gone, the rest will then resume work.'⁷² A magistrate's order was applied for under the Resident Labourers Ordinance for their removal from the estate. Apollo Owiti, a K.F.L. organiser assigned to the dispute, hoped to win a grace and favour type of recognition from the employer, through demonstrating that union officials were able and willing to control their members as the precondition for brokering plantation disputes. By the end of the month the strikers had returned on their union's instructions but at a price since the 'ring leaders' were to remain sacked. With their demands sacrificed on the alter of an unconditional return to work, the victimised 45 left in disgust, they 'all said they wish to be discharged.'⁷³

The dispute at Glenlee estate in Ruiru, seemed to reflect a more aggressive turn to the strike wave with both sides digging their heels in and where the margin of compromise had all but disappeared. The estate, owned by M.E.de La Hayes, was situated along Theta Road, the most concentrated coffee growing location in Ruiru. Ninety seven Kikuyu workers, all C.P.W.U. members, came out on April 7th demanding the removal of the headmen and an increase in wages. Initially the strikers refused to meet the management or return to work, 'stating that they would not consider doing so unless the three disputed headmen were removed.' The Labour Office judged 'that they had broken their contracts and were liable to dismissal' and that 'nobody could dictate to the management as to who should be engaged and discharged'. The estate manager convened the strikers and made reference to 'bad men who had taken their money and shown them stupid ways.'⁷⁴ He then read out the names of eleven workers who were to be discharged and warned that anyone who had not returned to work by the following day would also be dismissed. The strikers stood firm and insisted that if the workers were sacked they would 'all go',⁷⁵ whereupon the meeting became festive 'amidst clapping and singing'.⁷⁶ The eleven 'troublemakers'⁷⁷ were sacked without pay on April 15th with everyone standing firm.

The reputedly arrogant settler de la Hayes subsequently berated Godwin Wachira, that "labour relations were excellent before you came into the district... So much for the education of the workers." Wachira then asked Hayes if he could "address your workers and tell them to go back to work?" Hayes distrusted Wachira's co-operation, alleging that his workers wanted to go back "but they are being

intimidated and kept away from work by eleven of your members.” Wachira then disclaimed responsibility for the strikes in the district which had “not been called by the Union. These strikes are illegal.” Even though Wachira then instructed the strikers to return, Hayes threatened him that recognition would not be granted unless “you go back and clean up your own office.”⁷⁸ He later told the estate manager that Hayes “was very rude. I do not like to help employers who are rude and I cannot help employers who will not help the Union... Have I not stopped the strike on this shamba and everybody is going back to work tomorrow? Have I not told the eleven agitators to leave and they say they will leave peacefully?... I think I will go home now and leave it like this.”⁷⁹ Wachira was caught in a vice like grip with no margin of compromise, between a determined body of strikers and an intransigent employer, but one that made him no less willing to find ways of acceding his members to Hayes’s demands .

The obduracy of Hayes was not untypical of planters in the district. His anxieties were fed by misgivings about Wachira’s control over the strikers. Their disposition was unpredictable and no matter how much Wachira demonstrated accommodation, Hayes was loath to accept him as a bargaining partner. Attitudes on both sides hardened after the strikers reluctantly returned, empty handed and confused by union instructions. The labour office then reported ‘a noticeable “go-slow” ... with many of them not completing their normal tasks within a day’⁸⁰, a situation that the vindictive settler was determined to turn to his advantage by setting a task which ‘no one could do’, involving several days labour before their tickets could be marked up. This was the prelude to an attempt to evict the workforce with no backpay on the grounds that they had broken their contracts. On the morning of April 25th most workers came out on strike again, protesting ‘against this brutal treatment’⁸¹, and departed for their union’s offices in Thika, but in the absence of any direction from Wachira, ‘elected to be discharged.’⁸²

Wachira attempted a neutral ground, pleading for the Labour Commissioner’s intervention as arbiter on the grounds that ‘the two parties cannot prove who broke the contract.’ His aim was not to reinstate workers to their jobs but to plead for their backpay and unharvested crops⁸³. He was nonetheless under pressure and made a rhetorical broadside, that if Hayes did not yield ‘the Union is fully decided to take any action it deems necessary directed to this particular Estate if not all’.⁸⁴ This was a pseudo irreconcilability since Wachira had accepted the ‘accomplished fact’ of the sackings and reduced the union’s role to recovering back pay.⁸⁵ His recourse was towards ‘impartial’ state intervention in the hope that the Labour Commissioner would save him from strike action. This typically illustrated the outlook of Kenya’s union officials and the stand they would take on most issues in the period ahead.

