

THE KLANG STRIKES OF 1941: Labour and Capital in Colonial Malaya

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THE KLANG STRIKES OF 1941
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by

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The story I have to tell deals with human beings whom Colonialism and its supporters treated, mistakenly, as puppets and as factors of production – never as individuals.

– Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya*, p. xii.

In March, April and May 1941, Indian workers on a number of rubber plantations -- mainly located in the State of Selangor -- conducted a series of strikes, the culmination of which was the use of substantial force on the part of the Government of the Federated Malay States (FMS) resulting in the death of several workers. Overshadowed, as it was, by events in Europe, by the subsequent outbreak of war in the Pacific and by the Japanese Occupation, the incident failed to attract widespread notice in the West; and since then, scholarly interest again has tended to focus on the more dramatic occurrences of the war years. Yet the strikes themselves merit close examination for several reasons: first, because they provide an insight into the early organization of Indian plantation labour in Malaya for the purpose of securing political as well as economic aims; second, because the reactions of estate managers and owners illuminate the relationship between entrepreneurial interests and the colonial authorities; and finally because in India where, unlike Malaya, a measure of "responsible" government existed, the incident created considerable public debate, and nationalist leaders brought pressure to bear on the Indian Government to intervene on behalf of the plantation workers.¹

To appreciate the full ramifications of the incident, an understanding of the historical context is necessary. The phenomenal growth of demand for natural rubber on the world market during the first two decades of the twentieth century, stimulated first by mass-production in the automobile industry and then by the First World War, created an opportunity for the heavy investment of

* The research upon which this preliminary report is based was made possible by a grant from the University of Alberta.

1 A brief account of the Klang strikes is to be found in M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 28-33.

capital -- mainly European -- in rubber plantations in the Malay States. In turn, this created a demand for labour which, for a variety of reasons, could not be satisfied locally, with the result that estate owners or managers sought a supply of labour outside Malaya. To some extent, the demand was met by Chinese workers and by migrant workers from the Netherlands East Indies, mainly from the island of Java; but by far the largest pool of readily available labour existed in South India. The subject of the importation of Indian workers has been dealt with extensively elsewhere,² as has the development of the rubber industry,³ and the point to be made here is simply that there emerged in the west coast states of the Malay peninsula a substantial community of South Indian labourers, ill-educated or totally illiterate for the most part, and poorly paid, living in scattered, isolated groups housed in "coolie lines" located on the estates where they were employed. The conditions under which labourers were recruited discouraged mobility from job to job, a situation that was reinforced by an agreement amongst plantation proprietors and managers on a single wage structure, and by the avoidance of "crimping" (the practice of persuading labourers to leave their existing employment for higher wages elsewhere).⁴ As a geographically fragmented minority living in an alien environment, the Indian estate labourers were vulnerable to exploitation and too poorly organized to protect their interests, circumstances not helped by the initial disinclination of most educated Malayan Indians of the middle class to involve themselves in the affairs of their less fortunate fellow-countrymen.⁵ By contrast, local estate managers and proprietors were effectively

2 Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora & Co. Publishers Private Ltd., 1960); R.N. Jackson, *Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya, 1786-1920* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printing Office, 1961); Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

3 See, for example, P.T. Bauer, *The Rubber Industry: A Study in Competition and Monopoly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948); J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973); D.W. Fryer, "The Plantation Industries -- The Estates" in *Malaysia: A Survey*, ed. Wang Gungwu (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 227-245. A valuable ethnographic study of a South Indian community associated with a single rubber estate is that of Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970).

4 The structure of the Malayan rubber industry, and the recruitment and conditions of employment of South Indian labourers are discussed in J. Norman Parmer, *Colonial Labor Policy and Administration: A History of Labor in the Rubber Plantation Industry in Malaya, c. 1910-1941* (New York: J.J. Augustin Incorporated Publisher, 1960). See also Malcolm Caldwell, "War, Boom and Depression," in *Malaya: The Making of a Neo-Colony*, ed. Mohamed Amin and Malcolm Caldwell (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), pp. 44-47.

5 Parmer, op.cit., p. 65; Mahajani, op.cit., pp. 121-124.

organized and, through the Planters' Association of Malaya (PAM), had an efficient instrument for the protection of their interests; and directors of share-owned companies registered in London acted together for mutual advantage through the Rubber Growers' Association (RGA). In 1934, the PAM was reorganized to include representatives of the RGA, and renamed the United Planting Association of Malaya (UPAM).⁶

The RGA and the UPAM, acting either independently or in concert, provided a lobby which sought, from time to time, to persuade the colonial administration to adopt policies favourable to planting interests; they also functioned to control the rubber market in Malaya and, particularly, to control the costs of production. Since one of the major determinants of those "costs" was the price of labour, the UPAM became deeply involved in the recruitment of cheap labour in India. And when, with the growth of the nationalist movement in India, increased sensitivity to the plight of Indian labourers overseas resulted in the placing of restrictions on emigration, the UPAM directed much of its attention towards circumventing those restrictions, or towards gaining their relaxation in respect of Malaya.

Because of its extremely fragmented nature, the Indian community had no single, completely effective organization to represent its interests, but rather a plethora of social clubs, caste associations or societies, most of which enjoyed no more than an ephemeral existence, and none of which represented the interests of the estate labourers.⁷ Eventually, in 1936, and at least in part as a reaction to the continuing depressed economic conditions, a Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM), which had as its purpose the raising of the status of the Indian community, came into existence. From the beginning, it was insisted that this purpose included protection of the interests of Tamil and Telegu estate labourers, although the leadership was always firmly in the hands of middle-class, English-educated North Indians or Malayalis.⁸ On the part of rubber tappers and other

6 Parmer, p. 14.

7 Usha Mahajani has identified no fewer than ten such organizations which existed in the State of Selangor in the early 1930s -- see Mahajani, p. 120. The writer has been advised of the existence of a further source: A. Rejeswari, "Social and Political Developments in the Indian Community in Malaya 1920-41" (M.A. thesis, Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, 1969), to which he has not had access up to the time of publication.

8 Mahajani, p. 125; Sandhu, p. 45; Stenson, p. 26. Stenson makes the important point that, whereas in the West the idea of trade unionism was generally promoted by workers themselves, in order to protect their own interests, in Asia its propagation was frequently by the educated, who wished to use it as an instrument to attain the goals of nationalism -- see Stenson, p. 36.

estate workers, it seems certain that there was a growing awareness of the extent to which they were being exploited. Between 1933 and 1936, rubber prices rose by over 250%, yet employers strongly resisted pressures to restore wages to their pre-Depression level.⁹ From 1937 onwards, partly as a result of their deep sense of grievance, and no doubt influenced by labour unrest amongst workers elsewhere in the Federated Malay States, estate labourers became involved in sporadic strikes, as a result of which some minor concessions were wrung from the employers. At that time, there existed no kind of formal organization in the nature of a trade union for estate workers. Indeed, legislation providing for the formation and registration of trade unions was not introduced in the Federal Council until 1940, and did not come into effect until June 1941, after the disturbances in Klang.

At the time of the Depression, serious concern had been voiced in India when the minimum wages paid to estate labour in Malaya were sharply reduced; and when, in 1938, the UPAM recommended another wage reduction as a means of combating a threatened recession, the Indian Government responded with a ban on further assisted-passage unskilled labour emigration.¹⁰ Prior to the Indian Government's ban, wages had tended to remain static even in times of increased demand for rubber, since every increase in the demand for labour could be met by the importation of more workers willing to accept the existing low wages. After the ban, the bargaining position of the workers improved, since the source of cheap labour was no longer available. The result was that planters were obliged to seek to maintain or increase production by offering greater incentives in the form of cost-of-living and other "temporary" allowances, merit or attendance bonuses, overtime payments and, as a last resort, wage increases. Thus, by the time of the outbreak of war in Europe, the situation had evolved to a point where the pool of locally available South Indian labour was static. The repatriation of substantial numbers of workers which, in the past, had followed upon any major decline in the demand for rubber, was now resisted by the planters themselves, who feared that such workers could not easily be replaced. Any increase in the demand for rubber could no longer be expected to result in the importation of additional cheap labour.

9 Stenson, p. 15.

10 Parmer, p. 76. There is evidence that the Indian Government's ban was imposed largely as a result of the CIAM's representations – see the Intelligence Branch report on the CIAM enclosed with the Federated Malay States (hereafter FMS) Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, CO 717/145.

The war in Europe further stimulated demand for rubber, with the result that prices and profits rose steeply. During the latter part of 1940, Indian labourers agitated for increased wages and improved conditions, and in January 1941, the UPAM recommended an increase in wages from 50 to 55 cents a day for males and from 40 to 45 cents a day for females, with effect from 1 February.¹¹ The inadequacy of the increase must have been apparent, for almost immediately a series of strikes occurred which continued until early April, when the rates of pay were again increased, this time to 60 and 50 cents respectively. For a few days, things were quiet, but by the middle of April further strikes broke out, and these became widespread, developing into riots on 8 May, which in turn prompted the government to use police and units of the armed forces to restore order. The disturbances continued until the end of the month. The period of the strikes may thus be divided, for convenience, into three parts: first, the period of the earlier strikes which ended on 8 April; second, the period of renewed strikes, ending with the arrest of one of the strike leaders on 6 May; and third, the period of riots which commenced on 8 May and lasted until the end of May. The intention here is to examine these events in some detail, in order to establish to what extent, and by whom and for what purpose the strikes were organized; and the nature of the response of the planters, and of the colonial authorities.

