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The Colonial State and Labour Protest in the 1930s

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The 1930's were defining moments in the history of Mauritius. The impact of the Great Depression on the sugar colony set in motion a series of processes that would ultimately lead to the dismantlement of the old colonial system that revolved around oligarchical politics and the maintenance of industrial relations from the indentured labour system.

As the official documents of the crucial period in the history of the island are still not declassified at the Mauritius Archives, the rise of mass politics and organized labour have been studied mainly through newspapers and memoirs. This article focuses on the response of the local colonial authorities to labour protest in the 1930's through a study of records found at the PRO, Kew Gardens.

Introduction

On 23rd February 1936, at a meeting held at the Champ de Mars and attended by some four to five thousand persons belonging mainly to the working classes, resolutions were passed to the effect:

(a) "that the Letters Patent constituting the Legislative Council of the Island be so amended that the labour interest is represented as soon as possible by two nominees in the Legislative Council and that the right to vote be extended to the working classes who, through their receiving daily wages, have no such right, according to the Letters Patent presently in force".

(b) "That legislation be introduced in Mauritius to ensure the working classes the right of association by trade unions, old age pensions and other measures recommended by the International Bureau of Labour".

The resolutions made reference to the need "to ensure the enforcement of the ordinances on minimum wages and all other ordinances voted in Mauritius in the matter of labour legislation, by the creation of a Labour department" and "to the constitution of a Labour Party in the colony to discuss with the proper authorities all questions relative to labour such as the fixation of minimum wages". (PRO C0167/890/3: Sir W. Jackson to CO, 16th March 1936. Enclosure).

Dr. Maurice Curé and the writings on the wall

The meeting held at Champ de Mars at about 3 p. m. and presided by Dr. Maurice Curé was the culmination of the agitation that followed the defeat of the former at the general elections held in January 1936. As he reminded the Secretary of State later in a long memorandum dated 23rd April 1936, in the previous council he had several times raised important questions relative to the welfare of the labouring classes of the colony. For example,

during the debates on the Minimum Wages Ordinance in September 1934 and also on subsequent occasions, he had pressed for the legalization of Trade Unions. Besides, time and again he had drawn the attention of the Council on the difficult working conditions of the employees at the lower rungs of the civil service. Moreover, he had pleaded in favour of the transformation of the Immigration and Poor Law department in a more appropriate Labour department, given that the immigration of Indian indentured labour had ceased since more than two decades. Indeed, his electoral programme for the last elections included the creation of a Labour department under the responsibility of a British officer. (PRO C0167/890/3: Sir W. Jackson to CO, 24th April 1936. Enclosure).

This had raised high expectations among important sections of the labouring classes, not only in the Plaines Wilhems district but also in the colony at large. Severely hit by the impact of the world economic recession on the sugar colony, the labouring classes had seen in the initiatives of Dr. Curé a means whereby their genuine grievances could be redressed.

It is not surprising that disappointment at the defeat of Dr. Curé led a considerable number of his sympathizers, mainly from the labouring classes, to try to march to Port Louis in order to present a petition to the governor. However, the Police blocked the entrance to Port Louis while the troops were put on alert. In that context, two petitions were forwarded to the governor at the end of January, the first asking for the appointment of two nominees in the Council of government, one belonging to the Indian community to represent the labouring classes and the other to represent the interest of the artisans. The second petition, presented in the name of "carpenters, labourers, mechanics, artisans and workers", called for the extension of the franchise. (PRO C0167/890/3: Sir W Jackson to CO, 7th February 1936).

Sir W. Jackson and the politics of inertia

However, the governor, Sir Wilfrid Jackson, and the Colonial Office were far from being impressed by the agitation and the resolutions. Indeed, an analysis of the correspondence of Sir W. Jackson and of the minutes on file by the officers of the Colonial Office (PRO CO 167/890/3) shows that the governor did not consider Dr Curé as an important political figure on the local scene, the latter being described as "a somewhat haphazard politician" "who has a tendency to address the Secretary of State directly on matters of purely local importance" or as "a vain windbag of a politician but quite well meaning and harmless".