Wachira was for dragging out this dispute, thereby awarding credence to the appearance of insoluble difficulty, a course which ultimately assisted intervention from the Labour Commissioner. He left the issue unattended for some time before contacting the K.C.G.A. in June, by which time his approach was

starkly non-partisan, believing that it would now 'be of no use for either the management or the workers to judge who was right and or wrong.' He urged both sides to 'reach agreement in good time' or seek government intervention for an 'impartial inquiry' from which a report would follow. His hopes were pinned on prospective legislation 'to remedy any faults disclosed by such inquiry.' Wachira promoted this outcome in the hope that Glenlee would become a test case and force a way for mediation of the strike wave generally and produce the outcome of union access and recognition.

The C.P.W.U. saw Glenlee as a key dispute and laid its hopes on the estate as the site of a resolution, however problematic, that could then be turned to the advantage of the would be mediators in arresting the strike wave that had engulfed them. Wachira's turn to the K.C.G.A. was in anticipation that its collective discipline would bring the recalcitrant Hayes to heel. This could create a space for union recognition and access which would facilitate collaboration with the K.C.G.A. Along this road Wachira believed that the union could prove its indispensability to the employers as both sides applied themselves 'to promote industrial harmony, efficiency and as contributors to the National Well Being'⁸⁶, but this was not to be. When the Labour Commissioner gave his judgement on the dispute in July he came down firmly on the side of Hayes, because the strikers had 'left their jobs and thereby broke their contracts.' He cleared Hayes of all legal obligations for backpay or compensation to workers for the loss of their crops.⁸⁷ This was a watershed dispute by which, in contrast to previous strikes, the Labour Department abandoned all pretence of its erstwhile distance from bad employers.

In mid April the Ruiru District Association, aroused by the 'anxiety and distress' that 'was mounting' throughout the area, met to discuss 'the prevailing situation regarding strikes, and security, in the district.' It resolved to call an emergency meeting of coffee and sisal growers 'immediately' with representatives of the local administration and the government, at which the 'anxiety be stressed to persons at the highest level of Government'. This took place at the Ruiru Club on May 2nd and its importance can be gauged by those in attendance. The Chief Secretary, the Ministers of Labour and Defence, the provincial and district commissioners, labour officers from Thika and Kiambu, and administration staff from Ruiru, Gatundu, Githunguri and Kiambu gathered to confront the rising tide of labour protest. Around sixty committee members of the district associations of Thika, Makuyu, Donyo Sabuk, Kiambu and Limuru, representing an area worth £14,000,000 in crops and livestock, told ministers and officials of their 'concern over the flood of strikes' which had overwhelmed the area. The meeting 'deliberated alot' and agreed on a round-table conference as the 'best way' to handle the crisis. Government representative agreed to issue a warning to African workers 'of the consequences' of their 'failure' to pick the coffee crop, especially the 'large amount of revenue the country would lose' which would result in less money to spend 'on education and other schemes designed to improve the African

way of life'. This was a retaliatory threat to withdraw the resources and services upon which African communities depended.

The meeting was quick to dispel any suggestion that the government should intervene in 'any other way'⁸⁸, such as the use of naked coercion to force labourers to pick coffee. A strike breaking operation, especially on the large scale organised during the 1959 rail strike⁸⁹, seemed impossible given that no European or Asian would or could do such work. After 'considerable discussion' the assembly resolved that a committee should meet the Chief Secretary to discuss 'how to deal with labour unrest which was threatening to disrupt their industries.'⁹⁰ There was extreme tension amongst employers which compelled them to close ranks and call on the state to abandon its already withering posture of neutrality. Whilst these forces were of a mind to lash out, the Government preferred mediation. Along the former path, given the generalised restiveness of workers throughout Kenya, there was a risk of provoking an escalation of the strike movement under conditions where union officials had, as yet, only a fragile control over the developing movement.

Appraising the strike movement

The Governor of Kenya, Sir Patrick Renison, told the Colonial Secretary 'that majority of strikes occurred without prior discussion or negotiation with employers and that officers of the Ministry of Labour experienced quite exceptional difficulties when attempting conciliation'.⁹¹ Eventually, the Ministry of Labour had been able to bring the K.C.G.A. and the C.P.W.U. to the negotiating table 'with promising results' in Thika where the strikes were 'almost terminated...'. Nonetheless, Renison acknowledged his unease that the future position was 'still uncertain because of underlying difficulties...'.⁹² In the absence of any rooted structures of mediation, the state stood to be overwhelmed in the face of the uncontrolled spontaneity. Overall, the government feared a faceless antagonist that was accustomed to operating beneath the vision and beyond the reach of the state, and was unwilling to be dealt with in a predictable and formal way.