The fact that these events were centred in Klang, a district located in the western part of Selangor within which there were numerous estates employing many thousands of Indian workers, suggests that ease of communication had a direct bearing on the strikers' organization. The area containing the affected estates was approximately 1,500 square miles, and at the height of the disturbances, according to one British official's estimate, some 20,000 labourers were involved.¹² It is possible to speculate that, had the workers been better organized, with effective channels of communication to other concentrations of estate labourers, the strikes would have been pan-Malayan in scope. Some consideration of the nature of the strikers' organization is thus clearly relevant to this study.

11 FMS, Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, p. 2. In 1941, the Straits or Malayan dollar was equivalent to about US 47 cents.

12 Report of E. Bagot, Inspector-General of Police, FMS, 13 June 1941 (hereafter referred to as Bagot Report), enclosed with FMS Confidential Despatch of 14 July 1941, CO 717/145.

The CIAM was inspired by and to some extent modelled upon the Indian National Congress and, like its Indian counterpart, its middle-class leadership sought to gain the support of Indian labour. To this end, it was believed to have encouraged the formation of district Indian Associations which would then be affiliated to the parent body.¹³ Certainly, members of the CIAM were instrumental in forming the Klang District Indian Union, in July 1939, even though, at the time, there existed no legislative provision for the recognition of trade unions. Indeed, it has been asserted that prior to 1940, the unofficial policy of the Malayan Governments had been "to strangle trade unionism at birth".¹⁴ Perhaps because of the Union's initial appearance in the penumbra of extralegality, no formal records seem to have been kept. It is therefore necessary to deduce what one can of the nature of the organization from other contemporary sources. The first President of the Union was Y.K. Menon, an estate clerk who, in May 1941, was transferred to Singapore, to be replaced by R.H. Nathan. Nathan, an assistant editor of the *Tamil Nesan* -- a Tamil-language newspaper published in Kuala Lumpur since 1925 -- was assisted by his brother, R.S. Nathan. Reported by the Inspector-General of Police to have been "ardent Congressites with strong socialist sympathies",¹⁵ both Menon and R.H. Nathan had been involved in previous activities of a trade union character; moreover, both were members of the CIAM. Their activities in connection with the series of strikes culminating in the settlement of April 1941, brought them very much to the notice of the planters and the authorities. The police considered their behaviour so "objectionable and dangerous" that on 11 March, the Director of Criminal Intelligence applied to the Selangor Government for Orders of Detention under the Emergency Regulations, the rubber industry having been declared an Essential Industry.¹⁶ This suggests that normal trade union activities which aimed at gaining an improvement in wages and conditions of employment of estate workers were viewed as a threat not only to planters' interests, but to national security and the war effort. This apparent identification of planters' interests with broader national interests may well have created a

13 Ibid.; but Mahajani, pp. 122-128; Parmer, pp. 65-66, 218; Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Bombay & Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 97-102; and Sandhu, p. 110, suggest that the link between the CIAM and the various labour organizations was rather nebulous.

14 Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Donald Moore for Eastern Universities Press Ltd, 1962), p. 4.

15 Bagot Report.

16 Ibid. The Orders of Detention were not, however, issued or acted upon at that time.

climate within which the police were predisposed to act in support of estate managers and owners.

But here one of the complexities of the situation must be taken into account. The connection of the CIAM with the Klang District Indian Union has already been noted; yet on 27 March, at the invitation of the Controller of Labour, FMS, the President, Vice-President and Honorary Secretary of the CIAM toured the affected estates with the announced objective of helping to achieve a settlement of the dispute.¹⁷ On the following day, the President of the CIAM, N. Raghavan, had discussions with the Secretary of the UPAM and the Chairman of one of its affiliated organizations, the Klang District Planters' Association.¹⁸ It seems clear that during these discussions, Raghavan was informed that the two associations intended to recommend a wage increase to their members, for on Sunday, 30 March, at a meeting organized by the Klang District Indian Union in honour of the retiring Agent of the Government of India (C.S. Venkatachar), he addressed the gathering -- which included "several hundred Indian labourers including strikers" -- in the following terms:

I must tell you that I found the management, generally speaking, is not against increasing the wages at all. As a result of negotiations a gentlemen's understanding has been arrived at, I need not say between whom but I believe between persons able to deliver the goods. By that understanding I am assured that a meeting of the District Planters' body will be called not later than 9th April to decide a rise in wages. I do not know what the decision of that body will be, but I have strong reasons to believe it will decide on an increase -- how much I cannot say On your part there will not be any new strikes. The old strikers may keep out till 9th.¹⁹

These words were greeted with loud cheers, and Raghavan concluded with an expression of hope that the Union would soon be "recognised", and that friendly

17 Bagot Report. The President was N. Raghavan, and the Vice-President K.A. Neelakandha Aiyer, compiler of *Indian Problems in Malaya. A Brief Survey in Relation to Emigration* (Kuala Lumpur: "The Indian" Office, 1938).

18 FMS, Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Lord Moyne, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, CO 717/145.

19 *The Indian*, Kuala Lumpur, 3 April 1941. Raghavan's speech was translated from English into Tamil by R.H. Nathan. This was necessary since Raghavan, whose mother tongue was Malayalam, had little knowledge of other South Indian languages.

relations between employees and their employers would prevail. On 9 April, an increase in wages to 60 cents for males and 50 cents for females, retroactive to 1 April, was announced. The strikers returned to work, and the trouble appeared to be over. Yet, members of the UPAM expressed bitter resentment over the settlement, which they tended to view as a betrayal of their interests.

Central to planters' interests was, of course, the compelling need to maximize profits. Whether as proprietors, or as the salaried managers of estates owned by distant corporate enterprises, members of the UPAM perceived their immediate task in terms of providing the largest quantity of rubber that the size of their plantations and existing international agreements restricting production would allow, at the lowest cost possible. Within this broad rubric and, no doubt, out of a sense of enlightened self-interest, the planting community had gradually -- and sometimes unwillingly -- come to accept the fact that, in order to achieve the contented and quiescent (if not happy) work force that was the most productive, certain requirements had to be met. These included the provision of accommodation, basic medical care, maternity allowances for female workers, primary education facilities, land allotments for vegetable cultivation, and a wage which it was assumed would be sufficient to provide for the subsistence of the labourer and his family with a small surplus for savings, remittance to India, or an occasional return visit to the labourer's village of origin.²⁰ When the world price of rubber was high, the Controller of Labour and (from 1923 on) the Agent of the Government of India achieved some trifling success in prodding the planters to improve conditions for their work force; but such advances were frequently lost in times of trade recession. Much of the attention of district planters' associations and the UPAM during the 1930s was devoted to ascertaining the irreducible cost of survival for a tapper, from which could be calculated an "acceptable" minimum wage.²¹ It is not surprising to find that attempts, on the part of labourers, to engage in collective action designed to improve wages and conditions were resisted by employers, who tended to label would-be union organizers as "trouble-makers" and "agitators". Furthermore, the loyalties of European estate managers were directed towards Britain and the British Empire, then engaged in a life-or-death struggle in the West; and in the prevailing climate

20 Straits Settlements, Original Correspondence, Major G. St. J. Orde-Browne's report, "Labour Conditions", submitted 1.4.42, CO 273/671/50766, pp. 21, 42. Major Orde-Browne was Labour Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and his report was prepared following a visit to Malaya in 1941.

21 For a comprehensive discussion of the methods by which wages were determined, see Parmer, pp. 166-220, particularly p. 187ff. See also Sandhu, pp. 258-261.

of opinion, the decision of the leaders of the Indian National Congress not to cooperate with the British Raj was viewed as being positively supportive of Britain's enemies. Given the known or suspected relationship that existed between the CIAM and the Indian National Congress, members of the CIAM engaged in essentially trade union activities were widely suspected of having politically subversive goals, a view that appeared to be substantiated by reports then circulating to the effect that, at a secret meeting of the Sepang (Selangor) Indian Association, members had pledged themselves to work for Independence, and to instruct Indian labourers not to help the British in their war effort. At the same meeting, a decision had been taken to contribute \$100.00 to Japan, as a gesture of defiance to the colonial authorities.²²

When, therefore, the Controller of Labour took the initiative of inviting the leaders of the CIAM to help mediate in the dispute, he drew upon the government the disapproval of the European planting community. But what was even more galling to the planters was the failure of the government to take action against those whom the planters perceived to be the immediate causes of their trouble: the Union, and its organizers, Menon and Nathan. On 7 February, the Klang District Planters' Association wrote to the Federal Secretary, FMS, asking for the suppression of the Klang District Indian Union, but no action was taken.²³ However, at the insistent demand of the planters, the local police subsequently conducted an investigation, as a result of which they concluded that both Menon and Nathan were indeed engaged in subversive activities. On 11 March, the Director of the Criminal Intelligence Branch in Kuala Lumpur requested Detention Orders against the two men under the Emergency Regulations. But the British Resident of Selangor declined to issue the Orders, explaining (in a letter to the Federal Secretary) that in his opinion interference in labour disputes and the promotion of strikes did not amount to subversive activities. The Federal Secretary passed the file to the High Commissioner in Singapore, and after the case had been reviewed by the senior officials concerned, together with the Legal Adviser and the Inspector-General of Police, it was decided that sufficient evidence indeed did exist for the detention and deportation of both men.²⁴

22 FMS Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 9, CO 717/145.

23 S.B. Palmer, President, United Planting Association of Malaya, to H.E. The High Commissioner, 6 June 1941.

24 FMS, Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to The Right Honourable Lord Moyne, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, pp. 5-6.