For the governor, the meeting at the Champ de Mars had no great political significance as it was not attended by any of the local political notables. Moreover, "there was no serious political demand for any of the measures to which the resolutions referred".

Indeed, for the authorities, the demand for two nominees to represent labour could be interpreted as a politician's ploy to get into the Council by the backdoor and this despite the denials of Dr Curé himself.

As to the arguments in favour of political reforms or reforms in the industrial system, Sir W. Jackson pointed out in his despatches that the times were not propitious. Indeed, for the governor, the interests of the "creole labourers, mainly artisans, were closely championed by the coloured members" but he admitted that the Indian agricultural labourers had no special representative in council "owing largely to the distrust and dislike existing between this class and the creoles".

As to the legalization of trade unions the governor admitted that it was a well defined subject and that the local authorities had no objections in principle. (PRO C0167/890/3: Sir W. Jackson to CO, 16th March 1936)

It could hardly have been otherwise for a Trade Union Bill based on the Guiana Ordinance, Chapter 57, had been introduced at the instance of the Secretary of State himself and passed a first reading on 31st August 1926. However, not much had been heard since then. It appeared that the authorities had not proceeded further because the laws relating to Trade Unions in the U. K. were in the process of revision as a result of the general strike of 1926. Subsequently, the governor was told that the legislation must not be proceeded with in view of the financial crisis. It was left to him to go about it when he thought fit with due regard to the local situation (PRO C0167/890/3: Minutes on file: 19th March 1936). In his letter to the colonial office dated 7th February 1936, Sir W. Jackson argued that since then there had been no suitable opportunity to raise the issue in Council. The authorities had been totally engrossed in financial and administrative reconstruction, the revision of taxation, the changes in the constitution and the problems of the sugar industry. A government initiative in that context could have led to a great deal of misunderstanding and suspicions.

Moreover, according to Sir W. Jackson, there was not the slightest interest in the subject among those engaged in political life. Indeed, the inclusion of the subject in the resolutions was the "first public mention of the subject as an object of political activity in the last six years".

Hence, Sir W. Jackson argued that it would be most dangerous to single out this issue for special treatment as "it would merely encourage demagogues. In the absence of any initiative in the Legislative Council itself care must be taken that the demands of a comparatively small part of the population assembled in public meetings are not likely accepted as representing the wishes of large sections". Besides, "it would create a false impression that it was under the pressure of agitation that legislation had been introduced".

But he warned that great care should be taken, least through the labour associations, the authorities create "an opportunity for unscrupulous persons to exploit the poor ignorant to their own advantage or to the satisfaction of their own vanity. There is real danger of such a development under the conditions here and which should be guarded against by strict rules

regulating the management of labour unions" (PRO C0167/890/3 : Sir W. Jackson to Secretary of State, 17th March 1936).

Sir Wilfrid Jackson hence proposed to give the lead to a member of council to take up the issue and steal Curé's thunder. Otherwise, the governor argued that the authorities should gradually have to work towards legislation in the interest of the working classes but that it was best to have matters thrashed out in the local arena and be reduced to concrete form by the Council of government before the Secretary of State took a hand.

As to the creation of a Labour department, the governor argued that the "Immigration and Poor Law Department as at present constituted is in effect a labour department... The machinery of the department is such as to provide, inter alia, a system in which conditions of employment in the industrial sector as far as they exist as well as the agricultural sector are kept under review continuously".

Finally on the issue of old age pension, the governor reported that the matter had never been mooted out and the financial implications which would obviously be enormous had never been investigated. "But it was clear that the heavy burden involved could hardly be borne by the finances of the colony".

However, Sir W. Jackson's recommendations were a recipe for inertia. How could a Council where, besides, the elected unofficial members had consolidated their hold since the most important but often overlooked constitutional revision of 1933, be expected to introduce measures against its own class interest ? For the Council was mainly made up of representatives of the sugar plantocracy, *Indian* or Franco Mauritian.