Renison was vexatious about the political context surrounding the Thika strike wave, which he attributed to the 'unsettling excitement in the present political atmosphere and the unsatisfactory security position in the area, both impairing labour discipline.' His prime concern was that the 'reasons given for stoppages by strikers have not always been clear cut or sometimes even ascertainable.'⁹³ In many disputes the causes were unfathomable to labour officers, since few grievances were ever stated⁹⁴ creating intractable problems for conciliation.⁹⁵ The C.B.K. also affirmed that, to a large extent, workers 'were unwilling to put forward any reasons for their action and referred the estate management to the union representative - who had apparently called no strike'.⁹⁶ Some explanation for this was given by Central Province's Senior Labour Officer, O.J.Mason, who held that 'there was seldom evidence that the

stoppages were instigated by a union'⁹⁷, but that 'there was often cohesive organisation of the stoppages.'⁹⁸ Mason attempted to measure the temper and overall disposition of the strikers where in 'some cases workers with a long service record assumed a fatalistic "do what you like with me" attitude which again reminded people of the uneasy days of 1952...'. Significantly, many of these workers, who in some cases 'had no homes to go to'⁹⁹, were prepared to be signed off rather than give way, under circumstances of a labour surplus in Thika and other strike prone districts. The elements of this mood shed some light on the rarity with which representations were made to management before disputes occurred.

The Labour Department was caught unprepared due to the unexpectedly large number of strikes which 'put considerable strain'¹⁰⁰ on Thika's Labour Office. As the department struggled to carry out its industrial relations work, its routine inspections and field work fell by the wayside. John Watts reported April as 'a most hectic month, the telephone has hardly stopped ringing, and at times the office has resembled a railway station with numbers of people waiting to get in to see the writer.'¹⁰¹ While the department was anxious for its field officers take control of disputes to prevent them from spreading, it was hardly able to keep abreast of the movement erupting beneath it. There was a distinct pattern of delay in the notification of disputes, too late for labour officers to absorb these shocks waves under conditions where the margin of compromise was, in any case, found wanting. O.J.Mason described the mood of the strikers as 'morose, unhelpful and often insolent', a demeanour 'reminiscent of the early years of the Emergency, and they treated visiting departmental officers, both Europeans and Africans with contempt.'¹⁰² The Labour Department's overall strategy, to monitor and take control of the part in order to defuse and fragment the whole that was developing, was failing. Given these problems, forlorn attempts by the department to arrest the spontaneous movement mostly fell upon union officials who were encountering extreme difficulties of their own.

Although many employers suspected the C.P.W.U. for starting the strikes, its presence was often a help to them as, on many occasions, union officials were 'able and willing to secure a return to work by strikers'.¹⁰³ Whereas union leaders initially disclaimed responsibility for the strikes and sought to disown them, they nonetheless intervened to take control of the strike movement which promoted them as a potential layer of sub-contracted authority. Notwithstanding these efforts, the Labour Department was alarmed at the strikers growing scepticism¹⁰⁴ and impatience with union officials, given their tendency in the initial strikes to follow union instructions without question. Early on, it had generally appeared as if union officials were behind the strikes though, with few exceptions, they were unwilling passengers of the upsurge and worked to channel spontaneous energies into singular demands for recognition and access. They were concerned to establish themselves as brokers to assist in arresting the movement they had joined. The department was entirely conscious of this duality which it had worked

to implant¹⁰⁵ in Kenya's labour movement during the Emergency, and its agenda was to assist this layer to bring the strikes under control. The C.P.W.U. leaders believed they could achieve recognition by demonstrating their willingness to wind down the strike movement, through demobilising their members and thus proving their indispensability to the employers. Given the pressure they were under, they were in some instances prepared to risk a controlled mobilisation of raw recruits, unschooled in procedure and impatient for gains, to obtain recognition from the more intransigent and bigoted employers. On many occasions the intent of the Labour Department to impose the semblance of unionism led by 'class collaborators' foundered as labourers adopted these forms as their own and transformed them into instruments of struggle. The agenda for using the C.P.W.U. as a vehicle for defusing strikes was then seriously jeopardised.

That the situation was at least temporarily restored, was due in no small part to the efforts of K.F.L. officials Jesse Gachago and Apollo Owiti, along with C.P.W.U. general secretary Godwin Wachira. While Gachago was away on K.F.L. business in Casablanca, Owiti was delegated by the K.F.L. to take his place as its plantation organiser, and became 'instrumental in obtaining a resumption of work' on many estates. John Watts believed the ebb tide of the strike movement was 'mainly due to the efforts' of Owiti who apparently 'showed considerable concern over what he described as irresponsible striking in the district and immediately embarked upon a campaign of visits to all places where strikes were in progress telling the strikers to resume work immediately'.¹⁰⁶ Overall, the complicity of the C.P.W.U. in the strikes was 'vigorously denied' by its leadership which worked hard to conclude them. Both Gachago and Wachira made no secret that 'it was their earnest wish the strikes should finish'. They were at pains to continually impress on union members that strike action was secondary to all 'constitutional' means of resolution, 'a position few strikers could understand'¹⁰⁷ especially since, in the absence of union recognition and access, there were no operable constitutional arrangements. As the picking season approached these issues became paramount.