On 18 March, the High Commissioner gave his approval for the detention of Menon and Nathan, but owing to delay in preparation, the warrants were not issued until 28 March. Execution of the warrants was further delayed when it appeared likely that the strikes would be settled, and that the arrest of Menon and Nathan at that point could only exacerbate the situation. Thus it transpired that both Menon and Nathan were left free to organize the meeting at Klang which was held in honour of the departing Agent of the Government of India, Venkatachar, and which turned into something of a victory celebration with Raghavan's announcement of the impending wage increase.

The response of the European planters was one of outrage, the view being expressed that they had been blackmailed into granting wage increases due to the abdication of responsibility by the government. Typical of much of the comment was a report by the Kuala Lumpur manager of the London-based firm of Guthrie & Co. Ltd., in which he noted:

As far as can be traced and from the evidence available it is certain that the strikes are the work of Indian Agitators and there is no real feeling of discontent amongst the majority of the labour forces. This agitation is not unconnected with the activities of the Central Indian Association [of Malaya] ... whose representatives are now taking part in the negotiations. The strikes commenced on Midlands, Highlands, and one or two other neighbouring estates, and the managers of these estates were prepared to take drastic action and did so by dismissing the ringleaders who refused to leave the estates. They were then prosecuted for trespass, but due to some incredible bungling on the part of the prosecution got off with a very light fine.

Government then made matters worse by first agreeing to banish one of the principal agitators and then cancelling the order....²⁵

The subject of the dismissal and prosecution of the "ringleaders" was referred to by the Controller of Labour in a memorandum submitted to the High Commissioner, in which he sought to counter the charges of lack of concern, inactivity and bungling that were being levelled against the government

²⁵ Extract from report dated 4 April 1941, enclosed with letter from Sir John Hay addressed to Clifford H. Figg, Assistant Secretary at the Colonial Office, London, 28 May 1941, CO 717/145.

in general, and against his own department in particular. He insisted that consultations with estate managers had been numerous, and that it was now clear that

we did not realise at the time that there was more than the natural reluctance to unsettle labour forces in the disinclination of planters to take active measures to help themselves, by trying out the method we advised [of discharging "troublemakers"]. There always had been a number of planters and agents who thought that it was the duty of Government to compel the workers to return to work In advising these planters, we found that we had to overcome a strong resentment against "Government" arising from the faulty prosecution of seven workers on Midlands Estate. The Estate prosecuted seven discharged labourers because they refused to leave the Estate. The Court was crowded for the trial, and the conviction on a charge of criminal trespass and sentence of two months [imprisonment] caused scenes in and around the Court. Notice of appeal was given and the accused applied for and were given bail as is customary. The granting of bail is entirely a matter for the magistrate, but such is the mentality of certain planters and agents that this was quoted freely as evidence of the weakness of "Government"....²⁶

A rather different view of the matter was taken by the Agent of the Government of India. A few days before his retirement, he wrote to the Government of the FMS expressing his concern over what he considered to be the victimization of the strike leaders. He insisted:

These prosecutions, ostensibly meant to assert the private rights of the owner ... of the estate premises are really designed to break the strikes through the courts of law by one of the parties involved in the dispute There is a feeling among the public ... that the law courts are being brought into contempt by such proceedings

In this Agency we have always felt that the policy of the Malayan Governments with regard to immigrant Indian labour is marked by sympathy and much consideration and we have always reposed confidence in their just treatment and sense of fair play. The present situation is somewhat disturbing ²⁷

26 Memo by C. Wilson, Controller of Labour, Malaya, submitted to the High Commissioner, 25 June 1941, CO 717/145.

27 Letter from C.S. Venkatachar, ICS, Agent of the Government of India to Adrian Clark, Legal Adviser, FMS, 27 March 1941, CO 717/145.

No reply appears to have been sent to this communication.

At this point it is necessary to attempt to establish the nature of the workers' demands, since there is much ambiguity on this score in the reports of both planters and government officials, a fact that may suggest a failure of communication due to the lack of articulate spokesmen to represent the workers' interests. There is, however, one point on which all were agreed, at least initially; and that is that there was an economic motive. Something of the impact of the outbreak of World War II on the economy of Malaya is indicated in the comment of an official at the Colonial Office, in February 1941:

The expectations for 1940 were entirely upset by the American demand for tin and rubber. America is taking 430,000 tons of rubber -- for stock; and has already agreed to buy 75,000 tons of tin. We have learnt in the course of the last few days, that they wish to buy, at the present rate, all the tin we can produce till about June 1942. I calculate that this may mean about 7,000 tons p.m.; it may even go higher

All this abounding prosperity in 1940, which will, there seems no doubt whatever, be continued in 1941 ²⁸

The enormously enhanced demand for Malaya's rubber and tin created considerable profits for the owners of rubber estates and tin mines. At the same time, the cost of living began to escalate. Rubber estate workers, acutely sensitive even to minor increases in the cost of such commodities as rice, cooking oil and other foodstuffs, were not unaware of the large profits being made by their employers. Reports of the soaring profits of rubber estates appeared in the English press -- the *Straits Times* of 9 January 1941, for example, referred to the trebling of profits of one rubber company -- and these reports were repeated in the vernacular press.²⁹ It is fair to assume that rubber estate workers desired to share in the sudden prosperity of the industry, and it is significant that the announcement of an increase in wages, retroactive to 1 April, was sufficient to secure a temporary return to work.

28 Minute by Sir J. Campbell, dated 20.2.41, added to Memorandum No. 19 of 1941, FMS, Paper to be laid before the Federal Council by command of His Excellency, the High Commissioner. CO 717/146/51692.

29 Memo by C. Wilson, Controller of Labour, Malaya, 25 June 1941.

But there is evidence to suggest that more was at stake. Later on, in a statement to a Madras newspaper after his deportation to India, Nathan asserted that the demands raised during the strikes included: parity of pay for Indian and Chinese labourers; the removal of Ceylonese and Malayali estate staff who were "brutal" and their replacement with Tamil-speaking staff; the provision of "proper" education for children; an end to the molesting of labourers' womenfolk by Europeans and "black" Europeans; the provision of proper medical facilities; the closing of toddy shops; the granting of freedom of speech and assembly; free access to estates for relations and friends; permission for labourers to remain mounted on bicycles in front of European managers and Asian staff; the abolition of 10 to 12-hour working days; no victimization of those presenting grievances; and permission for labourers to combine to form an association to represent their interests.³⁰ Because conditions varied widely from estate to estate, there is reason to suppose that many of the grievances mentioned were well-founded, at least on some plantations. So far as parity of pay for Indian and Chinese labourers was concerned, the issue was made complex by the fact that Indian labourers enjoyed a number of benefits not provided for Chinese estate-labour, and by differences in the methods of employment of Indians and Chinese.³¹

In its reports to the Colonial Office, the Federal Government consistently maintained that, once the wage issue had been settled, there existed no justification for the strikes. Yet, it is clear that the government had some inkling of the social and political issues involved for, in a report he submitted to the Colonial Office in July, the High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas noted that there had been cases

where labourers wearing Gandhi or Congress caps have been made to take them off. These caps have only recently appeared, and the practice now is to ignore them At the same time, their appearance shows that adherents of the Congress party [sic] have

30 *The Hindu*, Madras, 2 June 1941, cited in Stenson, p. 29.

31 For a discussion of the differences in the terms of employment of Indian and Chinese labourers, see Parmer, pp. 99-108; 158-165; 169-170. The shortcomings of estate educational and medical facilities, as well as the inadequacies of accommodation, are detailed in official reports, and have been well documented; see, for example, Arasaratnam, *passim*; Sandhu, pp. 259-260; Parmer, 124-125. A dispassionate account of the conditions of employment of Indian labourers was provided by a member of the Indian National Congress, the Right Honourable V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, following his investigation of 1936/37; see Malaya, *Reprint of Report on the Conditions of Indian Labour in Malaya*, by Rt. Hon. V.S. Srinivasa Sastri (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printing Office, 1937).

been at work and, though I do not support demands for removal, I can understand the feelings of an estate manager ... at seeing his men parade a symbol of passive resistance to the struggle in which Great Britain is engaged.

It is the custom in India to dismount from a bicycle when meeting a superior. It is no more than a mark of respect, just as we take off our hat to a lady. But it is unwise to require this here and it is not commonly required.

Isolated incidents such as the above give no ground for general unrest, but they give a handle to the agitator ³²

The racialism and paternalism implicit in these words were no more than a reflection of ethno-centric values and attitudes widely, if not unquestioningly, held by the European planting community at the time; and an insensitivity to their impact upon the human beings who were employed as field workers, tappers or factory and smoke-shed workers must be counted as one of the root causes of the industrial unrest.

