

The Peculiarities of African Labour and Working-Class History

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The Peculiarities of African Labour and Working-Class History

Richard Roberts

Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds., *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1975)

A.T. Nzula, I.I. Potekhim, and A.Z. Zusmanovich, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa* (London: Zed Press 1979)

Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organize or Starve: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1980)

Robin Cohen, Peter Gutkind, and Phyllis Brazier, eds., *Peasants and Proletarians: The Struggles of Third World Workers* (New York: Monthly Review 1979)

Peter Gutkind, Robin Cohen, and Jean Copans, eds., *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills: Sage 1978)

Charles Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa* (London: Heineman 1979)

Charles Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1919-1933* (London: Pluto Press 1976)

LABOUR UNDER CAPITALISM shares common features in the extraction of surplus value as part of the production process itself. Under the operation of capitalist relations of production the working day is divided between necessary labour time and surplus labour time. The proportion of the working day allotted into the two parts, however, differs profoundly. It is not as Adrian Peace would like to argue: "In Marxist terms the Nigerian industrial worker is a proletarian. As a member of a propertyless, contractual labour force the worker's position is in this respect, essentially the same as that of his British or American counterparts."¹ On the contrary, the African worker differs from his metropolitan counterpart because s/he was not divorced from the

¹ Adrian Peace, "Industrial Protest in Nigeria," in Sandbrook and Cohen, *Development*, 41.

Richard Roberts, "The Peculiarities of African Labour and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 317-333.

means of subsistence. Continued access to land and mutual aid through kinship systems provide the clue to the nature of the unskilled labour coercive systems which characterize industrial capitalism in Africa.

Indeed, continued access to the means of subsistence was part of capitalist strategy in minimizing costs. As I shall argue, access to the means of production reduced the wage bill such that a significant part of the costs of social reproduction (of the worker, of the next generation of workers, and of the generation no longer able to work) was borne by production in rural areas. This policy was enshrined in the South African system of apartheid.² Cheap and plentiful labour was the goal of capitalists in Africa, but this goal was tempered by the dialectics of labour supply, and in particular, by the militancy of labour. Management and the state moved to stabilize and proletarianize the labour force only when it was in the direct interests of capital.

In this essay I will briefly discuss the nature of colonial capitalism, for it is the distinctiveness of colonial capitalism that helps determine the nature of labour history. Then I will discuss the various approaches to the study of African labour history presented in the books under review. The study of labour history in Africa is very recent. Workers have been the object of colonially employed social anthropologists, but historians have only recently begun to study the working class. Indeed, the books under review comprise a significant part of the available literature. Nonetheless, the field is growing rapidly and it is therefore opportune to raise some questions about it and to provoke discussion. In this article, I am especially concerned with the structures in which the labour process takes place.

² Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid," *Economy and Society*, 1 (1972); Claude Meillassoux, *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux* (Paris: Maspéro 1975).

I

THE MATURATION OF CAPITALISM as a system of production proceeded gradually in Europe.³ In Africa, the emergence of an indigenous process of capitalist development did not take place. The reasons need not concern us here.⁴ Slavery and other forms of dependent labour were the choice of those seeking additional labour power, and while a labour market did exist in many parts of Africa, it was insignificant numerically and structurally. Instead, capitalism was imposed by Europeans as a consequence of the late nineteenth-century imperialism which witnessed the rapid transformation of hitherto "sovereign" Africa into colonial entities.

Capitalism as it appeared in colonial Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was both similar to and different from that of metropolitan countries in a number of ways. First, capitalism coexisted with pre-existing modes of production. This was also the case in Europe, but the conditions under which these modes of production existed differed. In Europe, capitalism gradually eroded the viability of the pre-existing modes; in Africa, the precolonial modes of production were maintained, often artificially, by the colonial states. Second, the colonial states played a heightened role in the organization of capitalist relations of production precisely because of the need to maintain the viability of both capitalism and pre-existing modes of production. Bal-

³ Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International 1963); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso 1974); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press 1974); Rodney Hilton, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: New Left Books 1978).

⁴ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle l'Ouverture Press 1972); A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman 1973); Jack Goody, *Tradition, Technology, and the State* (London: Cambridge University Press 1971).

ancing the contradictory demands of these different modes of production helps explain why the colonial state was "over-developed."⁵ Third, employers of wage labour were largely restricted to the state, the mines, and the plantations. All employers sought to extract the greatest amount of surplus value from their employees through high degrees of coercion. Finally, capitalism in Africa reflected the structural consequences of its position as part of the world economy dominated by metropolitan capital in both Europe and America. As such, capital investment, labour policies, and production strategies were all influenced by the precarious nature of the links between Africa and the metropole. The Great Depression of the 1930s manifested the fragility of these links and forms a major watershed in the history of the colonial period.⁶

Two connected yet different analyses are needed to help explain the peculiarities of African labour history during the colonial period. The first is the insight offered by the articulation of modes of production theory. The second is to situate the struggles between labour and capital in terms of the labour process itself. The most persuasive conceptual apparatus for dealing with overlapping modes of production is provided by W. Ziemann and M. Lanzendorfer, "The State in Peripheral Societies," in R. Miliband and J. Saville, eds., *Socialist Register 1977* (London: Merlin Press 1977). See also the articles by Colin Leys, John Saul, and Teresa Turner in "The State in Post Colonial Africa," special issue of *Review of African Political Economy*, 5, 1976.

⁵ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "L'impact des interets coloniaux SCOA et CFAO dans l'Ouest Africain, 1910-1965," *Journal of African History*, 16 (1975); Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Mutation de l'imperialisme Colonial Français dans les Années 30," *African Economic History*, 4 (1977); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "The Great Depression and the Making of the Colonial Economic System in the Belgian Congo," *African Economic History*, 4 (1977); Perrings, *Black Mineworkers*; John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (London: Cambridge University Press 1979).

vided by the concept of articulation. Articulation means the joining together of modes of production in such a way that the specific form adopted by each mode of production is a condition for the existence of the social formation, or the specific historical case. Capitalism does not merely destroy pre-existing modes of production; it subordinates their processes of social reproduction to the needs of capital accumulation and capitalist relations of production. Pre-existing modes of production are maintained, but emasculated by the coercive instruments of the state. As in the case of South Africa, pre-existing modes of production must be maintained lest the very profitability of the industry be threatened.