As the bureaucratised form of unionism, mentored by the Labour Department, struggled for control over the already existent informal networks cast amongst Kikuyu detainees during the Emergency it came up against a syndicalist variant of unionism that surfaced amidst the spontaneity of the strike wave. According to Sir Patrick Renison, K.F.L. general secretary Tom Mboya had told him that 'irresponsible agitators have taken charge' because the employers had denied union officials access to their estates to visit union members.¹⁰⁸ Union officials were unable to exercise a commanding influence over the rank and file, thus providing a fertile ground for agitators amongst the many former detainees to fill the void. Their agenda to adopt strikers into 'unions' they were fashioning as agencies of reconciliation on the terms of the employers, depended on making workers demands negotiable on the basis of what seemed possible. Mboya was also likely giving a calculated warning to Renison aimed

at advancing his position as a political broker : if the employers continued to deny union officials access to the workplace, they would lose control and the militants would take over. Likewise if the transition to African majority government was to be stable and secure, trade union leaders would need to be incorporated at the highest levels of government.

According to Walter Coutts, Kenya's Chief Secretary, 'opinion hardened to the theory that the unrest', whilst projected through the C.P.W.U., 'had been fostered for political motives'. The question was by whom? This 'was one of a number of imponderables interwoven in the situation, which exercised many minds.' Coutts referred to the 'intimidation of labour' in the coffee districts and threatened a 'very special exercise' by the Ministry of Defence to find out 'who was doing the intimidating and why'. Addressing the Legislative Assembly, he described this intimidation as 'a grave difficulty' and accused a group of people out 'for their own ends' of 'bringing others out on strike who had no idea what they were striking about.' To those at the helm of state it 'appeared that labour was being wantonly led astray', stirred into action by outside 'agitators' and 'extremists'¹⁰⁹, a view reinforced by O.J.Mason who drew attention to the 'reckless underhand activities of some of the movement's lesser personalities'.¹¹⁰

Some credence to these concerns was given by Thika's wages inspector who was despatched to oversee 'barazas'¹¹¹ throughout the district. He addressed strikers on various estates, where he 'noticed that the crux of the strikes was mixed up with some political elements. In most cases, youngsters were the spokesmen of the strikers, whose ideas were of a political nature and not of plain trade unionism'. He reported that the union had enrolled 'very many members' all over the district, 'who apparently join without knowing the aims and objects of the union'.¹¹² Sir Patrick Renison told the Colonial Secretary that farmers believed there was 'a recrudescence of Mau-Mau, and that union officials who recently have been organising plantation labour are ex Mau Mau'. Indeed, there were not a few former Mau Mau amongst the union agitators though a movement involving such large numbers of workers made it difficult to identify just who the 'ringleaders' were. They operated, as Furedi has argued of Mau Mau, in an organisation based on 'a network of informal ties rather than on an formal system'.¹¹³ This movement had a life of its own apart from the union bureaucracy grafted onto it. That the mostly casual and dispersed physiognomy of the workforce was able to sustain such a generalised wave of plantation unrest was attributable to the integration of these workers into communities whose ties had withstood the repression and ruptures of the Emergency.

Conclusion

The plantation strikes which took place during 1960, a year which 'was remarkable for its unprecedented number of trade disputes',¹¹⁴ initiated the successive strike waves which plagued

Kenya's decolonisation process. The source of the strike movement on the plantations lay in the deep crisis on world commodity markets affecting Kenya's principal export. The precarious fortunes of Kenyan planters compelled them to reduce the wages and conditions of their workers as the means of compensating themselves for falling prices.¹¹⁵ Fierce productivity drives and unbearable discipline, which had plagued the labour process for several years, had triggered the conflagration. The strikes began as initiatives by plantation workers themselves already bonded together by less visible ties of association. Indeed, the plantation unions were especially dominated by unrestricted Kikuyu who had been convicted of oath-taking and other Emergency offences, and brought this very recent experience into the workplace with them. Dictatorship, repression and dispossession were embedded in the social being of the vast majority who entered plantation employment. The employers wanted their labour power because of its quality and skill in coffee growing, and assumed that the experience of detention and rehabilitation had both taught these workers a lesson and re-conditioned them into embracing their subordinate status. They could not have been more wrong.

Many strikes contained powerful strains of retribution directed at headmen and nyaparas who had been collaborators and loyalists during the Emergency. The harsh nature of supervision compounded the depth of grievance against such men. This was of course bound up with the intense productivity drives organised by the employers to achieve lower production costs in order to compete with their overseas rivals and the rising number of African coffee farmers. Many of the latter's smallholdings had expanded following land consolidation, involving the expropriation of the lands of many of those former detainees who were then compelled to enter the plantation labour force. The widespread calls for the removal of nyaparas were invariably bound to attempts by strikers to assert some control over the labour process itself, in some instances insisting on setting tasks themselves independently of the management.

