

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

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After World War II African workers expected radical social and political changes in payment for their loyal support of 'Empire' during the war. What they confronted instead was more stringent production regimes in which managers, with support of the state, were focused on achieving output targets and channeling protest through manageable organs of workplace consultation. Colonial resources were indispensable for the rebuilding of England. In one of history's great ironies the task of reconstructing a post-war empire fell on the Labour Party. Pushing a package of labor rights while custodian of the imperial state had its contradictions and these contradictions bubbled up and slapped Labour in the face. A rash of general strikes and embarrassing massacres of workers characterized this period of uncertainty and political tension contextualized in the Cold War. The shooting of 22 miners in November 1949 at the Iva Valley mine of Enugu Government Colliery was a product of these contradictory processes that shaped post-war labor policy and stoked African men's aspirations.

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

This paper argues that the post war period is a time when the state's interventions, to 'modernize' the means of controlling African labor and the social context in which workers lived, were themselves the cause of the rash of industrial disputes that riveted post-war African societies. It also contends that the industrial conflict of this period defied the erroneous boundaries that the state put on 'economistic' and 'political' struggles as it sought to insulate the industrial workers from a nationalist movement that was radically unpredictable.

The paper is built upon the elements of this reconstruction: the flawed introduction of state sanctioned trade unions, the emergence of a sophisticated union leader, the legal framework to decasualize labor and the structural reorganization of the trade union. The concluding section describes the shooting itself and suggests areas of further exploration most specifically the hearings of the investigative commission as context for examining decolonization. Preliminary analysis indicates that the commission, led by W. J. Fitzgerald formerly of the Palestine Land Commission, was far more than a body constituted to investigate an industrial dispute but was a vehicle used by the Colonial Office to distance itself from the bungling political proposals of the Nigerian state. Despite Labor's attempts to depoliticize African workers' movements the Iva Valley Shooting became the clarion call for the nationalist struggle and is today given as the 'birth date' of the independence struggle.