Ken Post⁷ has adapted Etienne Balibar's⁸ concepts of disarticulation to the problems of colonial capitalism. Post argues that each social formation was composed of its own contradictions conditioned by the nature of the mode or modes of production. The first act of disarticulation often resulted in the destruction of lives and property. For instance, Post notes that during the period of French pacification, 1830-1852, the population of Algeria declined by more than half. The decline in population was a "catastrophic blow to the pre-conquest social formation." (269) Once disarticulated, capitalism penetrated in the form of large scale French colonization and the introduction of vineyards. The social formation was reconstituted and pre-existing modes of production rearticulated around the demands of this capitalist agriculture. This new congruency differed from the pre-conquest variety. Although a mechanistic view of a complex social process which suffers all the flaws of Althusserian influence, the continued existence of pre-

⁷ Ken Post, "The Alliance of Peasants and Workers: Some Problems Concerning the Articulation of Classes (Algeria and China)," in *Peasants and Proletarians*.

⁸ Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books 1972).

capitalist relations of production is nevertheless crucial in explaining the peculiar nature of colonial capitalism.

In Africa, with the exception of the Congo Free State, 1891-1908 (and there it was a terrible farce), Africans were not deprived of access to land, and therefore to the means of subsistence. Instead, the continued existence of access to the means of subsistence helped lower the wage bill paid by capital or the state, and thereby permitted a sustained high rate of exploitation of workers. Capital could pay very low wages because the partial costs of reproduction were borne by those members who remained in the rural areas. Wolpe, Meillassoux, and Deere have discussed this process.⁹

The value of labour power is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour time which is embedded in production. This means the part of the working day called necessary labour time is equivalent to the amount of labour power expended to provide the worker with subsistence. The level of subsistence is clearly a function of moral and historical variables such as the costs of living, the degree of proletarianization, and the efficacy of the struggles between labour and capital over the distribution of income. Of these variables, the key is the degree to which the worker must provide for the reproduction not only of his own daily ability to work, but also that of his children (the next generation of workers) and his elders (the previous generation of workers). Under colonial capitalism, continued access to the means of subsistence meant that rural areas continued to support the reproduction of labour. Both Meillassoux and Deere argue that women's production of foodstuffs within the non-capitalist mode of production lowered the value of labour power by lowering the costs of social reproduction.

⁹ Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power," Meillassoux, *Femmes, Grenier et Capitaux*; Carmen Deere, "Rural Women's Subsistence Farming in the Capitalist Periphery," in *Peasants and Proletarians*.

This lowering of the costs of labour power enhances the relative surplus value for capitalist accumulation and profit. In other words, colonial capitalism was predicated upon the ability to sustain super-exploitation of its workers.

Extremely low wages, however, have profound consequences. People do not willingly come forward to sell their labour power. A backward sloping supply curve of labour was proposed as a concept analyzing Africans' response to the wage labour market. This neutered economic term reflected the racial assumptions of the lazy African firmly tied to traditional society. The concept also appeared in other guises, such as the "target worker," which suggested that Africans only entered the labour market with specific aims: to pay taxes or to purchase a specific consumer item, such as a bicycle. Once these goals were achieved, it was argued, the target worker would quit and not seek employment until he was again forced out. This interpretation of the motivations of African workers has been demolished by Hopkins.¹⁰ But the persistence of the concept during the colonial period was an important justification for the maintenance of very low wages. What sense did it make, employers argued, to raise wages? Higher wages would not increase the supply of labour; on the contrary, higher wages lowered the time spent on the job because the cash objectives of workers were achieved more easily. Employers justified low wages coupled with direct state intervention to yield a labour coercive system needed to offset high capital investment in mining. Thus, the state played an important role in assuring capitalist relations of production by forcing people out of the pre-capitalist modes of production while still hoping to maintain the reproductive capacity of these modes.

The first and universal tool used by the colonial state was the imposition of either personal or hut taxes. Tax revenue provided numerous functions including sub-

¹⁰ *An Economic History*, 229-32.

sidization of colonial conquest, infrastructure development, administrative expenses, and fostering more commerce. Colonial officials also argued that taxes would force Africans out of the lassitude due to the natural bounty of the continent (all mistaken assumptions) and to submit to the salutary law of labour.¹¹

The problem, of course, was that no African society was truly autarkic. Instead, market activity was universal. Africans knew the value of their labour, and if they were obliged to pay taxes in cash, they preferred to do so through the variety of established commercial, artisanal, and agricultural opportunities with which they were familiar. As long as Africans could earn cash through the sale of foodstuffs or cash crops, then they could avoid the labour market.

The state developed various methods for dealing with the supply of labour. First, it could raise taxes beyond the carrying capacity of market demand for commodities. Second, it could impose restrictions on occupations. Third, it could impose a tax in the form of labour. And fourth, it could impose restrictions on personal and occupational mobility in the form of pass laws. Colonial states in Africa could and did impose a variety of all these options depending upon the region.

The colonial state also differed from its metropolitan counterpart because it acted as part of the means to rearticulate overlapping modes of production. As such, the colonial state was not simply a reflection of the complex composition of capital, but also served to mediate the contradictions of a reconstituted social formation. In the Kenyan case, the colonial state bore a dual character. "It was once a subordinate agent in its restructuring of local population to meet metropolitan demand, yet also the local factor of cohesion over the hetero-

geneous, fragmented, and contradictory social forces jostling within."¹² Nor was the colonial state a disinterested mediator between conflicting fractions of civil society. The colonial state was very often characterized by its close alliance with the specific form of capital which dominated the social formation. This alliance between state and capital was not static, however. In South Africa, where the dominance of different forms of capital changed at least twice (from Afrikaner agrarian capitalism to mining capital, and from mining to manufacturing capital), the conflict between them was fought out at the level of the state. Control over the state was crucial because of the state's role in defining labour policies.¹³

I have discussed the colonial state at length because of its peculiar nature in regard to labour. The state often competed with capital for labour needed on road, railway, and harbour construction. In the Belgian Congo, where such competition existed, the state restricted recruitment by the mines to 25 per cent of the assessed population in certain rural areas. The state acted out of concern lest its share of labour be minimized and because it needed to protect the social reproductive capacity of the domestic mode of production. In West Africa, where there was little concentrated capitalist development, the state was often the largest employer of wage labour. All colonial governments practised some form of forced labour, which has been compared to slavery.¹⁴ British colonies overtly abandoned the use of forced labour in the 1920s; the French ended forced labour in

¹² Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, "Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895-1914," *Journal of African History*, 19 (1979).