An added element of antagonism had been injected into the dispute by reprisals taken on some estates against striking workers. On Whiteacres, Demansara and Blackacres estates, the pipe-borne fresh water supplies to the labour lines had been cut off for varying periods.³³ Whilst deploring this, the President of the UPAM had offered by way of explanation the fact that in some cases senior management personnel had been absent from their estates fulfilling their training obligations in the FMS Volunteers, and that inexperienced assistant managers had overreacted. The President, pursuing the logic of this argument, sought to persuade the High Commissioner to grant estate managers exemption from such service requirements in future. This the High Commissioner declined to do, on the ground that the Volunteer Force would be unable to undertake its allotted role in the defence of Malaya if it were to be deprived of the services of the "European Planting Community".³⁴

32 FMS Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Lord Moyne, 14 July 1941, p. 15.

33 Ibid., pp. 14-15. Citing a different UPAM source, Stenson maintains that there were at least two instances in which not only water supplies, but also rice rations were cut off by estate management as a form of retaliation - see Stenson, p. 30.

34 Letters, President of the UPAM to the High Commissioner, 6 June 1941; and High Commissioner to President UPAM, 20 June 1941.

Planters generally persisted in the view that, apart from the demand for an increase in wages, the strikes were the result of the subversive activities of members of the CIAM. This view was shared by senior officials of the FMS Government. In a letter to the Controller of Labour dated 4 April, the British Director of Criminal Intelligence indicated his disapproval of the former's invitation to leaders of the CIAM to mediate in the dispute. He wrote:

It is my opinion that the situation is very delicate now that the CIAM has been permitted to interfere in labour affairs. They may succeed in winning over the whole-hearted support of Indian labour throughout the country, and through that press for recognition as a political party in Malaya.

I have already informed you, and it has frequently appeared in police reports, that the leaders of the CIAM are strong and ardent supporters of Congress. The thing that I really fear is the spread of civil disobedience in this country. Unless the activities of the CIAM are checked now and unless they are made to withdraw their attentions from labour disputes, they will soon be in a position to dominate Indian labour throughout Malaya with the consequent ill-effects that must have.

I do not propose withdrawing my application for action under Emergency Regulations against Menon, Nathan and Thangaiah [allegedly a member of the Malayan Communist Party] because it is based on their political activities and not only on their activities as regards labour. I think ... that their intention was not only to produce an economic strike but to win over labour to their side so that they can make use of labour in their political activities; and I think you will agree that their political activities will be anti-British. I would again stress their Congress, Japanese and Communist contacts ³⁵

When called upon by the High Commissioner to explain his actions, the Controller maintained that, in his view, Raghavan was a "moderate", and that in a dispute involving large numbers of inarticulate labourers, it was essential for the workers to be represented by someone who enjoyed their trust and respect, and whose decisions would be accepted. Furthermore, it would have been unwise, he felt, to have denied the "facilities" of his department to the President of the CIAM, an organization which clearly enjoyed the support of members of the Indian

35 J.D. Dalley, Director of Criminal Intelligence, to C. Wilson, Controller of Labour, Malaya, 4 April 1941.

community.³⁶ In the meantime, in view of the wage increase which appeared to settle the dispute, action in connection with the arrest of Menon and Nathan was again postponed. The first period of strikes thus drew to a close, with a small victory for the workers, and with the Klang District Indian Union and the CIAM enjoying a distinctly enhanced prestige.

The experience to this point had left the European planters uneasy, and with the impression that they had not received the kind of support from government to which they believed they were entitled. In the hope of clarifying the situation and obliging government to accept what they perceived to be its responsibility, they invited the Controller of Labour to attend a meeting of the Proprietors' and Planting sections of the UPAM on 15 April. Considerable annoyance was expressed by members of the Association when the Controller refused to guarantee government "assistance" or "protection" in the event of further strikes.³⁷ It is clear, in the context of subsequent events, that what the planters required was a guarantee of police assistance in the arrest and eviction of those whom estate managers judged to be "trouble-makers". In short, government was to function as strike-breaker.

Within a week of the announcement of the wage increase, it became apparent that the troubles were not over. Between 15 April and 3 May, twenty-eight strikes occurred, of which seven lasted for four or more days. The reports on these strikes, by the Deputy Controller of Labour, provide evidence that they had been fired by a variety of grievances, some of which were explicitly political in character. Thus, he reported that at the Port Swettenham estate, workers demanded that the Congress flag be flown at the entrance to the estate, and that pictures of Gandhi be hung in all rooms including the estate office.³⁸ In other instances, the causes were not so clear: at the Bukit Cheraka estate, the Deputy Controller was informed by the manager that "it was the youngsters who were making the trouble and the large majority were being intimidated into striking". He understood that workers had "put up a series of demands most of which were trifling and could easily be solved", while at the Padang Gajah estate, the

36 Letter, Controller of Labour to High Commissioner, enclosed with FMS Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Lord Moyne, 14 July 1941.

37 Report from E. Hardman, Local Manager, Guthrie & Co., Ltd., Kuala Lumpur, 17 April 1941, a copy of which was forwarded to the Colonial Office by Sir John Hay, Managing Director, on 16 June 1941.

38 Cited by High Commissioner in FMS, Confidential Despatch, 14 July 1941, p. 54. CO 717/145.

manager considered that "the whole series of strikes was due to political agitators and was without economic foundation" and that the government "had failed in its duty to deal with the situation".³⁹ The Inspector-General of Police, in his report, insisted that "it soon became clear ... that the labourers now began to believe what Menon and Nathan had told them, namely that labour wielded the power and it had only to unite in its demands to see them granted". He argued that "in most cases" the demands were minor and insufficient to justify strike action.⁴⁰

During this second period, organizers of the Klang District Indian Union were extremely active, addressing gatherings of estate workers, appealing for unity and stressing the possibility of gaining an improvement in conditions, thereby shattering the fatalistic acceptance with which many labourers hitherto had viewed their lot. A sense of expectant discontent revealed itself in the increasing pace of strikes, causing growing concern to estate managers. At the meeting of the UPAM called to consider the situation on 28 April, motions were passed stating that members were continuing to do all that was "within their influence and their power" to resolve the discontent; that the Association viewed with anxiety the activities of "certain persons" who, as "officers or the agents of officers of certain societies or associations" were causing "disaffection"; that the Association did not intend to grant any further increase in wages; and that the government should be urged to accept the duty of "meeting the situation and of devising proper means for dealing with it".⁴¹ A deputation was appointed to bring these matters to the notice of the Federal Secretary.

Despite the increasing frequency of strikes and mounting pressures from the European planting community, the Controller of Labour continued in the belief that the CIAM was not to blame. In a memo to the Inspector-General of Police he wrote:

All the information I have about the activities of Messrs. Menon and Nathan, the instigators of the recent strikes, leads me to the conclusion that they are the only educated Indians connected with the bigger Indian associations who have formed contacts with the

39 Ibid., pp. 54-55.

40 Bagot Report, p. 2.

41 The United Planting Association of Malaya: Decisions of the Planting Section, Kuala Lumpur, 28 April 1941 (typescript).

labourers In so far as the Central Indian Association of Malaya or the Selangor Indian Association have been brought into direct contact with labour matters it has been by them *and then with reluctance*.⁴²

That the police did not accept this interpretation is clear from a letter to the British Resident, Selangor, written by the Director of Criminal Intelligence on 2 May, urging the immediate arrest and deportation of Nathan, Menon and Thangaiah. He pointed out that all were members of the CIAM and active union organizers. He went on to charge the Controller of Labour with failure to cooperate with him by keeping him informed of the activities of the CIAM. Enclosed with his letter were lengthy verbatim reports of the speeches of the "agitators", the contents of which appear designed mainly to secure unity of action in pursuit of better wages and working conditions.⁴³ But in addition, both Menon and Nathan frequently gave warning of their own imminent arrest, and advised their followers to be ready to retaliate with "the strongest action". On one occasion, Nathan was reported as saying: "Menon and I will be arrested very soon, we feel sure. When we have been arrested, you people must go on strike and agitate for our release."⁴⁴ On 3 May, under mounting pressure from the planters, the Controller of Labour agreed that Menon and Nathan should be arrested, although he feared that this action might make matters worse. The necessary warrants were reissued, and Nathan was arrested on 6 May. Menon, having been transferred to Singapore a day or so earlier, avoided arrest. The second period, which set the stage for confrontation, thus drew to a close.

News of Nathan's arrest appears to have spread rather slowly, as reaction to it was far from instantaneous or well coordinated. Some reports mention 7 May as the beginning of widespread strikes, others refer to 8 or 9 May.⁴⁵ Certainly, by 8 May, some estates must have been affected, for by 9 a.m. on that day, several hundred Indian labourers assembled at the office of the Controller of Labour in Kuala Lumpur demonstrating for the release of Nathan.⁴⁶

42 Memo, Controller of Labour, Malaya, to Inspector-General of Police, FMS, 1 May 1941 (emphasis added).

43 J.D. Dalley, Director, CIB, FMS, Kuala Lumpur, to Federal Secretary, 2 May 1941. CO 717/145.

44 High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, p. 10.

45 Ibid., pp. 2, 10; Bagot Report, Part II, p. 3.

46 *Straits Times*, Singapore, 9 May 1941. See also High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, p. 10.