The 1937 Conflagration and a Commission of Enquiry

Meanwhile, the newly constituted Mauritius Labour Party under the leadership of Dr. Curé, ably assisted by Pandit Sahadeo and E. Anquetil, recently repatriated to Mauritius, launched a series of public meetings around the whole island calling for reform in both the political and the industrial system of the colony. According to the authorities, Dr. Curé's speeches dealt mainly with local politics, E. Anquetil's with "international bolshevism" (i.e. socialism) and Pandit Sahadeo's with a radical brand of "indian nationalism." (Sir Bede Clifford's despatch, 29th November 1937). They were helped by several other members of the progressive intelligentsia of the time, like for example Godefroy Moutia, editor of a paper called "*Le Nouveau Journal*", M. Gaston Pierre, editor of the newspaper "*L'Après-Midi*", Dr. Millien, Dr. Piarroux, M. Svaminathan and Osman Hassenjee.

The impact of the political agitation was tremendous. As the subsequent enquiries revealed, there was a general feeling of class hatred among the labouring population of the colony (PRO C0167/909: Sir Bede Clifford to Secretary of State, 7th February 1938).

The labourers felt that since too long they had not received a fair treatment from their employers. The latter had felt no disposition to

compromise, even when the sugar industry was slowly recovering from the crisis. "This feeling of discomfort had developed into a class hatred of considerable vehemence". Sir Bede Clifford later remarked that as all underdogs were coloured and most of the upper-dogs white, the class hatred had racial overtones – a clear threat to internal security.

But on 13th August 1937, it was on the estate of Union Flacq belonging to the Gujadhur family that estate authorities opened fire, killing and wounding several labourers. The shooting at Union Flacq was the most dramatic incidents in the large scale mass protests of 1937 by labourers, workers and small planters against flagrant abuses and the inertia from the local authorities.

The immediate trigger of the unrest was the arbitrary 15% reduction in the prices paid to small cane growers for the purchase of the Uba Cane variety by the Sans Souci and Rich Fund estates. The unrest intensified and became widespread and was accompanied by sporadic acts of incendiarism and sabotage. Even while regular troops were being called in to maintain order, labourers, dock workers, artisans and unemployed joined in the protest against unemployment and low wages. By the beginning of September, the agitation had spread to the southern districts of Grand Port and Savanne and at Souillac the Police station was attacked by rioters.

E.W. Evans: A commission of Enquiry to redress abuses

The immediate response of the plantocracy was to lay the blame on political agitators and to call for severe repression and there were even talks of a lock out in the sugar industry if the strikers failed to return to work.

However, E.W. Evans, the officer in charge of the colony would not let himself be influenced unduly by the plantocracy. Indeed, his independent investigation had revealed that the causes of unrest went beyond the agitation of Dr. Curé and the Labour Party, however much the political activities might have contributed to the flare up. There were genuine abuses that had to be removed. He had at first called on the planters to negotiate directly with the strikers but had been told that this was impossible...

The solution to the crisis was the setting up of a conciliation mechanism and this would be through the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry with the power to make recommendations (PROC0167/897/6: E.W. Evans to Secretary of State, 24th August, 1937). This is what precisely the Chamber of Agriculture wanted to avoid. Indeed, they had called for the sternest measures against strikers and the nomination of Sir Leclézio as Chairman of a commission that would not be empowered to make any recommendation whatsoever.

For the Colonial office it was typical of the planters that they would refuse to negotiate with their employees. But M. Leclézio, a leading figure of the planter community and the Chairman of the Commercial Bank, a partial person, was totally unsuited to chair a commission of enquiry of conciliation.

Hence, Evans proposed that the Procureur Général, Sir A. Hooper be the Chairman with Dr. E. Laurent, member of Council, P. Raffray President of the Chamber of Agriculture, Lionel Collet, Protector of Immigrants and R.M.C. Monk as assessors.

The disturbances in Mauritius had received a relatively wide coverage in the British press (*Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Morning Times*, etc.). These events, coming after the disorders in Trinidad in June and Barbados in July, highlighted the need for a more constructive role by the colonial authorities on the labour issues in the colonies. For, as the *Daily Telegraph* reported on the 16th August, 1937 "Negotiations between Capital and labour are apt to become the more difficult when a colour question arises".