The C.B.K. crudely observed that 'the strikers gained nothing from the skirmish'¹¹⁶, since in most cases they had either gone back with no material gains or, in a few cases, decided never to return. Nonetheless the strikes were a testing ground where union officials were put into the ring, often against their will. How would they handle the employer? What gains could they extract? What would be their stance towards erstwhile loyalists? These questions were uppermost in the minds of many strikers. For Tom Mboya, the plantation strikes were an 'indication of a flaw in industrial relations' which could only be corrected if both sides of the industry 'play the game according to the rules'¹¹⁷, though almost every dispute demonstrated that strikers could not play a game whose rules they had been unable and unwilling to internalise. Nonetheless, union officials by and large played this for them as they sought to exhaust spontaneous energies by demobilising the strike movement and tried to collude with labour

officers and employers to manoeuvre a return to work as a precondition for negotiations, a scenario which often evaded them.

Kenya's decolonisation process was beset by the strike prone years of 1959-65.¹¹⁸ This was an unprecedented period, far surpassing all previous levels of militancy which left few urban and rural sectors untouched. The recurrent strike waves which attended independence reached a high point in May-June 1962, when over 28,000 plantation labourers throughout Central Province struck together in a simultaneous strike that touched every estate. Over 1.5 million man hours were lost at the height of the picking season. They were joined by workers in tea and sisal plantations, general agriculture, the railways, docks, electricity supply, post and telecommunications, banks and airlines, construction, engineering, the oil and petroleum industry, chemicals, glass, distribution, tobacco, brewing and bottling, food processing, hotels and restaurants, timber and furniture trades, textiles, shoe and leather industries, civil and public services who all converged into generalised strike action. The K.F.L.'s threat to call a general strike was a backhanded recognition that one was already developing, representing a direct 'challenge to the National Government on the eve of independence which threatened to cause more damage to Kenya than any single disturbance since the Emergency period'.¹¹⁹ Trade union officials then intervened in an effort to arrest this movement on the basis of an unconditional return to work, though workers were still coming out on strike after it was called off. They were few tangible gains for the strikers, which officials believed should be sacrificed or postponed to lend stability to the transition to independence. Kenya's first African majority government appointed Tom Mboya as Minister of Labour in order to head off this movement. Mboya then quickly moved to put the apparatus of the Industrial Court in place which severely restricted collective bargaining and made Kenya's unions captive to corporatism. The trade unions then became straitjacketed within these structures in the years following independence. Overall, it became an unwritten precondition for the independence 'bargain' that the organised working class temper and delay its expectations, though in practice few lasting gains were achieved beyond some concessions to a thin layer, of mostly government employees, who passed, under Kenyan conditions, as a 'labour aristocracy'¹²⁰.

Notes

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² David Hyde, 'Paying for the Emergency by Displacing the Settlers': Global Coffee and Rural Restructuring in Late Colonial Kenya, *Journal of Global History* [2009] 4, pp.81-103.

³ The Kenya coffee industry is based upon mainly highland grown arabica coffee. The arabica varieties grown are mild and command higher prices than other varieties. Some robusta coffee is grown in Nyanza Province but this forms a small part of the whole industry. In Kenya the berries are picked from June to December, according to region and season and the bulk of the crop is ready for market by November/December. The official crop year is from October 1st to September 30th.

⁴ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya: trade unionism on the land 1945-65, Ph.D [S.O.A.S., 2001].

⁵ '...those four-gallon paraffin tins that had become a universal water-vessel, measure and roofing material.' Elspeth Huxley, *The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood* [London: The Reprint Society, 1960], p.9; AMC 720:Verjee Report. According to this report these tins were capable of carrying anything between 6,000 to 18,000 cherries, depending on the size of the cherry. The average was about 8,000 per debe or approximately 4,000,000 cherries per ton. The differences were accounted for by the weight and size of the cherry. Sometimes, with excess of rain, the cherry or the pulp was bigger or thicker. With less rain, the bean or kernel was smaller. Overall, there was rough average of 550 debes to the ton.

⁶ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya.

⁷ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya. See Appendix 33 : *Anatomy of the Coffee Industry in Thika district giving details of ownership and acreages of estates, tribal and gender composition of the workforce as at August 1st, 1960.*

⁸ Singh, Makhan. *Kenya's Trade Unions : the Crucial Years 1952-6*. Nairobi : Uzima Press, 1980.