On 9 May, the Chief Police Officer of Selangor went to Klang in response to requests from estate managers for assistance in the eviction of dismissed "unruly" workers. On arrival, he found that most estates in Klang district and as far north as Jeram (some 19 miles distant) were strike-bound. There was, in his view, little doubt that the work stoppage "... whether voluntary or under threats, was due to the arrest of Nathan, and coolies hoping that united action and demands on their part would lead to his release".⁴⁷

That some thought had been given to the strategy to be adopted is suggested by the activities of the strikers. At one estate, a group of workers assembled at the factory in order to prevent the transport of a consignment of rubber to Port Dickson, while fellow workers were busily engaged in cutting down trees which were then placed across the approach road and a bridge, thereby effectively halting traffic. When police attempted to remove the obstruction, they were met by a "fusillade of bricks, bottles and lumps of earth".⁴⁸ In the ensuing clash, four labourers were injured by the police, who used their riot sticks. Later in the day, the strikers were joined by several hundred others from a neighbouring plantation, armed with an assortment of weapons including sticks, spears, iron bars, broken bottles, and bricks. When they refused to disperse, the police again charged, with the result of further injuries and one death. Numerous reports of similar incidents began to reach police headquarters, and by 10 May, it was clear that the police had insufficient manpower to meet the challenge. Bands of bicycle-riding workers were reported far afield seeking to persuade labour from more distant estates to join the work stoppage. Places other than estates, where Indian workers were employed, were also approached -- including the Bata Shoe Factory, Kapar Match Factory, the Railway, the docks, and the Sanitary Board -- in attempts to secure supportive action. These attempts met with little success. There is no evidence that when armed, the workers had anything other than the most primitive weapons, but in many places telephone lines were cut in a partially successful attempt to disrupt contacts between estates and police.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the High Commissioner had been drawn into the matter. On 6 May in Kuala Lumpur, he had received a deputation from the UPAM,

47 Bagot Report, Part II, p. 3.

48 Ibid.

49 Bagot Report, p. 4.

led by its President, S.B. Palmer, who complained bitterly of the "indifference" of the Controller of Labour, and the "inaction" of the government.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the High Commissioner reported that up to that time, he had not been advised of any disturbances, and that his meeting with Palmer gave him his first "inkling of what was in store".⁵¹ During the meeting, according to the High Commissioner, two principles of policy were established:

- (1) ... that the Government ... does not fix the wage to be paid in any industry. It is the duty of the Labour Department, when wage disputes arise, to pay regard to all the circumstances, and to make ... representations based on the facts and figures at its disposal in an effort to secure a just settlement
- (2) ... while it is the duty of the Labour Department to safeguard the interests of labourers, it is no less its duty to use every effort to conciliate in labour disputes, and to exercise a fair and impartial influence between employers and employed ⁵²

The High Commissioner went on to explain to the deputation why he was reluctant to apply the Defence Regulations to force an end to the strike:

The Government is no more able to make a man work against his will than is an estate or mine manager, and it is necessary that this should be recognised [However], there is no reason why labourers who decline to work should be allowed to remain on an estate. The Manager is entitled to pay them off, and if they still remain, to see them off the estate The police will not give active help in this (they are not and never have been "chuckers-out"), but if notice is given a sufficient force will be sent to the estate to deal with any persons who may attempt to create disturbances It seemed to all of us that action of this sort, especially if directed against those who are suspected of trying to prevent or upset settlement would be salutary, as the evidence ... is that the bulk of the labourers prefer to work in peace and quiet

We all felt that it would be a mistake to take direct action against labourers wearing Gandhi caps. The Indian coolie

50 High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, p. 10.

51 Ibid., p. 2.

52 FMS, Secret and Confidential memorandum, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 May 1941, CO 717/145/51574/1.

is very much a child, and in a matter of this sort is more likely to be daunted by mild ridicule than by active suppression.

We agree that the flying of Congress flags at entrances to an estate can reasonably be prohibited by managers, as suggesting that the estate itself is pro-Congress. It is ... debatable whether this prohibition should extend to the display of these flags in the labourers lines

It cannot be denied that labour is becoming more and more progressive and that the need for ... contact becomes correspondingly greater.⁵³

According to its leader, the deputation had pointed out to the High Commissioner that unless the government took "strong action" the strikes would spread, with a resulting loss of production which would "seriously affect Malaya's war effort". It was also argued that the cost-of-living "had not increased to any untoward extent" and that the wages paid Tamil labourers on rubber estates "were higher than at any time in the history of the rubber industry". The President of the UPAM insisted that planters had done all they could, but that they had reached the end of their tether, and that government now must deal with the situation. The President's report continued:

We pointed out that to date we had received little or no assistance from the Government whose attitude appeared to be one of masterly inactivity ⁵⁴

In the days following this meeting, the situation deteriorated and on 10 May, in response to requests from the Selangor Chief of Police, the British Resident, and the Inspector-General of Police, the High Commissioner decided to call in military assistance. At first, an approach was made to Australian troops, as they were stationed closest to Kuala Lumpur; but when their Commanding Officer declined to give assistance, on the ground that he was not legally empowered to go to the aid of the civil authorities, contact was made with the

53 Ibid.

54 S.B. Palmer, "Record by the President of the Association of Interview of May 6th, 1941, with H.E. the High Commissioner upon the subject of current labour unrest and strikes," Bruas, Perak, 9 May 1941 (typescript).

British Officer in Command in the area, who arranged for a battalion of Indian troops to be brought to Klang from Ipoh, about 125 miles away, and the decision was taken to call out the armoured car unit and the Signals Company of the Malay States Volunteer Force.⁵⁵ From the High Commissioner's report, it is abundantly clear that no consideration whatsoever was given to the propriety or possible political consequences of using British-officered Indian troops to put down riots by Indian labourers directed primarily against British-owned estates. It was a point not to be overlooked by the politically conscious in India.

The troops were given orders to disperse groups of strikers who were, by then, reported to be travelling in trucks and buses as well as on bicycles. The British Resident, Negri Sembilan, telephoned the High Commissioner with the news that a "gang of strike-spreaders" was believed to be approaching via the coast road, and that he had sent police to meet them. He had also ordered the State Volunteers to stand by.⁵⁶

The disturbances reached a peak during the period 10 May to 17 May. By 11 May, work had ceased on practically every estate between Kuala Selangor and Sepang, 28 miles north and 50 miles south of Klang respectively, and there were frequent clashes between the strikers and the forces of the establishment. Reports were received of damage to property, including the destruction of several toddy shops, a point that the authorities took as evidence of the influence of both the Indian National Congress and the CIAM.⁵⁷ On 12 and 13 May, estates in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur joined the strike, and more troops were deployed to reinforce those already on duty. Numerous baton charges were made by the police, and on several occasions troops fired on gatherings of strikers, with the inevitable result of serious injuries including five deaths.⁵⁸ In general it appears that once the strike organizers had been arrested, labourers were easily prevailed upon to return to work. On 14 May, 93 out of a total of 120 rubber estates

55 High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 14 July 1941, p. 11; Confidential Telegram, FMS No. 42, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 May 1941; Unnumbered Telegram, FMS, High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 10 May 1941.

56 FMS, Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 14 July 1941, p. 12.

57 Bagot Report, Part II, pp. 5-6.

58 Ibid., pp. 6-9.

in the Kuala Selangor, Kuala Langat and the Klang districts were reported on strike; however, by 17 May, there were unmistakable signs that the disturbances had passed their peak.⁵⁹ An Associated Press report spoke of 15,000 employees on 40 estates still being "idle" on that day "due to intimidation by a small group of agitators",⁶⁰ but the High Commissioner felt that the situation was sufficiently under control to allow him to return to Singapore. As calm was restored, the troops were progressively withdrawn, and all estates were reported back in production by the end of the month. Short-lived as it was, however, the incident left the colonial authorities profoundly disturbed.

And on the face of it, the third phase of the strikes had accomplished nothing for the estate workers. During the riots, 386 orders of arrest and detention had been issued, under the Emergency Regulations, for persons against whom it was considered there existed evidence of "active intimidation".⁶¹ Nathan was deported to India on 19 May.⁶² The Klang District Indian Union ceased to exist, most of its active members having been arrested and the organization dissolved on government orders. The government found itself, willy-nilly, acting in support of European interests and serving, in practice, as strike-breaker. The workers returned to the estates cowed by the violence of the measures used against them, and without any improvement in wages or conditions.

On the other hand, the European planters were not entirely happy. Certainly, in responding to what it perceived to be a challenge to its authority, the government had committed itself wholeheartedly to supporting the planters. It had arrested and detained "troublemakers" -- it had indeed allowed the police and army to become "chuckers-out" -- it had afforded some protection of person and property; and it had imposed the return of a chastened and apparently tractable work force to the martially ordered ranks of rubber trees.

59 High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 14 July 1941, pp. 12-13; Bagot Report, Part II, pp. 4-9.

60 *Dispatch*, 18 May 1941.

61 Bagot Report, Part II, p. 10.

62 Government House Confidential telegram No. 238, Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 May 1941. Subsequently, Nathan was again arrested, this time under the Defence of India rules, for fomenting labour troubles which were considered likely to hamper the war effort. The Madras police suspected him of being "a cunning underground worker ... capable of considerable mischief" -- High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 14 July 1941, p. 10.

But quite apart from the interrupted flow of latex, and damage to their property, the planters were disturbed by a number of factors. First of all, the events had revealed the presence of a new-found national consciousness acting in dangerous combination with nascent trade unionism to transform the hitherto compliant labourers into a potentially militant proletariat. And then, there were the repercussions consequential to an appeal to the strikers issued by the High Commissioner at the height of the riots. The appeal had been in the form of a manifesto, written in Tamil, several thousand copies of which had been distributed. In it, persuasively urging a return to work, the High Commissioner had undertaken to consider "any representations", and to arrange a full investigation of complaints, once order had been restored.⁶³ In explaining his action to the Colonial Office, the High Commissioner indicated his belief that there were "no alleged grievances worth mentioning" and that such "trifling complaints" as existed normally would have been settled by the estate managers.⁶⁴ This prompted an immediate response from Lord Moyne, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, who had been following events closely. He telegraphed:

.... I attach importance to steps which you are taking for investigation of labourers' grounds for complaint. However trifling these may appear I doubt if it is sufficient in present circumstances to rely upon estate Managers to settle them in view of serious nature of disturbances.⁶⁵

The Colonial Office anticipated that there would be a full, impartial investigation in order to reestablish public confidence in the government, and to restore peaceful conditions to the strategically important rubber industry.