¹³ See Charles Van Onselen, "Randlords and Rotgut," *History Workshop*, 1976; Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State," *History Workshop*, 1979; Robert Davies, "The 1922 Strike on the Rand," in *African Labor History*.

¹⁴ E.D. Morel, *Black Man's Burden* (New York: Monthly Review 1969); Henry Nevinson,

¹¹ Jean Stengers, "The Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo," in Louis Gann and Peter Duignan, eds., *Colonialism in Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press 1969), cited in *African Labor History*, 7.

1946 as part of the concessions granted Africans for their support during World War II; and Portugal ended forced labour only when it lost the wars of independence in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau. The persistence of forced labour underlined the weakness of the capitalist sector in colonial Africa.

In much of West Africa non-paid forced labour co-existed with wage labour. In French West Africa, the two most important groups of workers were the railway men¹⁵ and the soldiers.¹⁶ In an ingenious argument, Echenberg demonstrates that not all the soldiers recruited in French West Africa fought; the second portion of the annual military draft was used as a reservoir of cheap labour intrinsic to the development of the colonial infrastructure. Soldiers, railway men, and dockers were the first groups of workers sharing employment and similar conditions of labour. Strikes by railway workers date from the 1890s in the French Soudan, but began to take on greater regularity in the 1920s.¹⁷ What was important about railway workers' and dockers' strikes was that they were immediately strikes against the state. Since the state was the direct

employer, the leap from grievances about the conditions of work to grievances about colonialism was short.

But what does this discussion about colonial capitalism tell us about African workers, about their strategies for survival within labour coercive systems, and about their consciousness and culture? It tells us little directly, yet it provides the context within which labour history must be studied.

Workers played an active part in this process as well. They often chose not to acquiesce in labour processes determined by capital and the state. The fact that most wage labour in Southern Africa was unpleasant, gruelling, dangerous, and underpaid provides a glimpse into the dialectic of labour supply in that region. A contribution of Van Onselen's *Chibaro* was to demonstrate that even in extremely coercive working environments workers could and did make explicit statements about their working conditions. In the Rhodesian gold mines, workers expressed their disaffection with their feet. They deserted and avoided mines with the worst reputations and appalling safety records. Van Onselen argues that desertion was, in many cases, a form of combination based upon a very efficient system of communication among workers.¹⁸

Worker militancy in its many forms was a constant problem for both capital and the state. Capital and the state often acted in concert to prevent proletarianization as part of a long term commitment to cheap labour power. As Perrings has pointed out, only when it was in the interests of capital did employers encourage the selective proletarianization of African workers. This occurred in the Katanga copper mines when the militancy and costs of white skilled labour threatened the fragile profit margins of the mines. Thus, the making of an African working class was subordinated

¹⁸ Charles Van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness in Black Miners: Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1920," in *Peasants and Proletarians*, 114.

A Modern Slavery (New York: Schocken 1968); Père Renault, *Liberation des Esclaves et la Nouvelle Servitude* (Dakar: Nouvelle Éditions Africaines 1976); Mason, "Working on the Railway," in *African Labor History*.

¹⁵ Ousman Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood* (New York: Anchor 1962); C. H. Allen, "Union Party Relationships in Francophone West Africa: a Critique of the 'Teleguidage' Interpretations," in *Development of an African Working Class*, Jean Suret-Canale, "French West African Railway Workers' Strike, 1947-1948," in *African Labor History*.

¹⁶ Myron Echenberg, "Tragedy at Thiaroye: The Senegalese Soldiers' Uprising," in *African Labor History*.

¹⁷ Jean Suret-Canale, "Strike Movements as part of the Anti-Colonial Struggles in French West Africa," in M. Crowder and A. I. Asiawaju, eds., *Protest Against Colonial Rule in West Africa* (Atlantic Highlands: Academic Press 1977).

to the peculiar nature of capitalism in Africa, which limited the options open to working men.¹⁹

A sense of common problems and the creation of a common culture were minimized by the temporary nature of most work in the capitalist sector. The mines were often obliged to recruit labour from an ever widening net, thus further blocking the establishment of a shared sense of grievances and aspirations. Ethnic and linguistic differences were encouraged by capital. Nonetheless, there were incidences of concerted labour struggles and strikes. In the following section we will

¹⁹ Women were rarely employed in the industrial sector in Africa. Instead, they were relegated to the precapitalist sectors where they were instrumental in reproducing cheap labour power. A number of women certainly did move to the new urban areas of the colonial state, such as Nairobi, and they settled on the peripheries of the mines. Here women became petty entrepreneurs: buying and selling; brewing; retailing alcoholic beverages. Luise White has argued, given the temporary nature of most employees in the capitalist sector, that prostitution provided vital services to the capitalist sector. Prostitutes provided sex, but also meals and baths. These services served to "recharge" (her term is reproduce) labour power precisely among this migrant group. "Women's Domestic Labor in Colonial Kenya: Prostitution in Nairobi, 1909-1950," Boston University African Studies Center Working Papers, 30, 1980. George Chauncy has recently published an article on the role of women in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in Zambia. Chauncy argues that women were permitted to settle in mining compounds or the surrounding areas and thereby helped to proletarianize male workers. Women's work became an additional arena for conflict, as management tried to control women's entrepreneurial activities through licensing. Women's work thus becomes part of the conflict over labour process. "The Locus of Reproduction: Women on the Zambian Copperbelt," *Journal of Southern African History*, 1981. Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve*, explore women's militancy in South Africa. Particularly interesting is how women organized to prevent the state from controlling their beer brewing activities.

explore how the material under review has dealt with these issues.