And, indeed, on a minute on file, the Secretary of State expressed clearly the view that as the international scheme for sugar was coming into operation, "the wage earning class should benefit and not merely the sugar capitalists a more progressive labour policy in Mauritius as elsewhere is a policy which I desire to see carried out by governors" (PRO C0167/897/6: 15th September 1937).

The Hooper Report has often been described as a landmark in the history of labour in Mauritius. Its recommendations included among others, the legalization of labour associations and the setting up of a Labour department under a British official, measures which were included in the resolutions voted at the Champ de Mars on 23rd February 1936 but rejected by Sir W. Jackson... (Hooper, C. A: Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Unrest on Sugar Estate in Mauritius, Port Louis, 1938).

However, an analysis of the correspondence of the colonial authorities reveals the extent to which its recommendations were in line with what was being discussed at the Colonial Office and being proposed by the newly appointed governor.

Sir Bede Clifford: Reform without the intelligentsia

Sir Bede Clifford, the newly appointed governor, too, saw the urgent necessity of introducing a new 'industrial system' in the colony. For he had been impressed by the vulnerability of the sugar mills and cane fields to spontaneous or organized acts of sabotage. This internal security threat was extremely worrying in a colony that depended almost entirely for its prosperity and survival on one crop.

Hence, for Sir Bede Clifford there was an urgent need to prevent a recurrence of the events of 1937 by a more constructive social policy.

However, an analysis of his dispatches reveals that Sir Bede Clifford's policies were deeply marked by his innate social conservatism, albeit tinged with an outdated aristocratic colonial paternalism.

Already, in a speech on 23rd October 1937, commenting on the futility of strikes and lock outs, he pointed out that in Great Britain, which had vast experience in settling differences between employers and labour,

various schemes had been devised to settle industrial troubles without recourse to factors likely to reduce production or cause stoppage of work. Invariably all of them were based on consultation between representatives of parties in dispute with provision for appeal to an arbitrator acceptable to all. (PRO 167/897/15: Enclosure).

Moreover, he expressed the view that, as soon as the industrial issues were tackled, the question of the representation of the working class in Council would be considered. And in a despatch to Ormsby-Gore dated 23rd November 1937, he put forward a tentative program whereby the Immigration and Poor law department would be transformed into a new Labour and Employment department or something similar. As the Protector of Immigrants was due to retire the following year, he proposed that a competent man from England with managerial and administrative skills, together with a sound knowledge of the customs of "Hindus and Mussulmans Indians", be appointed. (PRO 167/897/15: Sir B. Clifford to Ormsby-Gore, 23rd November 1937).

The first task of the new Director of Labour would be to organize the employers and labourers into associations whose representatives could meet to settle industrial disputes and complaints. Moreover, he would also act as Chairman of the Industrial board and as ex-officio member of the Council of government. Sir Bede Clifford also envisaged that the Head of the Labour department would organize a newly set up employment bureau.

As he wrote in his despatch of 29th November, he did not think that anyone would be justified in asserting that the recent disturbances were entirely economic and devoid of political significance. A large section of the labouring classes had been made to believe that they would get a better deal only if they could send a representative to the Council of government. Sir Bede Clifford, however, not only strongly believed that constitutional reform could only be introduced in an atmosphere of tranquility but concurred with Sir W. Jackson that any lowering of the franchise would be dangerous as it would serve only to give the vote to the uneducated. Hence, it should be preceded by a wide extension of primary education.

One salient fact that comes out from a reading of his despatches is that the new governor viewed the local intelligentsia, 'indian' or 'creole', with distrust if not utter contempt. For example he wrongly perceived Dr. Curé as an opportunist who "for two years that he had sat in Council did not betray any special solicitude for the Indian labourers. It is difficult to trust his sincerity" (PRO C0167/897715: Sir B Clifford to Ormsby-Gore, 18th September 1937).

But for the governor, if the Indian labourers were allowed to choose their representative by election, "they would inevitably choose a professional politician who would only pretend to champion their cause but in reality would be influenced by a section of the community who had no sympathy whatsoever with the Indian labourers".