But a full and impartial enquiry into the disturbances did not commend itself to the planters, and it is not difficult to find the reason for their lack of enthusiasm. Such an investigation risked exposure of the hollowness of the frequently reiterated claim that the disturbances had been the work of a handful of "troublemakers"; and it might have opened the way to a flood of demands for improved conditions of employment. In order to head off such an enquiry, the newly formed Emergency Executive Committee of the UPAM held a hastily

63 Confidential telegram, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 May 1941; *Financial News*, 21 May 1941.

64 Ibid.

65 Telegram No. 35, from Secretary of State for the Colonies to the High Commissioner, 22 May 1941.

convened meeting in Kuala Lumpur, on 21 May. After discussion, the Committee agreed unanimously:

- (1) that the recent labour disturbances ... did not originate from reasonable and legitimate grievances arising out of the terms and conditions of employment ...;
- (2) that such disturbances were caused by the activities of agitators ...;
- (3) that to the best of the knowledge and belief of the Association all cases of genuine grievances and bona fide complaints ... have already been inquired into ...;
- (4) that it was never contemplated by the Association that His Excellency's promise made in his manifesto to estate labour that any representations put forward ... would be referred to a special tribunal but that such representations would be inquired into by the Labour Department pursuant to the ordinary procedure ...;
- (5) that the Association feels very strongly indeed that great harm might result if a tribunal of inquiry were now appointed by Government;
- (6) that the mere announcement that such a tribunal was to be appointed would encourage estate labour to come forward with ill-founded and exaggerated and frivolous complaints, and generally would have a most unsettling effect upon labour ...;
- (7) that if however His Excellency decides that in his manifesto he did in fact make a promise to consider complaints, then it is suggested that ... complaints should be made first to estate managers who would examine and reply thereto;
- (8) that having regard to the foregoing the Association earnestly urges that His Excellency will not appoint any special tribunal to deal with representations which estate labour ... may make in response to the manifesto ⁶⁶

A copy of the minutes of the meeting was promptly forwarded to the High Commissioner in Singapore. A few days later, the UPAM followed up the minutes with a letter to the High Commissioner which added a further dimension

66 The United Planting Association of Malaya, Proceedings of the Emergency Executive Committee at the meeting held at Kuala Lumpur, 21 May 1941 (typescript).

by suggesting a convenient scapegoat. It was the Association's belief, the letter read, "that the vacillation of and the absence of prompt action by certain officers of Government made possible the strikes and disturbances".⁶⁷ The opinions and arguments contained in these documents, stressing the deleterious effects of an enquiry, in conjunction with pressures from other sections of the European community, including the English-language press, appear to have been effective. In a report to the Colonial Office, the High Commissioner sought to justify his decision against a full and open investigation on grounds of expediency:

When the strikes were over, I was faced ... with the question whether to arrange for a public enquiry into their origin or to carry out an investigation myself. I know that the former would have been regarded as justified but I decided on the latter course for several reasons. The most important ... was that the labourers needed an opportunity to settle down quietly, whereas a public enquiry would have been attended by argument and counter-argument and the evidence would certainly have been misrepresented by politically minded Indians. Another reason ... was that the ineffective action of certain Government officials would have been made public. I saw no advantage in this, provided that their actions are otherwise examined and adjudged.⁶⁸

The advantages of a "cover-up" clearly commended themselves to His Excellency.

And there the matter might have rested. Given the government's wartime powers of censorship, it is possible that the events might have been sufficiently muffled to pass unnoticed outside Malaya. But here, the Agent of the Government of India reenters the picture. At the end of March, C.S. Venkatachar retired from the position of Agent, and his place was taken by S.C. Dutt, a younger man who was not familiar with conditions in Malaya. At first, he appears to have accepted the official interpretation of the labour dispute at Klang. At meetings with representatives of the Indian communities in Penang and Singapore shortly after his arrival, he is reported to have expressed himself as satisfied that the Tamil estate labourers had "no valid reason for going out on strike". On 11 May, he was briefed by the High Commissioner, who informed him of the government view that the bulk of the labourers had been forced into strike

67 Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Secretary of State, 14 July 1941, pp. 15-16.

68 Ibid., p. 16.

action by "a small minority of agitators", and that their actions constituted "a challenge to the authority of the Government and as such would be resisted". The High Commissioner told Dutt that there would be no discussion of the labourers' grievances until order had been restored, and asked for his assistance in persuading the labourers to return to work.⁶⁹

Dutt agreed to help, stating that the labourers were in need of guidance, and that they were more likely to listen to him than to a member of the Labour Department.⁷⁰ However, when Dutt met the workers, it appears that he underwent a conversion, for his report to the Government of India caused a flurry of exchanges between New Delhi and the India Office in London. That the Government of India had a continuing concern over the plight of Indians in Malaya is clear not only from the perpetuation of the ban on assisted-passage emigration to the peninsula, but also from a letter written by the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, to the Secretary of State for India, Leo Amery, shortly before the outbreak of the third phase of the Klang disturbances. In it, the Viceroy reasoned that, in view of the considerable support provided by India for the war effort, the time was "opportune for seeking public recognition of the claim of Indians who [had] made their home in Malaya to the same rights of citizenship, whether social, political or economic", as other British subjects. He noted that in educational facilities and in the matter of "their representation in the public life of Malaya" Indians still remained in a position of inferiority.⁷¹

The Viceroy was, of course, responding to growing pressures in India for action to secure an improvement in the status of Indians overseas, particularly in Malaya. The information supplied by the Agent of the Government of India brought the matter into sharp focus. In his report, the Agent charged that the Malayan Government had refused to advise him of the reasons for the arrest and impending deportation of Nathan, that the movements of Indian labourers had been strictly controlled, and that they had been effectively prevented from

69 Ibid., p. 11.

70 Ibid.

71 Linlithgow to Amery, 18 April 1941, cited in Amery to Moyne, June [sic] 1941, [received at Colonial Office on 26 June 1941], CO 967/74, Colonial Office, Private Papers.

establishing contact with him.⁷² The Indian Government was concerned that reports of the disturbances reaching the Dominion would outrage local opinion, and in a telegram to the Secretary of State for India, urged that the Malayan Government be requested to communicate, "confidentially if necessary", full details of what had occurred, and the reasons for the actions taken, so that "responsible opinion" in India could be satisfied of the necessity for such actions.⁷³ The telegram added that it would help to "reassure public opinion" if it could be stated that the Agent of the Government of India, whose discretion could be "wholly relied upon" was in close touch with the Malayan authorities.

Officials at the India Office promptly conveyed the substance of this message to the Colonial Office, and were informed in reply that according to the High Commissioner, the latter had indeed been in touch with the Agent who had been "most helpful", and had agreed that the labourers had no grievances that could have justified the strikes.⁷⁴ This response, duly reported to New Delhi, failed to satisfy the Government of India, and the India Office then wrote to the Colonial Office pointing out that the Indian Government's request for full information had not been met, and that

Mr. Amery trusts that Lord Moyne will be prepared to ask the Malayan Governments to furnish the Government of India with a complete history of events and the causes leading to them.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, in response to a question in the House of Commons, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies made an announcement to the effect that the disturbances at Klang had been caused by agitators of the CIAM, an allegation immediately and vigorously denied by the Government of India, which pointed out that a succession of its Agents had described that organization as "seeking improvement in the political status of ... Indians by constitutional means". The Government of India further charged that "conservatives"

72 Cypher telegram, "Important", from Government of India, Department of Education, Health and Lands, to Secretary of State for India, 20 May 1941. CO 717/145.

73 Ibid.

74 Telegram, India Office to Department of Education, Health and Lands, Government of India, 22 May 1941. CO 717/145.

75 Confidential. India Office to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 23 May 1941. CO 717/145.

in Malaya distrusting the CIAM for its openly avowed aims had rejected its offer to collaborate with the authorities in trying to find a settlement of the dispute. The Agent of the Government of India had reported that the use of the "Banishment Ordinance" was deeply resented by the Indian community, and that there had been a tendency on the part of some estate managers "to dismiss and eject as undesirable ringleaders, labourers who sought to voice comparatively minor demands for the improvement of their fellow-workers' lot ...". The Government of India asserted that there was a growing suspicion that force had been used to crush the "legitimate demands" of labour, and to prevent collective bargaining, actions that could only have adverse effects in both Malaya and India. It further urged the appointment of a "judicial inquiry" into the deaths of the five labourers.⁷⁶

The charge that the CIAM offer of collaboration with the authorities in seeking a settlement of the dispute had been rejected is borne out by the High Commissioner. He reported:

On the evening of the 16th [May], in a despairing attempt to secure for his Association and himself at least some of the credit for the restoration of order, Mr. Raghavan issued an appeal to the labourers to return to work unconditionally, but he was too late. The strikers had already made up their minds.