Following the Nairobi General Strike [1950], the labour movement was decimated by Operations 'Jock Scott' [1952] and 'Anvil'[1954] as thousands of members were arrested and detained, while others disappeared altogether. The Emergency brought on a vicious repression which severely impacted on the Kikuyu workforce throughout Central province and caused a great social dislocation. The close and intimate ties between urban Africans, the trade unions and Mau Mau, were placed under great stress and partially broken as many trade union members and officials were swept off into detention. Tens of thousands of Kikuyu workers were torn from the workplace to be 'screened' and 'rehabilitated', a process that lasted throughout the Emergency. This lent a dysfunctional character to the labour market following the detention of the most skilled and stable sections of the work force. Ultimately, by the end of the Emergency the government was unable to prevent the previous Kikuyu dominance of the unions, that it had blamed for the 'seditious' tendencies within the movement characteristic of the post war phase of union militancy up to 1950, from resurfacing. Whilst the Labour Department concentrated its energies on taming these workers for responsible unionism, in the run up to independence the structures of conciliation and arbitration were barely effective in containing the successive strike waves that engulfed the plantation districts of Central province. See David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya, appendices 1-36.

⁹ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya.

¹⁰ K.N.A./AMC 7/11/Coffee Planters' Association: Enclosure 36.

¹¹ East African Standard [E.A.S.] 11 August 1958: 'Greatest Challenge to Kenya Farmers - Trade Union Growth'.

¹² Alice Amsden, *International Firms and Labour in Kenya: 1945-70*, London, 1971, pp.3-82; Anthony Clayton and Donald C.Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895-1963*, London, 1974, pp.290-462; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society : The labour question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge, 1996, pp.323-360.

¹³ This post-war militant phase where the trade unions, organised around the East African Trade Union Congress, were at the forefront of resistance to the colonial government was brought to a definitive close by the Emergency. The realignment within the leadership that followed evidenced a shift from the militants who represented the upward sweep of the post war strike wave towards the moderates led by Tom Mboya, who reflected its downturn. In an attempt to survive a fierce repression the unions regrouped within the Kenya Federation of Registered Trades Unions which worked closely with, and became dependent upon, the Labour Department. The K.F.R.T.U. sought to limit the movement to everyday concerns and emphasised defence rather than defiance.

¹⁴ Frank Furedi, *Mau Mau War in Perspective*, London, 1991, p.165.

¹⁵ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya gives full quantitative survey details of the tribal and gender composition of the workforce compiled from Labour Office returns of African workers employed on coffee estates in Thika district as at August 1st 1960. The release from detention and the lifting of all remaining restrictions on the employment of Kikuyu males facilitated the reinstatement of at least 10,000 of them into the plantation work force in Thika district alone.

¹⁶ R.J.M.Swynnerton: '*A Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya*', Government Printer, Nairobi 1954.

¹⁷ K.N.A./VK/2/17/Labour and Trade Unions [General]: O.J. Mason/Senior Labour Officer/Central Province to Labour. Officer/Thika, 24 December 1959.

¹⁸ Jesse Gachago was the conduit of Labour Department unionism. He was mentored by Tom Mboya and, like the latter, had been a sanitary inspector with Nairobi City Council, attended the Jeanes School and, with Mboya's help, had become the Kenya Local Government Workers Union branch secretary in Nakuru and then the K.F.L.'s plantation organiser.

¹⁹ K.N.A./AF 1/1: Thika Labour Office Annual Report, 1959.

²⁰ K.N.A./AF 1/1: Thika Labour Office Annual Report, 1959.

²¹ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Filenote by L.R. MacCullough, Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 27 October 1959.

²² K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U.1959-61: J.Gachago to Executive Officer/Thika Urban District Council, 2 November 1959.

²³ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U.1959-61: J.Gachago to District Commissioner/ Thika, 2 November 1959.

²⁴ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U.1959-61: Report of the meeting by labour and wages inspectors, Thika district, 23 November 1959.

²⁵ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U.1959-61: Report of the meeting by labour and wages inspectors, Thika district, 23 November 1959.

²⁶ C.B.K. 'Kenya Coffee' Monthly Bulletin, April 1960.

²⁷ P.R.O./CO/544/98:L.D.A.R. 1960. Throughout Kenya, there were 232 officially reported strikes during the year, involving 72,545 workers and incurring a loss of nearly 758,000 man-days.

²⁸ P.R.O./CO/822/2871/Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.