II

FRANTZ FANON, the noted West Indian commentator on the Algerian revolution, paid a great disservice to African labour history. Fanon condemned the complacency and therefore the implicit alliance between the Algerian working class and the nationalist bourgeoisie.²⁰ Instead, Fanon looked to the peasantry and the lumpen-proletariat for the revolutionary potential not only in Algeria but throughout the Third World. Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul have since enshrined the notion of a labour aristocracy in their studies of neocolonialism.²¹

In Arrighi and Saul's use, the labour aristocracy thesis was concerned with identifying the revolutionary potential of classes in independent Africa. Crucial to their analysis were the ways in which surplus was consumed, for it was in the unequal access to surplus that class alliances or at least class affiliations were formed. Most surplus was consumed by the "economic elite" composed of the national bourgeoisie and the upper income levels of the labour force. Precisely because of their privileged position within the post colonial state, workers could not be considered as revolutionary, nor as having revolutionary potential.

These workers enjoy incomes three or more times higher than those unskilled labourers and together with the elites and sub-elites in bureaucratic employment in civil service and expatriate concerns, constitute what we call the labour aristocracy of tropical Africa. It is the discretionary consumption of this class which absorbs a significant proportion of the surplus produced in the money economy.²²

²⁰ *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove 1968), 108-9.

²¹ These essays are reproduced in Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review 1973).

²² *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, 19.

Instead, Arrighi and Saul, like Fanon, looked to the peasantry for the revolutionary potential in neocolonial Africa.²³

It is important to remember, however, that Saul and Arrighi were writing at a time when the euphoria of the development decade of the 1960s was turning bitter. Africa was not living up to its revolutionary potential. On the contrary, neocolonialism had taken hold of the continent, mirroring it ever more fully into a dependent role *vis-à-vis* multinational capital. Thus, Saul and Arrighi's analysis must be understood as an attempt to reinterpret classical revolutionary thinking. The working class in Africa was not the champion of the revolution; nor could it be, since the permanent working class in Africa was so small in relationship both to the peasantry and to unskilled labour. For Saul then, the analysis of the working class must focus on whether it either facilitates or cuts against a radical challenge to the status quo of underdevelopment and neocolonial domination.²⁴ The major thrust of the 1973 Toronto conference was to consider the Fanon-Saul-Arrighi conceptualization of the labour aristocracy. "Our contributors were at least in agreement in identifying a crucial problem area: to what extent have workers in employment in the 'modern' sector been co-opted as partners, albeit junior partners, in the existing social order."²⁵ The conference proceedings have been published as *The Development of an African Working Class*.

The Toronto conference certainly went beyond the labour aristocracy, but that debate was never far from the surface. Indeed, the labour aristocracy controversy has resulted in a special concern with strikes, as if strikes, *per se*, were the proof

²³ See especially, John Saul and Roger Woods, "African Peasantries," in *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*.

²⁴ John Saul, "The Labour Aristocracy Thesis Reconsidered," in *Development of An African Working Class*.

²⁵ Sandbrook and Cohen, "Introduction," in *Development of an African Working Class*, 2.

needed to negate the condemnation of the African working class. Despite the occasional gem, I find the Sandbrook and Cohen anthology overly concerned with institutional approaches to the trade union movement and with the momentary glamour of strikes. Of the dozen articles, only two stand out. Stichter's long range approach to a periodization of the Kenyan working class from 1895 to 1947 presents a good starting point for more detailed studies. She argues that the process of proletarianization is dependent, especially in Kenya, on the operation of a "distinct peripheral capitalism."⁽²¹⁾ Unfortunately, Stichter never qualifies the distinctiveness, yet the paper itself pinpoints the important changes in the operation of colonial capitalism. The real gem in the Sandbrook and Cohen collection, however, is Iliffe's study of the dockworkers of Dar es Salam. Indeed, Iliffe's study is probably one of the best labour histories we have. While still a preliminary study, it raises important methodological concerns:

[T]he history of labour in Tanzania makes little sense unless it is taken back far beyond the semi-political trade unionism of the 1950s, back indeed to the attempts of the earliest groups of workers to act in solidarity. The second is that a labour movement has its roots not in politics, but in work. It grows out of the nature of work, the economic and social position of the worker, and his response to his position. To view it solely from the "top" is to miss the dynamic which powers the movement. This history of a labour movement must therefore be based in a history of work, and the most profound sense of change within it is the changing character of work in which men are engaged.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Iliffe pushes this argument further, and he therefore sets the tone of the article itself, using some of E.P. Thompson's familiar arguments. "It is often said that 'industrialization creates a working class' or in Africa that the needs of a colonial economy create 'the embryonic proletariat of the town.' Yet industrialization or a colonial economy does not create workers. . . . Consciousness among workers is created by the workers themselves."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Iliffe reminds us that the unit of analysis must remain the workers and their work, for the workers are the actors. Trade unions do not act, nor do structures such as colonialism and neocolonialism.

African labour history is a recent endeavour. As such, it proceeds through its own growing pains. Turning to the books under review, we note that two are anthologies: one, a compendium of previously published articles, and the other, a collection of new work. These anthologies sample the variety of approaches in the field, and while this does not exhaust the possibilities, it does indicate the state of the art. The other books under review are: a reissued Russian polemic dating from the 1930s; a 25th anniversary history on the activities of the South African Congress of Trade Unions; and a monograph dealing with the Central African copper belt.

Forced Labour in Colonial Africa was a joint venture written by Albert T. Nzula, I.I. Potekhin, and A.Z. Zusmanovich. Robin Cohen, who has had a hand in so much of recent African working class studies, has written a very able introduction to what might otherwise seem an obscure polemic. *Forced Labour*, originally published in Moscow in 1933 under the somewhat misleading title of *The Working Class Movement and Forced Labour in Negro Africa*, was one of the earliest efforts by the newly established African bureau in Moscow's Research Association for National and Colonial Problems (NIANKP), under the direction of André Shiiik. Cohen's introduction helps pinpoint the politics of Moscow's African studies, the role of Moscow in the international labour movement, and the contribution of Albert Nzula, a black South African who fled to Moscow in 1931. Thus, the book raises from obscurity one of the earliest black figures of the South African Communist Party and helps broaden out the standard account of the South African party.²⁶

²⁶ H.J. Simon and R.E. Simon, *Class and Colour in South Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969).