One more attempt was made by the Association. A few hours before I left for Singapore [on May 17th] Major Kidd [the British Resident, Selangor] informed me that it proposed to distribute leaflets to labour on the subject of the strikes. The Inspector General of Police was opposed to this but he himself thought it should be allowed. I had therefore to give written instructions to Major Kidd that no facility of any sort was to be accorded to the Central Indian Association of Malaya or any Indian Association to assist or take any step towards bringing the strikes to an end, and that on no account should any Indian Association be allowed to issue any leaflets to strikers, nor should persons known to be connected with such Associations be authorised by an officer of the Government to visit estates and address strikers without my permission. If I was correct in believing that these strikes were mainly political, then I was opposed to allowing any political organization to secure any merit for itself in the settlement.

76 Government of India, Confidential telegram to Secretary of State for India, 4 June 1941. CO 717/145.

I was prepared to justify this instruction on the ground that the action proposed was not in the public interest.⁷⁷

Given the identification of the "public interest" with the continuance undisturbed of British rule in Malaya, the High Commissioner's rejection of the CIAM's proffered assistance may well have been quite logical. Acceptance of the offer would have been interpreted by planters and strikers alike as an admission of weakness, and of incapacity to rule.

By the end of May, senior officials at the Colonial Office had become deeply concerned by events in Malaya, and they began to suspect that the situation had been mishandled by the High Commissioner. They urged him to adopt the Government of India's suggestion about communicating full information through the Agent, who should be brought in "at an early stage" in any future disputes involving Indian estate labour.⁷⁸ As more detailed reports arrived at the Colonial Office, it became increasingly clear that the attitude of the Malayan Governments was hopelessly out of touch with the times, and an attempt was made to remedy the situation by a series of telegraphed admonitions, delivered in the style of a pedantic elementary schoolteacher. In one such, the Secretary of State for the Colonies began with the words: "It may help us all at this stage if I state the following provisional ideas which I believe to be important ... " and he continued by indicating that, in his view, it was doubtful whether there would be a resumption of the "former happy relations" which he claimed had existed between employed and employers, since both political and labour consciousness of Indians was "developing", and that no matter how "illiterate or politically unambitious" Indian labourers had been previously, a "new assertive attitude" was to be expected, which was likely to be a "severe test for employers" and would need "sympathetic understanding" by the Malayan Governments. The telegram went on to urge that future disputes should be settled by conciliation and collective bargaining.⁷⁹

77 FMS Confidential Despatch, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 July 1941, pp. 13-14.

78 Confidential telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to High Commissioner, 4 June 1941. CO 714/145.

79 Confidential telegram No. 54, Secretary of State for the Colonies to the High Commissioner, 9 July 1941.

Meanwhile, inquests into the deaths of the labourers were held, and a small Advisory Committee established to determine the fate of those who had been arrested during the strikes. At the inquests, enquiries were limited to the question of whether or not the use of force had been justified, and on the basis of the evidence presented mainly by senior police and army officers, and estate managers, it was found that the force used had, indeed, been justified. The Advisory Committee determined that 116 labourers should be deported to India, and that 49 of the remainder should be detained and their cases "reviewed from time to time".⁸⁰ These matters were reported, in due course, to the Government of India, both by the Federal Secretary and by the Agent of the Government of India; and the Viceroy immediately telegraphed to Whitehall, referring to the Federal Secretary's report which, it was insisted, left the impression that every Indian in Malaya sympathetic to the Indian National Congress was regarded by the Malayan Government as "a public menace" and that even "honest attempts" on the part of workers to have their grievances redressed were considered to be "fomenting discontent". The Viceroy went on to press for "an open and searching enquiry" and argued that there should be no large-scale deportations back to India until such an investigation had been held.⁸¹ The India Office pressed the Colonial Office to instruct the Malayan Governments to arrange for a "full public enquiry ... by a tribunal in which Indian public opinion would have confidence and which for that purpose should include [a] person from India of standing of High Court Judge ... before which Indians could give evidence without fear of victimisation".⁸² In informing Sir Shenton Thomas of the Viceroy's demands, Lord Moyne indicated that he felt that it would be "politically advantageous ... to satisfy the Government of India's feelings as far as possible" and suggested that it would be desirable to provide the "clearest proof" that the Malayan Governments were not "dominated by planting interests" but were "equally responsive" to the claims of Indian estate workers. He then went on to suggest the inclusion of a *European* High Court Judge from the Indian Civil Service, in the hope that this might satisfy the Indian Government's request for the inclusion of a "member from India".⁸³

80 Minute by Sir Edward Gent [who was, at the time, Assistant Secretary at the Colonial Office], dated 1.9.41, on File No. 09213. CO 717/145.

81 Immediate telegram, Governor-General to Secretary of State for India, 26 July 1941.

82 Immediate, Secret and Personal cypher telegram, to High Commissioner, from Secretary of State for the Colonies, 5 August 1941. CO 717/145.

83 Ibid.

It is interesting to note that, at some point, the demands of the Government of India were leaked to the Rubber Growers' Association in London, and the RGA promptly passed the information on to the UPAM, a fact that was discovered by the Malayan Government's wartime Censorship.⁸⁴ The UPAM redoubled its efforts to discourage a tribunal, both by pressure on the local governments and by telegraphing the RGA urging the latter to do what it could to resist the demands of the Government of India.⁸⁵ Either by accident or design, in its communications with the RGA, the UPAM conveyed the impression that it believed the proposed tribunal was to be conducted by and responsible to the Government of India rather than the Malayan authorities, and this led the RGA to query the point with the Colonial Office. Having been reassured on this, the RGA advised the UPAM that they were satisfied that any decision to hold an enquiry depended solely on the Malayan Government and that they did not consider it expedient for the rubber industry to attempt to influence that decision. There was, they added, no question of an Indian as distinct from a Malayan enquiry.⁸⁶

In the following weeks, a series of proposals and counterproposals were advanced by the India Office and the Colonial Office, each designed to provide a formula acceptable both to the Malayan officials, who revealed themselves to be particularly sensitive to pressures from the planting interests, and to the Government of India which, under the provisions of the 1935 constitutional arrangements, was obliged to be responsive to Indian nationalist demands. Each proposal for an investigative team that included a representative of the Indian Government was flatly rejected by the High Commissioner, whilst any suggestion of an enquiry that did not include such representation was found to be quite unacceptable to the Indian authorities. By mid-October, Lord Moyne and his senior Colonial Office officials produced what they hoped would be a satisfactory compromise. The draft proposal was despatched to the High Commissioner for his approval, and when this had been obtained, Moyne discussed the matter with Leo Amery, who agreed to recommend its acceptance to the Viceroy. It was further proposed that if the latter found it acceptable, simultaneous announcements would be made in New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur, preferably in time to defuse

84 Private and Personal cypher telegram, Governor (Sir Shenton Thomas) to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 August 1941.

85 Letter from A.C. Matthew, Chairman, The Rubber Growers' Association, London, to the Under-Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 12 September 1941.

86 Ibid.

what was anticipated to be an explosive debate on the subject at a forthcoming meeting of the Indian Council of State. The proposal in its final form read:

His Majesty's Government have decided to appoint a Commission to consider the present relationship of Indians resident and employed in the Colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay States with the administrative and legislative systems in those territories, and to make recommendations as to any further measures which could usefully be taken to promote the well-being of the Indian population in Malaya and their contribution to a general development of the social and economic life of the country. The question of the personnel of this Commission will engage the early attention of His Majesty's Government.⁸⁷

Sir Shenton Thomas was informed that Amery had been asked to stress to the Viceroy that nothing should be said in India which could suggest that the proposed Commission was connected in any way with the May strikes. This rather naive requirement was intended to avoid giving the appearance of the Malayan authorities yielding to pressures from India to conduct a "post mortem".⁸⁸ Lord Moyne proposed that the Commission should be chaired by the Chief Justice of Hong Kong, and that there should be two other members, one from the United Kingdom and one who was to be "the virtual nominee of [the] Government of India" in order to "meet their present feelings" but who was in fact to be selected by himself and Amery to ensure that he would be a "person likely to be useful and helpful".⁸⁹

There followed a hiatus in the discussions, while the proposals were considered in India. The suggestion had been made that, if the proposed Commission was found to be acceptable to the Indian Government, the Viceroy would communicate directly with the High Commissioner to arrange for the simultaneous announcement. On 1 November, Sir Shenton Thomas cabled Lord

87 Immediate telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to Governor, Singapore, 25 October 1941.

88 Immediate cypher telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to High Commissioner, 21 October 1941; Cypher telegram, Governor of Straits Settlements to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24 October 1941; Cypher telegram, Personal and Confidential, Secretary of State to Governor, Singapore, 25 October 1941. See also letter from Lord Moyne to the Right Honourable L.S. Amery, M.P., 21 October 1941. CO 717/147.

89 Immediate cypher telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to High Commissioner, 21 October 1941. CO 717/147/52030.