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- ²⁹ David Hyde, Plantation Struggles in Kenya gives full details of plantation and other disputes in Kenya throughout the period.
- ³⁰ P.R.O./CO/544/98: L.D.A.R. 1960.
- ³¹ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Reports, April 1960. See also K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, January 1960.
- ³² There was a widespread assumption that the estates of departing Europeans would be allotted to them free of charge.
- ³³ P.R.O./CO/822/2871 Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.
- ³⁴ P.R.O./CO/544/98: L.D.A.R. 1960.
- ³⁵ Supervisors.
- ³⁶ P.R.O./CO/822/2871 Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.
- ³⁷ Interview with Ralph Kariuki Igeria, Kiambu Farmers Hotel, August 11th 2004, "Former detainees were the people who could most understand the meaning of trade unionism. They understood the need for unity, but not with men who had a former loyalist record. These Kikuyu had been their jailers and had occupied their land."
- ³⁸ P.R.O./CO/544/98: L.D.A.R. 1960.
- ³⁹ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U.1959-61: J.Watts, Filenote, 19 January 1960.
- ⁴⁰ Table figures compiled from K.N.A./ABK/8/207: LD 98 Strike Reports, 1960.
- ⁴¹ K.N.A./VK/2/39/ K.F.L. 1959-63: Jesse Gachago to District Commissioner, 4 January 1960.
- ⁴² K.N.A./VK/2/24 C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 6 January 1960.
- ⁴³ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, January 1960.
- ⁴⁴ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 6 January 1960.
- ⁴⁵ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Jesse Gachago, 8 January 1960.
- ⁴⁶ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 14 January 1960.
- ⁴⁷ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 14 January 1960.
- ⁴⁸ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, January 1960.
- ⁴⁹ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 14 January 1960.
- ⁵⁰ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61:Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 26 January 1960; According to the C.B.K. *Kenya Coffee* Monthly Bulletin [April 1960].
- ⁵¹ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 16 January 1960.
- ⁵² K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61: C.P.W.U. General Secretary to the Manager of Shortlands Estate, 15 January 1960.
- ⁵³ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer /Central Province, 23 January 1960.
- ⁵⁴ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Labour Officer's Monthly Report, January 1960.
- ⁵⁵ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Labour Officer's Monthly Report, February 1960.
- ⁵⁶ K.N.A./ABK/8/205 : LD 98 Strike Returns, 1960.
- ⁵⁷ K.N.A./AF/1/9 : Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, February 1960.
- ⁵⁸ K.N.A./VK/2/24/C.P.W.U.1959-61: Joint Report Thika Labour and Wages Inspectors to the Labour Office, 21 March 1960.
- ⁵⁹ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Reports, April 1960.
- ⁶⁰ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Central Province Senior Labour Officer's Quarterly Report, April 1960.
- ⁶¹ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, May 1960.
- ⁶² K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Reports, March 1960.
- ⁶³ K.N.A./ABK/8/225/Strikes at Socfinaf Co., Ruera Estate and at G.Criticos & Co.Ltd., Kiaora estate, Ruiru: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 22 April 1960.
- ⁶⁴ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Reports, April 1960.
- ⁶⁵ K.N.A./AF/1/9:Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Reports, April 1960.
- ⁶⁶ K.N.A./ABK/8/222/ Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter fromThika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 8 March 1960.
- ⁶⁷ Interviews carried out in Makuyu during July-August, 2004.
- ⁶⁸ K.N.A./ABK/8/222/ Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, Nyeri, 29/3/60.
- ⁶⁹ K.N.A./ABK/8/222/ Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 8 April 1960.
- ⁷⁰ K.N.A./ABK/8/222: Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 8 April 1960.
- ⁷¹ K.N.A./ABK/8/222: Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Filenote by the Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 21 April 1960.
- ⁷² K.N.A./ABK/8/222: Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 26 April 1960.
- ⁷³ K.N.A./ABK/8/222: Strike at Sisal Ltd., Makuyu 1960: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 4 May 1960.
- ⁷⁴ K.N.A./ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from Labour Officer/Thika to M.E. de La Hayes, 12 October 1960.