He emphasized in another despatch (29th November 1937) that indeed it was against the members of the "Indian intelligentsia" that the

unrest of 1937 had been partly directed, as had been clearly shown by the shooting at Union Flacq.

A labour policy that could only end in disaster...

The best friend of the Indian labourers, for Sir Bede Clifford, remained the colonial state itself. Hence, he proposed a scheme whereby the labour associations (among which would be included an association of domestic servants) would be asked to select six representatives from the working class itself out of whom the governor would select one for nomination to council. At the same time, he proposed to nominate a representative of the small planters to council while toying with the idea of getting rid of the two Indian nominees, G.M.D. Atchia and R. Gujadhur. The Colonial Office was skeptical about the practicality of this scheme but agreed with the governor that the times were not propitious for political experimentation. (PRO C0167/909: Minutes on file P. Rogers, 3rd March 1938).

But the governor's strategy combined with his avowed hostility to Dr. Maurice Curé and the intelligentsia could only lead to a direct clash between the Labour Party, which was gathering momentum following the events of 1937, and the newly created Labour department.

It is to be noted that E. Anquetil understood all too well the intentions of the Colonial authorities in introducing the Industrial Associations Ordinance in May 1938 with its highly restrictive provisions and, later in November the Labour Ordinance. Hence his refusal of employment as a paid official of a Labour department that he viewed as a device of the colonial state to wrest the control of the labour movement from the Labour Party.

The direct clash came on the occasion of the strike in the docks in September 1938. The conditions of work at the docks had not fallen within the ambit of the Hooper commission as the dockers had struck for an increase in wages only after the commission had been set up. Early September 1938, following the dismissal of a docker for 'insolence', a large scale strike developed in the docks and the strikers called for an increase in wages and better working conditions. Technically, as the strike had been started on the issue of the unfair dismissal of an employee, a conciliation board was not necessarily convened.

But a conciliation board was convened by the new director of Labour, W. Oswell, on the initiative of the governor himself but the dockers refused to resume work as they were bound to do in accordance with the newly enacted Labour Association Ordinance. As a result, one docker was arrested for illegal stoppage of work.

Meanwhile, the strike and unrest began to spread and, at Trianon, there were some violent incidents during picketing by labourers of the sugar industry and nineteen workers were arrested and later sentenced to heavy imprisonment.

For the governor the strike had been well planned beforehand. The sugar waiting to be loaded in the ships, any stoppage of work at the docks could only have a chain reaction on the sugar factories, leading to widespread unrest.

Moreover, for Sir Bede Clifford here was a golden opportunity to break the influence of what he termed as "agitators" on the working class and establish once and for all the Labour department as the sole protector and friend of the labouring class in the colony. (PRO C0167/897/15: Sir B. Clifford to M. Macdonald, 13th September 1938) This explains the highhanded and arbitrary fashion in which the strike was broken ; the state of emergency declared, the arrest of three hundred peaceful strikers for illegal strike, the confinement of Dr. Maurice Curé to more or less house arrest, the deportation of Emmanuel Anquetil and his sixteen year old son to Rodrigues without even notifying the former which provisions of the law he had infringed, the use of 'black legs' (sugar bags loaders from remote factory areas), the transport of the latter by the military and their isolation in a heavily guarded camp, the use of armed forces to patrol the streets of Port Louis : all these were extraordinary proceedings in an imperial possession of a mother country, Great Britain, that took pride in the sophistication and liberal nature of its labour legislation.

The Labour Party of Dr. Curé, Pandit Sahadeo and Emmanuel Anquetil would not recover easily from the severe blows inflicted by the colonial authorities.

Yet, just like Sir W. Jackson had misread the signs of the times and opposed a policy of inertia to the working class demands as articulated by Dr. Curé and others in early 1936, Sir Bede Clifford had devised for the colonial state a labour policy that could only end in disaster. The Labour department was bound to fail in these conditions and the tragic events of 1943 at Belle Vue Harel would be one of the outcomes of this failure.

It was only after the shooting and the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry that followed that the local British authorities changed their mindset and would from now be try to one step ahead instead of being caught up by events.