
IMPERIALISM IN THE WEST INDIES

By George Padmore

There are about 10 million Negroes in the West Indies, a small group of islands located in the Caribbean Sea, between north and south America. All except Cuba, Haiti and San Domingo are dominated by British, French, Dutch and American imperialism; while Cuba, Haiti and San Domingo, the so-called independent Republics are, in truth and reality, economic colonies of the United States, which maintains puppet governments in each of them as well as marines in Haiti.

1. Labour and Social Conditions

The Negro masses in the West Indies are just as viciously exploited as the natives of Africa or the black toilers in the United States of America. Their

exploiters are not only the foreign imperialists, but the native bourgeoisie and the landlords, who are equally as ruthless in their suppression of the broad toiling masses, as the foreign blood suckers.

After the abolition of slavery in the early eighties of the last century, the Negroes refused to continue to work on the plantations. The British Government, in order to save the sugar industry made grants of land to them on the basis of which a peasantry was developed. At the same time it was necessary to secure labour for the big plantations, so East Indian immigrants were brought in from India in 1845 and set to work on the sugar cane plantations. These workers were so badly treated that the Government of India was forced to protest to the Colonial Office at London.

Since the war the policy has been to stop peasant land holding and to place all the lands in the hands of the big native planters, landlords and foreign corporations. This has created a landless semi-proletariat, who work part time on the land and part in the mills. Everywhere the natives are in revolt against the landlords and their governments.

In Cuba, Porto Rico, Haiti and San Domingo, American imperialists have completely enslaved millions of black workers on the sugar cane, coffee and tobacco plantations. In order to get cheaper labour thousands of natives are imported from Haiti and Jamaica to work on the plantations in Cuba, Porto Rico and San Domingo.

In the British colonies of Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbadoes, British imperialism is equally as brutal and ruthless as American imperialism. Throughout the West Indies the whole population lives on the verge of starvation. In the rural districts we find thousands of pauperized, down-trodden natives huddled together in company-owned barracks on the sugar plantations or scattered around the countryside in mud shacks. The social conditions amongst these victims of imperialism is hardly much removed from primitive life. Forced to labour long hours for the smallest pittance, the West Indian worker is scarcely able to provide himself with food to eat. Women and children are forced to go into the fields and labour in order to help along the family. The man worker receives about 40 cents per day while the women and children receive between 15 and 30 cents.

In the larger British colonies, especially in Trinidad, where there is a big oil and asphalt industry, an industrial proletariat has been brought into being in recent years. Thousands of Negroes are employed to dig the pitch (asphalt) and to load ships at La Brea, at an average of 50 cents per day and live under terrible conditions.

Although the vast majority of workers in the oil fields are Negroes, in recent years, however, Hindu workers have been attracted to the industry. The natives are the unskilled labour force, while the Europeans occupy the best paid positions.

The marine workers form another important section of the West Indian working class, sailors, longshoremen, boatmen, etc. The transportation system, such as railroads, street cars, busses and taxis are all operated by black workers.

2. Agricultural Situation.

The complete failure of the sugar industry has reduced the West Indian toilers to a condition beyond description. Starvation and disease are raising havoc and depopulating entire sections of the population, especially in the rural districts.

The Church is making some flimsy appeals for the labourers, but it is merely doing this to safeguard its own position, for much of its financial backing came out of the sweat and blood of the agricultural labourers, who have been taught

by the Church to work hard, and be obedient to their exploiters, have faith in the Christian God and food will always be guaranteed them. But now things have come to the worst and this is arousing the Negro slaves. That is why their religious dope peddlers are doing their best to divert this growing revolutionary spirit among the masses into safe channels, by holding out promises of Government relief to them.

These Church people are forced to admit that there is squalor and degradation among the great majority of the labouring classes, their food is insufficient in quantity and quality, Considering the nature of the work they have to do, a great proportion of these people of all ages and both sexes are suffering from malnutrition; in the country districts, for the most part there are no sanitary conveniences, this applies universally to all villages. Diseases prevail which are preventable and curable and are sapping the energy and life of the population.

The same conditions which exist in the British colonies also prevail in the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where agriculture is the main occupation of the populations. All of the large sugar cane plantations are owned by French companies which make great profits by robbing the Negro workers.

The conditions which prevail in the Virgin Islands of the United States are most appalling. The Negro workers hardly get more than two days work per week for which they receive an average wage of 35 to 50 cents. Poverty exists everywhere and is taking its toll among the children of the poor.

3. Forced Labour.

Forced labour also exists in the West Indies. Whenever there is a shortage of labour for public works, the Governments of the various colonies especially in Haiti, conscript or force the natives to do the work. Nearly all of the public roads have been constructed by forced labour gangs under the military supervision of United States Marines. In the British Islands all forms of repressive legislation, such as vagrancy laws, are enacted in order to enable the imperialist rulers to find an excuse to force the Negroes to work. Workers and peasants are arrested on all kinds of frame-up charges, thrown into prison and there assigned to chain gangs and made to build roads and other forms of public works.

According to the latest reports, the situation has become so deplorable in the British colonies that the "Labour" Government, in order to avoid the general uprising of the toiling population, has been forced to appropriate a small sum of money to help the populations in Trinidad, Jamaica and British Guinea.

4. What must be done?

The workers and peasants in the West Indies must build up a real revolutionary trade union movement. For example in Trinidad where the labour movement has reached the most advanced stage, the left wing opposition to the reformists misleaders, (Cipriani and Bishop who presently control the Working Men's Association) should immediately begin a wide campaign among the rank and file in the various unions, as well as the unorganized on the basis of concrete everyday demands which should be linked up with the ultimate demands of the class interests, to win the masses away from the reformists and develop the left wing movement.

Rank and file committees should be set up inside and outside the unions. These committees must take the initiative in putting forward the demands of the

workers over the heads of the "leaders", for only in this way will the opposition be able to expose the treacherous role which the fakery is carrying on, especially since the crisis which is forcing them to come out with more and more "left" phrases in order to cover up their deception.

The opposition must pay special attention to the organization of the agricultural labourers and the unorganized workers in the basic industries (oil and asphalt), as well as transportation.

Committees of action must also be set up among the agricultural workers of all the sugar and cocoa plantations, as has been successfully done on the Felicity Estate, (where, it may be noted, 2000 labourers armed with cutlasses, agricultural forks, hoes and other implements marched on Port-of-Spain, the capital of the Island, July last, and demanded that the plantation owners and the Government withdraw the wage cut — from 1 shilling to 9 pence — and abolish the increased hours of labour).

Despite all the attempts of the labour fakery and the petty bourgeois nationalist leaders, such as the Hon. Serran Teelucksingh, "labour" representative of the Legislative Council of Trinidad to persuade the workers to turn over the leadership of the struggle into their hands and return to the estate, the strike committee bluntly refused to permit the men to go back to work until all of their demands had been granted.

Since this armed demonstration, the Trinidad Press reports that there is considerable unrest on all the large plantations, where the workers, inspired by the militancy of the labourers of the Felicity Estate are also setting up committees of action to put forward their grievances and lead them in the struggle.

The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers should render all aid and assistance possible to the struggling West Indian workers, and to support the economic and political demands of the toiling population of the West Indies in their fight against the imperialists and the native capitalist exploiters.