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- ⁷⁵ K.N.A./ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from Labour Officer/Thika to the Labour Commissioner 16 April 1960.
- ⁷⁶ K.N.A./ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from Labour Officer/Thika to M.E. de La Hayes, 12 October 1960.
- ⁷⁷ K.N.A./ABK/8/205/ L.D. 98 Reports, 1960.
- ⁷⁸ K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Transcript of Meeting between Hayes and Wachira related in a letter from Labour Officer/ Thika to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 21 April 1960.
- ⁷⁹ K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Conversation between Mr G.Wild, Manager of Glenlee Estate Ltd., and Godwin Wachira, 14 April 1960.
- ⁸⁰ K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/Central Province, 21 April 1960.
- ⁸¹ K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from the C.P.W.U. to the Labour Commissioner, 22 June 1960.
- ⁸² K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from Thika Labour Officer to Senior Labour Officer/ Central Province, 26 April 1960.
- ⁸³ Resident labourers had cultivation rights on the estates where they worked consisting of small plots close to their labour lines.
- ⁸⁴ K.N.A./ ABK/8/228/ Glenlee Estate, Ruiru Strikes: Letter from the C.P.W.U. to the Labour Commissioner, 22 June 1960.
- ⁸⁵ K.N.A./ VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Wachira to the Labour Commissioner, 22 June 1960.
- ⁸⁶ K.N.A./ VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959-61: Letter from Godwin Wachira to the Executive Officer, K.C.G.A., 9 June 1960.
- ⁸⁷ K.N.A./VK/2/24/ C.P.W.U. 1959 - 61: Letter from R.A.J.Damerell, Labour Commissioner to the General Secretary, C.P.W.U., 1 July 1960.
- ⁸⁸ E.A.S. 5 April, 1960: 'Growers and Ministers discuss strike wave...'
- ⁸⁹ David Hyde, *The East African Railway Strike 1959-60*, unpublished SOAS monograph [1996].
- ⁹⁰ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, May 1960.
- ⁹¹ P.R.O./CO/822/2871 Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.
- ⁹² P.R.O./CO/822/2871 Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.
- ⁹³ P.R.O./CO/822/2871 Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 16 May 1960.
- ⁹⁴ P.R.O./CO/544/98: L.D.A.R. 1960. Conditions of service, usually pay or rations, were prominent amongst the demands raised by workers in 23 cases, whilst demands for the dismissal of a supervisor, 'usually a long service headman with loyal emergency record' came to the fore in at least half the plantation strikes that occurred. The struggle to reinstate dismissed activists triggered at least 6 disputes and was a contributory cause in others; Central Province's Senior Labour Officer, O.J.Mason observed, that where strikers demands were made discernible, they frequently followed a set pattern.
- ⁹⁵ By the end of 1960, throughout Kenyan industry as a whole, there were 104 negotiating bodies covering 187,000 workers.
- ⁹⁶ C.B.K. *Kenya Coffee Monthly Bulletin*, April 1960.
- ⁹⁷ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report /Central Province, March 1960.
- ⁹⁸ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report /Central Province, March 1960.
- ⁹⁹ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report /Central Province, March 1960.
- ¹⁰⁰ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, January 1960.
- ¹⁰¹ K.N.A./AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, May 1960.
- ¹⁰² K.N.A./VK/1/50: Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report /Central Province, March 1960.
- ¹⁰³ P.R.O./CO/544/98: L.D.A.R. 1960.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ralph Kariuki Igeria testifies to a prevalent assumption amongst workers that union officials were being paid off to commandeer them back to work. Interview conducted at Kiambu Farmers Hotel, August 11th, 2004.
- ¹⁰⁵ David Hyde, *Plantation Struggles in Kenya*.
- ¹⁰⁶ K.N.A./ AF/1/9: Thika Labour Officer's Monthly Report, May 1960.
- ¹⁰⁷ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Central Province Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report, February 1960.
- ¹⁰⁸ P.R.O./CO/822/2871/ Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Telegram from the Acting Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State, 3 May 1960.
- ¹⁰⁹ P.R.O./CO/822/2871/ Labour Unrest in Kenya, 1960-2: Reuters News Agency Report, 11 May 1960.
- ¹¹⁰ K.N.A./VK/1/50: Central Province Senior Labour Officer's Monthly Report, April 1960.
- ¹¹¹ Estate meetings involving workers.
- ¹¹² K.N.A./AF 1/5: Thika Labour Inspector's Monthly Reports , April 1960.
- ¹¹³ Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* [London, 1989], p.140.
- ¹¹⁴ P.R.O./CO/544/98/Labour Department Annual Report, 1960.
- ¹¹⁵ David Hyde, 'Paying for the Emergency by Displacing the Settlers'.
- ¹¹⁶ C.B.K. *Kenya Coffee Monthly Bulletin*, April 1960.
- ¹¹⁷ E.A.S. 7 May , 1960: 'Politics and organisation to blame: causes of wildcat strikes explained.'
- ¹¹⁸ David Hyde, *Plantation Struggles in Kenya*.

¹¹⁹ Sharon Stichter, 'Imperialism and the Rise of a 'Labor Aristocracy' in Kenya, 1945-70', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Volume 21 1976-7, pp.157-78; P.Mwangi Kagwanja, *Kwame Nkrumah's Theory and Practice of the Labour Movement and their Manifestations in Kenyan Trade Unionism to 1966*, M.A. Thesis Kenyatta University [1992], pp.13-23 ; G.Arrighi, 'International Corporations, Labour Aristocracies, and Economic Development in Tropical Africa,' in R.I.Rhodes [ed.], *Imperialism and Underdevelopment* [New York, 1970]; J.Saul, 'The 'Labour Aristocracy' Case Reconsidered', in R.Sandbrook and R.Cohen [eds.] *The Development of an African Working Class* [London, 1975], pp.303-10. There was a case of mistaken identity in this literature involving the labour aristocracy and the trade union bureaucracy. Whilst the skilled proletariat and union functionaries both occupied a more privileged position within the working class, the latter embraced the politics of class collaboration in their practice of administering workers struggles. Though a coincidence of interest between the two was sometimes apparent, during 1959-64 they more often confronted each other as opposites. So that while the labour bureaucracy drew closer to the state, the more privileged sections of workers such as railmen, teachers and civil servants, hitherto the most conservative and quietist, moved into confrontation with their state employer. The conflation of the upper layers of the working class with the bureaucratic stratum in the trade unions has lent credence to the incorrect assumption that the factionalism and corruption amongst the latter, often motivated by the scent of individual gain and prospective privilege, were an essential reflection of real or supposed tribal divisions within the African working class which was allegedly contending for patrons.

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