The three authors each contributed their own chapters and jointly shared others. The importance of the book does not lie in the empirical data presented, for much is not adequately documented, but in the conceptualization of colonial labour. Most interesting is the argument which anticipates the articulation of modes of production thesis:

Labour surpluses, in the form of a reserve army of labour, are being developed in the countryside, but there is no demand for this labour. A ruined peasant can not abandon his farm completely and become a proletarian, because as a proletarian he is needed by no one. . . . But the Boer farmer and the British mining industrialist wanted neither slave nor proletarian, which were expensive and not without their dangers. They wanted a peasant who was tied to the land, who would support himself when not needed to work for his European exploiters, and who would be re-engaged whenever needed. (49-50)

The chapter on the Great Depression also anticipated some of the important work by Coquery-Vidrovitch and others on the "crisis," but this section is thin. Reciprocally, the authors read too much into the peasant movements and uprisings, although they do make an important argument about the alliances of classes in colonial situations. "The working class, and the peasantry in alliance with and led by the working class, are the basic driving forces of the revolution in Black Africa." (164) This is certainly a different interpretation than Fanon.

Organize or Starve is a celebration of the first 25 years of the South African Congress of Trade Union. SACTU was founded in 1955 as a non-racial, trade union coordinating body, aimed at promoting the common interests of all workers. Such non-racial unions in South Africa date from 1918, with the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa under Clements Kadalie. The ICWU failed because of the actions of the state and militant anti-black, white unions, and because of leadership problems. SACTU itself emerged out of the continuing efforts

to establish a viable non-racial, trade union movement in South Africa.

The origins of SACTU during this period and its continued existence are critical. When the Nationalist (Afrikaner) Party came to power in 1948, they began to establish a highly repressive state apparatus to check the radical critiques of apartheid and of the state. Especially important was the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) which outlawed any organization or person which "aims at the encouragement of feelings of hostility between European and Non-European races of the Union the consequences of which are calculated to further [disorder, threats to the state, proletarian dictatorship, etc.]" (74) The continued existence of SACTU within the limitations imposed by these laws is extremely important.

Luckhardt and Wall have compiled a useful history of SACTU which explores not only the union's history but the context within which SACTU was forced to operate. SACTU has not been banned outright, and therefore the authors may be overstating the militancy of its leadership. The ability to function within the repressive South African political economy requires drawing a fine line between a radical critique of the regime and the acceptance of the limitations of free speech.²⁷ According to the authors, "SACTU is legal, but its activities and objectives are illegal." (404) While SACTU leadership has been selectively banned, arrested, detained without trial, and deported, this was due less to the non-racial nature of SACTU's unionism, than to its affiliation with the banned African National Congress, which in the 1950s became a militant political party committed to a non-racist society. From its inception, SACTU pledged itself both to the interests of workers and to a political alliance with other organizations engaged

²⁷ Steve Biko's trial under the Suppression of Communism Act is very revealing of the constraints imposed on dissidents. See Millard Arnold, *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa* (New York: Vintage 1980).

in the struggle against the repressive South African regime.

Organize or Starve is a detailed reconstruction of SACTU's history based on the organization's minutes, its newspaper (*The New Age*), and interviews with members. Luckhardt and Wall consistently move the history of SACTU into a larger analysis of contemporary South African conditions. In this manner, *Organize or Starve* helps clarify the nature of the political and union strategies in South Africa. In so doing, the authors implicitly reject the viability of the liberal efforts to reform apartheid. They argue that the nature of apartheid lies in economic structures which "are vitally necessary to the maintenance of the South African ruling class." (36)

Theoretically interesting is *Peasants and Proletarians: Struggles of Third World Workers*, edited by Robin Cohen, Peter Gutkind, and Phyllis Brazier. The goal of this anthology was "to establish a corpus of shared knowledge and understanding between scholars and activists interested in the study of workers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and between workers from the three continents in the advanced capitalist countries and their metropolitan counterparts." (7) Articles range in area, focus, and age. The earliest article is A.G. Hopkins, "The Lagos Strike of 1897: An Exploration in Nigerian Labour History," which was first published in 1966. Most of the articles were originally published in the mid 1970s, and many of the articles are still timely. Unfortunately, most articles are not reproduced in their entirety, since the editors have had to reduce an already thick book. As a contribution to African labour history, the anthology brings together Hopkins' very important study of Lagos, Van Onselen's study of worker consciousness in Southern Rhodesia, another study by Adrian Peace on Nigeria, and an excerpt from the (Marxist) Institute of Industrial Education's analysis of the 1973 Durban strikes in Southern Africa. It also contains the

interesting theoretical studies by Carmeen Deere and Ken Post cited above.

Hopkins' study goes well beyond the Lagos strike of 1897 to explore a number of structural problems in labour supply in early colonial Nigeria. The strike occurred during the period of the transition from slave to free labour, and while Hopkins' analysis presented here and in his *An Economic History of West Africa* implies that the transition was relatively smooth, there were still problems in the supply of wage labour. This was so, according to Hopkins, because most freedmen stayed where they were and remained farmers. (94-5) In contrast, the largest employer of wage labour was the government, and just before the strike a new governor was appointed. Governor McCallum had served for 20 years in the Far East, and his conceptions of wage labour were based on the huge labour markets of that part of the world. Hopkins successfully analyzes the failure of McCallum's wage policy in terms of the structure of African labour supply.

With *African Labour History*, edited by Gutkind, Cohen and Jean Copans, we have the first anthology of working-class history composed of original work. *African Labor History* is to date the most popular volume of the Sage series on African Modernization and Development, under the general direction of Peter Gutkind. Despite its popularity, which I suspect relates more to the subject matter than to the contents, the anthology is disappointing.

In an introduction to an anthology designed to present new work, and in this case, to break new ground, a carefully laid out discussion of the major conceptual and methodological problems is crucial. Yet this is only incompletely done. The introduction is composed of partially related issues including surplus accumulation in precolonial periods, dominant and mixed modes of production, and a distinction between British and French traditions of labour history. The editors also include a long section on the appropriate posture for

academics studying the working class, which is a classical plea for *engagement*. They conclude by identifying three areas for future work, without pushing the theoretical issues involved: 1) the nature of peripheral capitalism and the neocolonial state; 2) the character of the working class under the forms of capitalism prevailing in Africa; and 3) the nature of class consciousness and class action. (25)

African Labor History presents a fair geographical sampling, although Zaire (Belgian Congo), Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the Lusophone regions are conspicuously absent. The anthology also presents a wide spectrum of approaches to the study of labour history. I am not convinced that the inclusion of Althab's study of political conflict in Tananarive, Madagascar, is justified since workers were minor actors in these events which began with a "school crisis." There are other anomalies as well. Diane Bolton's study of the Tanganyika sisal industry, 1958-64, deals primarily with employer strategies, while workers recede far into the background. David Cooper's article on the 1975 Selebi Phikwe strike, Botswana, presents an interesting argument about the weakness of that state in relationship to international mining capital. This article is useful in detailing the "political" environment in which contemporary working-class action takes place, but does little to help our understanding of workers, labour process, or working-class action.