Moyne "I assume that you are aware that I have received no communication from the Viceroy",⁹⁰ to which Moyne replied that he understood that Amery was in consultation with the Viceroy and that a "final formulation of their views" was expected shortly.⁹¹

The Government of India eventually rejected the proposal on the grounds that it constituted "an ingenious method of eluding responsibility in regard to the strikes" and that in any case, public opinion in both India and Malaya could not be persuaded to dissociate the proposal from the Indian demand for a full public enquiry into the May disturbances. The Viceroy, in conveying these views to the India Office added that if the Commission as proposed went ahead, it would have to be made clear that "the Government of India were in no way party to it and had given it neither consent nor approval".⁹² The Viceroy added that in his view the time was not "propitious" for a Commission of the type that had been proposed, and that he therefore recommended that the matter be left in abeyance for the time being, and reconsidered a few months later.⁹³

The anticipated debate in the Indian Council of State took place on 20 November 1941, on a motion by Pandit Hirday Nath Kunzru (United Provinces Northern: Non-Muhammadan) which read:

That this Council recommends to the Governor General in Council to take adequate steps to protect the legitimate rights of Indian Nationals in Malaya and to give his full support in particular to the efforts of the Indian workers on the rubber plantations in Malaya to improve their living conditions and to secure higher wages.⁹⁴

90 Telegram, Governor, Straits Settlements to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1 November 1941. CO 717/147/52030.

91 Confidential telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to Governor, Singapore, 3 November 1941. CO 717/147/52030.

92 Personal letter, Leo Amery to Lord Walter Moyne, 21 November 1941. CO 717/147/52030.

93 Personal and Confidential Cypher telegram, Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor, Singapore, 28 November 1941.

94 Government of India, *Council of State Debates*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Report of meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber of the Council House at New Delhi, on Thursday, 20 November 1941.

During the debate, members of the Council left no doubt as to their feelings. Pandit Kunzru, after outlining the history of events as he understood them, pointed out that Indians were keenly disappointed that the Malayan Government had "succumbed completely to the influence of the European employers"; and that India had sent its troops to Malaya "not to quell strikes and not to fire on their countrymen there but to take part in fighting the enemy should war break out ...". He added that the use of Indian troops against Indian workers exhibited "a spirit of unexampled arrogance" which had "insulted every Indian". P.N. Saprú (United Provinces, Southern: Non-Muhammadan) was less restrained. He argued that

... if the Government of India were an Independent State it would know how to deal with this most rotten of all governments imaginable, this Malayan Government We do not want ... our troops to be used for suppressing legitimate labour movements in the Malayan peninsula Of course, capitalists do not like the Trade Union Movement -- they dislike it intensely everywhere -- but the Malayan European capitalists who have found Indians very docile so far do not like the sense of awakening among them I am not interested in the rubber plantations. Let them go to hell ⁹⁵

Other speakers demanded a full enquiry into the riots, and pressed for improved conditions for workers, and for them to be accorded full citizenship rights in Malaya. The Indian Government was urged not to lift its ban on the emigration of Indians to Malaya, a matter that was assuming considerable importance in the eyes of the Malayan authorities, who were seeking anxiously to increase the number of dock labourers at Penang and Singapore, as the prospect of war in the Pacific loomed nearer.⁹⁶

Subsequently, a good deal of pressure was brought to bear on the Indian Government to lift the ban on the movement of Indian labourers to Malaya, but this was firmly resisted. On 5 December 1941, Leo Amery wrote personally to Lord Moyne to inform him that the Indian Government had refused to allow the return to Malaya of labourers who were then on leave in India, unless it

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Cypher telegram, Governor, Straits Settlements to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 November 1941; Confidential/Immediate Letter, Colonial Office to Under-Secretary of State for India, 26 November 1941. See also Confidential letters to C.H.M. Waldock at the Admiralty and to L.H. Macklin, at the Ministry of War Transport, dated 26 November 1941.

could be proved that they were “really essential” for the war effort, adding:

I am afraid we must face the fact that this [refusal] ... represents the attitudes of the Viceroy's new Indian Member of Council for Indians Overseas and that he is likely to be a tough fighter. It is of course inevitable that Linlithgow should ride his expanded Council on a light rein in matters of this kind, and I am reluctant to press him personally unless we can make out a very strong case It is unfortunate that this minor irritant should keep the main Malayan sore running ⁹⁷

Later in December, a senior official of the Colonial Office commented:

The plain fact is that the Viceroy ... whether he likes it or not, is working against us, and for our enemies, at a time of supreme crisis in the Far East. I cannot conceive that the Curzons, Mintos, Hardinges, etc. of the past would ever [have] stooped to so ignominious an attitude ⁹⁸

And there the matter rested, as events of greater significance intervened. Months later, when an extract of the Indian Council of State Debates recording the views of Indian members was received in London, the file was shelved with the comment:

This document is now only of historical importance but the issues raised by speakers in the debates will be heard again if we re-occupy Malaya and still more if Indian troops play a large part in the reoccupation. Put by.⁹⁹

Conclusion

The events described in this paper throw light upon the interests and actions of the major participants in the rubber plantation industry of pre-Pacific War Malaya: capital, labour, the Indian Government, and the colonial adminis-

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- 97 Immediate Letter, Rt. Hon. L.S. Amery to Lord Moyne, 5 December 1941. CO 717/147/52032. The Indian Member of Council referred to was Madhav Shrihari Aney, who had been a member of the All India Congress Committee for several years.
- 98 Minute, initialled “J.E.S.” [Sir J.E. Shuckburgh, Deputy Under-Secretary of State], 11 December 1941. CO 717/147/52032.
- 99 Minute by W.B.L. Monson [Principal, Colonial Office], 13 June 1942. CO 717/147/52032.

tration. So far as capital was concerned, local proprietors, estate managers, and the distant investors in British-based companies predictably were motivated by the desire to increase profits; however, although the attitudes and responses of the planting community appear to suggest a degree of quite uncomplicated greed, it must be noted that the nature of the rubber industry imposed a limitation on the extent to which the benefits accruing from increased demand could be passed on to labour. Bringing new acreage into production is a process that involves an unavoidable delay of at least seven years. Hence, the supply of rubber is "inelastic", and capital invested in expanded cultivation offers no prospect of early return, and is subject to considerable risk arising from unpredictable price fluctuations. Understandably, therefore, estate managers and proprietors felt compelled to control so far as they could all factors of production affecting costs. Certainly, differences can be detected in the attitudes and responses of the RGA and the UPAM, but these arose from differences of perspective and experience rather than from any fundamental differences of interest.

The concerns of labour seem equally clear. There was the compelling need to survive and, if possible, to improve wages and the conditions of service. To these must be added the desire to be treated with consideration as human beings, a desire enhanced by the activities of the CIAM and other Indian communal associations which sought to mobilize the support of Indian labour through the inculcation of a sense of national identity and pride.

The role played by the Indian Government underlines the essentially anomalous situation created by the Government of India Act of 1935 which, while increasing the element of elected Indian participation in the operation of individual departments of government, left the exercise of coercive power with the British. Differences between British civil servants and Indian Members of Council could always be resolved, in issues of sufficient importance, by the British simply ignoring the Indians, as had been adequately demonstrated by the Viceroy's unilateral declaration of war on Germany in 1939. But in matters of lesser importance, it was considered politically expedient to pay due attention to the sensibilities of Indian heads of departments whose cooperation was desired; and so it was that the Viceroy, acting for the Indian Government, declined to acquiesce in the Malayan Government's refusal to allow a public enquiry into the Klang disturbances.

The attitudes and role of the colonial authorities are more complex. On the basis of shared ethno-linguistic and national loyalties often reinforced

by a common social class background, it seems reasonable to suppose that colonial officials were predisposed to favour the planters in any dispute with Asian workers, a point of view argued most cogently by Malcolm Caldwell.¹⁰⁰ An additional consideration tending to support this view was the fact that the rubber industry had been established, in the first place, on the initiative of the colonial authorities, who believed firmly in its beneficial effects on the Malayan economy, and who therefore had an interest in its survival and continued growth.¹⁰¹ Yet this view can be accepted only with some qualification. Many colonial officials seem to have been deeply and genuinely imbued with a sense of public service which transcended the narrow dictates of class interest. Furthermore, senior members of the Malayan Civil Service enjoyed a relatively high standard of living, with the assurance of ultimate retirement on a comfortable pension, factors that were not normally subject to the vagaries of supply and demand in the international rubber market. The result was a tendency to view with distaste the unrelenting efforts of planters to maximize profits. These considerations go far to explain the attempts of successive Controllers of Labour to improve the wages and conditions of service of Tamil labourers. They also explain the Controller of Labour's invitation, in 1941, to the CIAM to help resolve the disputes at Klang. But once rioting had broken out, and there appeared to be a real challenge to the government's authority, these divisions within the ranks of the British were closed. Planters and officials acted as one; and the Controller of Labour reaped the reward for his invitation to the CIAM by being asked to accept early retirement or face the prospect of dismissal.¹⁰²

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that, at Klang, British capital and the imperial authorities acted together to crush the strikes and riots of Indian labourers, who were responding to the entreaties of trade union organizers, and the demands of Mother India. The events further reveal the

100 Caldwell, op.cit.

101 See, for example, Parmer, p. 249; Sandhu, pp. 48-50.

102 Minute, by W.B.L. Monson, 14 November 1941. In a subsequent minute, Sir G.E.J. Gent noted: "As regards Mr. Wilson [Controller of Labour], the S. of S. agreed that I should see him and try and obtain his application to retire on the understanding that as far as the S. of S. was concerned there was no cloud, but if necessary I should let him know that if he were not willing to apply to retire, action would be necessary on the S. of S.'s part which would inevitably lead to clouds gathering." [Signed] G.E.J. Gent, 25.11.41. CO 717/145.

labourers to have been a malleable force, susceptible to exploitation by European planter and Indian nationalist alike, each acting in pursuit of his perceived goals.

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