Despite the fact that soldiers are not normally considered workers, Echenberg makes a convincing case for dealing with soldiers as part of the working class. In French West Africa soldiers were recruited from the peasantry, yet they were the largest single body of people in state employment. African soldiers in colonial French West Africa not only bolstered the coercive potential of the colonial state, but the "second portion" of the annual military draft built much of the infra-structure in French West Africa and instilled a new

form of discipline in a rural and often subsistence farming population. Echenberg focuses on the massacre of Thiaroye in which 70 African soldiers were killed or wounded. The Thiaroye soldiers were ex-POWs being demobilized. "It was not a case of soldiers refusing to sell their labor by laying down their tools. Instead, it was a refusal to disband until the state as an employer had fulfilled its contract, an act of military disobedience in the face of patently unjust treatment." (125) The Thiaroye example is slightly ambiguous in the context of Echenberg's argument. Yet I do think Echenberg is correct in viewing soldiers as workers, and the strike as a means of solidarity in the face of the employer's breach of contract. In contrast, Amidu Magassa's *Papa Commandant a jeté un grand filel devant nous* (Paris: Maspéro 1978) is a compilation of oral testimony of workers, forced labour, and members of the "second portion." Even though Magassa does not claim to be writing working-class history, his collection of testimony more closely approximates the conditions of work and worker consciousness in French West Africa.

Because of the nature of colonial capitalism, conditions of work, and the labour market, forced labour characterized the early phase of labour history in Africa. Mason's study, "Working on the Railway: Forced Labor in Northern Nigeria 1907-1912," is very useful. Mason details how forced labour was used to build the railway which eventually opened Northern Nigeria to international capital. His study exposes the coercion involved, which the British dismissed under the rubric of "political labour," — "political" because political means were used to force men out to work. (62) At the same time, these methods were instrumental in strengthening the traditional political structures and elites in Northern Nigeria's Muslim caliphate system. Evidence from Mason's study comes largely from a 1909 incident involving the mass desertion of forced labourers. The paradox of the perpetuation

of forced labour in Northern Nigeria was that the railway ultimately increased the value of agricultural labour because groundnuts became a profitable export crop and thereby further weakened the labour market.²⁸

The second essay on the Nigerian working class deals with a general descriptive and quantitative assessment of its early phase, 1897 to 1939. Arnold Hughes and Robin Cohen are largely concerned with "characteristics" of the wage earners and their strikes. They provide a useful data base, but the article is largely devoted to enumerating strikes: between 1897 and 1939 there were 24 dozen "industrial actions" and one extended period (1919-27) of labour agitation. But what does this record of strikes tell us? Nigerian workers could and did strike, but more importantly, it points to a type of analysis favoured by Hughes and Cohen. They believe that a working-class identity can be discovered deductively through a study of industrial action and political organization. This is the institutional approach reminiscent of *The Development of an African Working Class*. We thus have much data on the organizations of workers, but little on working-class culture.

Strikes, however, are important in the study of African labour history. They gave publicity (no matter how notorious) to workers; and in the case of state employees, such as the railway men, government inquiries were held. An institutional approach is a starting point, but it only touches the surface. Similarly, Suret-Canale's study of the French West African railway workers' strike of 1947-48, which was the longest and most significant working-class action in the region's history is disappointing. Suret-Canale was a member of the French CP and was active in the "groupes d'études communistes" in

²⁸ Jan Hogendorn, *The Nigerian Groundnut Exports: Origins and Early Developments* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press 1978). William Freund, *Capital and Labour in the Nigerian Tin Mines* (London: Longman 1980).

Senegal at the time of the strike. Much of the paper is derived from his personal archives and his remembrances.²⁹

I found Stichter's study of the militant phase of Kenya's unions weak in comparison with her earlier study. This is a macro-political analysis of unions, concentrating on the ideological character of labour protest. Stichter uses the concept of "relative deprivation" in comparison with other races and classes to explain the organizing of skilled and semi-skilled labour. Because "relative deprivation" was the motivating factor, the union leadership was "willing at critical points to subordinate the goal of worker improvement *qua* workers to other nationalistic goals of political independence under the rule of the African middle class." (165) Stichter here rephrases and sheds some light on the alliance between labour and the national bourgeoisie not otherwise noticed in the Fanon-Saul-Arrighi position. Moreover, Stichter's study raises some important issues, although undeveloped, about how the colonial state and colonial capitalism undermined the development of a national and radical labour movement in Kenya.

Perhaps the best study in *African Labor History* is another apparent anomaly: Robert Davies' study of the 1922 strike by white South African miners on the Rand. Because of the racial basis of class in South Africa, it is easy to forget the important role of white labourers. More often than not white labour has played a conservative role in the history of class formation and racism. Davies' study departs from this analysis by examining not only ²⁹ More interesting than Suret-Canale's study is the famous novel by Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*, which deals with the same issue. This novel is probably one of the best discussions we have on the emergence of a working-class culture and consciousness, but it is not "history." Another useful novel about working-class history is Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy*, which deals with South Africa. *Mine Boy* is more romanticized than Sembene's novel, but in the absence of good data, is it possible to write a history of working-class culture?

the conflict between race and class, but a conflict between mining (international capital) and capitalist agriculture and manufacturing capital (fractions of national capital).³⁰ This tension between capitals was crystallized in the 1922 strike because control over the state itself was at stake. Thus, 1922-23 marked the transition between the hegemony of mining capital and the rise of national capital. This transition helps clarify the process which led to the rise of Afrikaner political parties and the establishment of apartheid. Even though Davies' article does not deal with working-class culture, his use of the 1922 strike by white workers is very important in understanding the role of the state in colonial capitalism, especially in the South African manifestation of a labour coercive system.

With Charles Perrings' *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa*, we move from anthologies and article length discussions to monographs. Perrings blends two approaches, one concerned with industrial strategy and the other with the process of proletarianization, to yield a history of minework in Central Africa. *Black Mineworkers* makes extensive use of business and national archives, but only occasional use of oral data. The nature of the sources impinges upon Perrings' analysis and produces an uneven emphasis on capital. This emphasis on capital, however, is not altogether misplaced for two reasons. First, the economic history of colonial Africa is weak and in order to understand labour history, we need to know about the industrial sector. Second, the copperbelt in Central Africa reaches from Katanga in the former Belgian Congo into Northern Rhodesia, and therefore provides an excellent case study for the operation of international capital. For much of its existence, the copperbelt did not recognize international boundaries and there was a relatively unrestrained movement of capital, food, and labour. Indeed, the initial development

³⁰ Davies, "The 1922 Strike on the Rand," 88; Van Onselen, "Randlords and Rotgut."

of Katanga copper was made by British capital.

The objective of *Black Mineworkers* is to study the process of proletarianization in what is now Zaire and Zambia. Perrings is concerned above all with "the manner of class formation in those economies in which production is based on the coexistence of both capitalist and non-capitalist social relations," and brings to bear a Marxist critique of both industry and labour. (3) Perrings argues that the structural basis of labour oscillation between these two modes of production was basic to the industry, and that this structural foundation was already in place by 1911, providing the industry with steady streams of "ultra-exploitable" black labour. However, the establishment of ultra-exploitable black labour was not smooth. By 1905 both the Katanga and Northern Rhodesian mines were competing for labour, resulting in a greater intervention by the colonial state into the pre-existing social formations of the Katanga hinterland.³¹ The competition for labour between the copper mines was exacerbated by the other opportunities and demands made on Africans, including railway work, road building, and farming. Yet in 1911 a cash nexus had been institutionalized and both labour power and foodstuffs were being extracted from the pre-capitalist societies. Perrings' study begins with the period after 1911, when the system was already operating, but experiencing difficulties in labour supply.

The crucial aspect about mining capital in Katanga and Rhodesia was its subordinate place within the world economy. Central African copper entered a world market already dominated by the technologically efficient American and Chilean industries. The key to making Central

African copper competitive was to rationalize the labour market. This rationalization took on two countervailing tendencies. There was a continual need for cheap, unskilled black labour, but there was also a growing demand for a group of skilled labourers to replace the expensive and militant white labour. This switch in labour strategies is related both to the 1919-20 white mineworkers' strikes for higher pay and to the effects of the Great Depression. The Depression ended the mines' attempts to increase productivity through mechanization and proletarianization of black mineworkers and resulted in a return to the policy of cheap unskilled labour. Capital, however, took the opportunity of reduced production to eliminate the remaining expensive white work force. Once the world prices rose again, the mines returned to balancing the two policies of cheap unskilled black labour and of stabilizing a small sector of black skilled labour. Perrings provides some very useful documentation on health care, mortality, and other dimensions involved in stabilizing black labour.

Capital's policy of stabilizing black labour in Katanga stands in sharp contrast with the experience on the Rand and in the Rhodesian gold mines. In Southern Africa no effort was made to encourage a permanent black proletariat, which, because it was permanent and therefore without links to precapitalist modes of production, was much more expensive, potentially militant, and in a position to compete with white labour. What is also intriguing about the Katanga mines, where the process of black proletarianization proceeded the furthest, was that the state acquiesced in the decision to eliminate most white labour.

The process of proletarianization is outlined in the second part of *Black Mineworkers*. There are many redundancies here, as the argument moves from industrial strategy to an attempt to view the same data and processes from the standpoint of workers. The process of

³¹ See the work of Bogomuil Jewsiewicki, "The Making of a Colonial Economic System," and "Unequal Development: Capitalism and the Katanga Economy, 1919-1940," in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1977).

stabilization resulted in a pool of skilled black workers, but also in a pool of voluntary, unskilled workers, standing mid-way between the ultra-cheap migrant worker and the more expensive skilled workers. Unfortunately, Perrings does not pursue this line of argument to assess whether status or gradations appeared among black workers or whether they shared common sense of class.

Instead, Perrings presents a major argument about labour mobility. Here Perrings draws on Van Onselen's *Chibaro* and tries to assess workers' options in a labour coercive system. Perrings identifies two types of mobility: 1) mobility between modes of production; 2) mobility within the industry; and four options: a) to remain as farmers, craftsmen, merchants; b) to work in the industry; c) to move from one mine to another within the industry; or d) to desert. Desertion was recognized, even within management, as an index of working conditions. A 1920 report from Katanga notes that "as a general rule the number of desertions taking place is a useful guide to where there is ill treatment, over working, or other injustices being practiced." (165)

Perrings concludes his study in 1941, with the outbreak of the Katanga mineworkers' strike, which followed the Rhodesian copperbelt strike of the preceding year. Both strikes indicate two general patterns. The first was the nature of the grievances against deteriorating real wages, and the second was the gradual emergence of a new type of class consciousness. The process of class formation and concerted class action was still distant. Perrings indicates that

so long as the political economy of areas such as those described here is structured to permit a low organic composition of capital through the "articulation" of modes of production; so long will workers be forced to depend for their subsistence on both wage labour and some form of non-capitalist production; so long will the class of "free and unattached proletarians," notion-

ally an intrinsic part of capitalist development, remain stillborn. (242)

Although Perrings' *Black Mineworkers* shares many common assumptions with Van Onselen's *Chibaro*, the two books move in different directions. Van Onselen deals with the earlier formative period of the Rhodesian gold mining industry, to about 1920; Perrings concentrates on the period after 1911. Van Onselen is concerned above all with workers; Perrings with structures.

Chibaro is a study in the formation of a labour coercive system. Three factors contributed to the system's emergence. First, there was the problem of geologically determined constraints, which meant that the Rhodesian gold mines deposits were not located in continuous gold reefs, no matter how deep, as on the Rand. (18) Second, the Rhodesian mines participated in a larger South African labour system, which pitted Rhodesian mines against the marginally better paying Rand mines. Third, gold was fixed by an international price so technological (economies of scale) or organizational (cartels) means were not sufficient to yield greater profits. Profits could only be made by intensive exploitation of cheap African labour. But squeezing down wages was not sufficient; further reductions of costs were sought by curtailing expenditure on food, accommodation, and medical care for workers. (34) This solution to increasing profits posed its own contradictions. Since the Rhodesian mines were part of the larger South African labour system with higher wages on the Rand, they could barely attract enough workers. Instead of raising wages, they turned to forced labour. "Chibaro" is the term Africans used for forced labour. "No Central African peasant would, voluntarily, seek out conditions of employment where he was to be paid the lowest wage, obliged to work the longest contracts, and sent to mines with the worst health and labour management records in Southern Rhodesia." (108) The state, therefore, was forced to intervene to provide a recruiting

agency and/or the conditions forcing labour out of the pre-capitalist social formations.

But help from the state through its enactment of restrictive pass laws was not enough. Conditions were so bad that desertion was rife. Even the threat of prison did not discipline labour, because at least in prison the food was good. (44) Hence, the mines modified the South Africa diamond compound system, strengthening an already coercive institution until it achieved almost "total" control over the workers both during and after the working day. (158) Van Onselen's analysis of the compound system is brilliant, and the coercive nature of the system is exposed. Not only does Van Onselen examine the tiers established by the industry (between voluntary and *chibaro* labour) to minimize collective action, but he probes the social implications as well. The language of the mines was *Fanankalo* (a bastardized form composed almost exclusively of imperatives and divorced from the Central African languages spoken by the miners) which further disoriented workers. Even meat is seen as an element of social control. (160) Struggling to have sufficient nutritional intake, workers would get into debt and then prolong the labour cycle. Moreover, in the hierarchical nature of the compound, with its insidious means of motivation and deprivation, sex, prostitutes, cheap liquor, tobacco, and drugs all served to deflect worker consciousness. "Thus much of the black workers' energy and wrath was directed against fellow workers while the fundamental cause of the conflict and competition lay outside the compound." (176) Indeed, Van Onselen likens the employer-employee relationship in the Rhodesian mines to the nineteenth-century master-slave relationship. "Control over African labour was so effectively ensured through masters and servants ordinance, the pass laws, the Native Regulations Ordinance, and the compound system, that some settlers actually were in a position to 'sell' black workers to other employers." (113)

Black workers were not passive recipients of an imposed coercive system. And here lies Van Onselen's lasting contribution to African labour history: a study of African responses to a labour coercive system. Most Central Africans could not escape the labour market. Yet African workers had or took some leeway within the system; they pressed for the shortest possible labour contract and they deserted. Desertion was a rational and conscious attempt to avoid not only low wages and exploitative practices, but also to avoid the death and disease rampant in the compound. (239) Desertion was more than a conscious assessment of the value of one's labour power, it was also a protest. "Desertion was, in many cases, a form of combination and in some cases an extremely effective form."²² Although workers were not in a position to bargain with management, they were not powerless. Many of their responses were "indirect, even subterranean, but they were effective." (243) Indeed, Rhodesian industry needed to recruit labour from progressively more distant areas.

This ever larger net for recruitment was necessary because information about the conditions in various mines and knowledge about the practices for avoiding them were widely disseminated throughout the vast expanse of rural Central Africa. Returning workers would provide an efficient, if informal, communication system, which would in turn affect the labour flows in the subsequent seasons. (234) Thus, workers were relatively well equipped with knowledge and strategy of how to "work" the system through short contracts and desertions, and thereby reach the Witwatersrand industrial complex where conditions and pay were somewhat better. Moreover, this informal system of intelligence was important in the growth of worker consciousness.

Van Onselen also explores the nascent and early forms of worker organizations

²² Van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness," 114.

including self-help, mutual benefit societies, dance societies, and religious groupings. These informal societies operated within the difficult conditions of a coercive system and the constant turnover of labour meant that few remained long enough to reap the benefits of these "insurance" schemes. (202) Some of these societies were modeled upon European military structure, thereby mimicking yet internalizing European forms and norms. Many societies were also elitist. The most important attempt at organization was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, formed by Clements Kadali in South Africa in 1918, which spread to Rhodesia nearly ten years later. The ICWU ideology was aimed at giving black workers clearer insight into the nature of power and class structure of the colonial economy. (211) Yet the ICWU was not effective because its aims and objectives were often hidden under confused ideological positions and ICWU leadership was drawn from the better educated and elite ranks of clerks, not from the miners themselves. If the political consciousness of black workers is measured through the presence or absence of associations and organizations, then there are few instances of an effective articulation of the hopes, fears, and grievances of workers.³³ Yet, it is precisely these associations which have been the focus of African labour history, and Van Onselen's major contribution is to demonstrate that class consciousness and effective means of worker responses were possible without formal organizations.

In a labour coercive economy, however, worker ideologies and organizations should be viewed essentially as high water marks: they should not be allowed to dominate our understanding of the ways in which the economic system worked, or of the African responses to it. At least as important, if not more so, were the less dramatic, silent, and often unorganized responses, and it is this latter set of responses, which occurred on a day to day basis, that reveal most about the functioning of the system and the woof and warp of worker consciousness. Likewise, it was the

unarticulated, unorganized protest and resistance which the employers and the state found the most difficult to suppress. (227)

III

AN AFRICAN LABOUR and working-class history, then, differs in certain fundamental ways from its North American and European counterparts. The very nature of capitalism in metropolitan and colonial settings imposes different structural conditions under which a working class develops. Therefore, the starting point for an African labour history must be an understanding of the industry and its context within the world economy. This history must begin with the worker and with the nature of the labour process itself.

Iliffe was certainly correct in insisting that labour history must never lose sight of this unit of analysis. Yet it is precisely this tendency which has plagued African labour history from the start. The earliest misleading conceptual path was laid by Fanon, and followed by Arrighi, Saul, Sandbrook, and Cohen. While the route led to different concerns and modes of analysis, it nevertheless was a useful first step. African historians must now be more firmly aware of the nature of the analytical problems involved in their choice of units of analysis.

Concerns with contemporary class struggles are not misplaced. The best labour history we have has come out of a radical critique of apartheid and South African racism. Yet these historians of the South African system are keenly aware of the need to explain the roots of the system and its early formulation as a means of criticizing liberal solutions to the present regime. At the same time, these historians of the South African labour system have contributed to our understanding of the dialectic involved in the emergence of working-class consciousness. The fact that this process has taken place under excessively coercive conditions only reiterates the humanity of workers and the depth of their struggles.

³³ Van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness," 107.