The Moral Economy of Working Class Struggle: Strikers, The community and the State in the 1947 Mombassa General Strike

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Résumé: *Cet article examine certains déterminants cruciaux de la résistance sociale des travailleurs, en particulier la grève comme arme, en prenant pour exemple la grève générale de Mombasa de 1947. Tout en battant en brèche l'usage bien établi de concepts tels que l'économie morale et la communauté, l'article tente d'analyser leur importance ainsi que le rôle de l'Etat dans le processus et l'issue de l'action revendicative des travailleurs. Il montre que dans la grève générale de Mombasa de 1947, les grévistes autant que le patronat, avaient bénéficié de ressources extérieures. Pour les premiers, c'était le poids moral de la communauté. Pour les seconds, la puissance coercitive de l'Etat.*

Introduction

For twelve days in January, 1947, the port city of Mombassa in Kenya was virtually paralysed by a general strike. The strike involved more than 15,000 workers out of an estimated workforce of 20,000. It was, and remains to date, the largest strike in Mombassa's history. This strike was not an isolated event. It was part of a wave of strikes that engulfed colonial Africa after the Second World War (Zeleza 1986a:164-190). The Mombassa general strike features prominently in a number of studies. But these studies tend to focus narrowly on analysing the workers' grievances, the articulated goals of the strike, and then proceed to assess whether or not the strikers achieved their stated objectives. Singh (1969:141-160) uncritically celebrates the strike as a great success, Clayton and Savage (1974:276-283) concentrate on the weaknesses of the African Workers Federation, which they believe, wrongly, engineered the strike, while Stichter encapsulates it in the growing tide of nationalist militancy (Sticher 1978-1982:173-174). Perhaps the most perceptive analysis of the strike has been made by Cooper (1987:78-113) who tries to show the way in which it transformed the organisation of work in Mombassa. However, Cooper tends to underestimate the ruthlessness with which the state sought to suppress the strike, and his analysis of community involvement offers important leads that are not fully developed.

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It was Cooper (1983:35), in fact, who in a 1983 paper, noted that 'the relationship of spatial organisation and collective action in Africa needs specific attention'. This paper attempts to capture the linkage between communities and strikes by using the 1947 Mombassa strike as a case study. What is remarkable about this strike, and other earlier strikes in Mombassa, is that it was not organised, at least initially, by a trade union. The strike cannot, therefore, be fully understood without analysing the social networks in the community where the workers lived. The paper seeks to show that strikes are not merely episodic struggles between labour and capital at the work place. In reality, they involve much wider struggles in society. In a strike labour and capital are not simply pitted against each other as abstract factors of production, but as workers and employers who are members of different communities. More often than not, workers' struggles are aimed at not only improving working conditions, but also conditions in the community, for it is in the community that workers consume their earnings and reproduce themselves. Moreover, strikes are not sustained simply by solidarity expressed on the picket lines, but through the support of families, friends and the community at large as well.[1]

Focusing on heroic events such as the 1947 Mombassa general strike runs the risk of oversimplifying history. Changes in colonial societies did not come about only because of such gestures of collective defiance. The prosaic but constant daily struggles between workers and the functionaries of capital and the state at workplaces and in the communities, which required little or no coordination or planning, except perhaps the implicit understandings of informal networks, probably proved more enduring in transforming colonial society, in containing the authoritarian practices and hegemonic pretensions of colonial rule.[2] But the general strike provides an irresistible arena for the social historian: the contradictions, brutalities, capacities, and relations between and among the contending forces are thrown into sharp relief.

The paper seeks to examine the way the 1947 Mombassa general strike developed, the role played by the community, the attempts by the state to control and contain it, and the effects of the strike's resolution on subsequent relations between the colonial state, capital and labour, and on social relations in the working class community itself. It is divided into five

1 This point was brought home to me during a strike at my university in March 1991. The strike lasted three weeks. As the strike dragged on, my morale was affected by the morale of the others on the picket lines, the changing attitudes of the students, my family, neighbours, and the general public as reflected in the media. For accounts of this strike see, *Peterborough Examiner*, 4-30 March, 1991.

2 One of the most compelling accounts of everyday struggles can be found in James C. Scott, 1985.

parts. First, it offers a brief historiographical and theoretical discussion of African labour struggles and the concepts of 'moral economy' and community as used in this paper. Second, the tradition of strikes and the patterns of community organisation in Mombassa are examined. Third, the paper traces the development of the strike during its early days, the use of public meetings as forums for articulating the objectives of the strike, and the initial responses by the employers and the state. Fourth, it delineates the role of the community in the strike and strategies used by the state to crush it. Finally, the paper assesses the impact of the strike.

Struggles and Communities

Ever since the managerial approach[3] in African labour history was superseded at the turn of the 1970s by the so-called 'radical' perspectives inspired by dependence and Marxist paradigms much has been written about the class consciousness of African workers (Sandbrook and Cohen 1975; Gutkind, Cohen and Copans 1979). Endless debates have raged on the extent to which these workers constitute a class, objectively and subjectively, in-themselves and for-themselves. The 'engaged' scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, were convinced that African workers did indeed possess this indeterminate class consciousness, and that they would eventually commit themselves to socialism and the reorganisation of the state and economy. Others were not so sure. They argued that working class consciousness in Africa was compromised by the centrifugal pulls of ethnic identity, peasant culture, or petty-bourgeois populism.

In the debate, the work place was the locus of working class consciousness, the arena where the workers discovered and fought for themselves as a class against capital. Strikes were their rites of passage on the straight line of proletarianization. In this literature neither class consciousness, strike action, nor proletarianization were adequately problematised. In the aftermath of the debacle of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe and Africa at the turn of the 1990s, much of this 'radical' scholarship appears naively reductionistic and deterministic. It not only ignored the complexity of work cultures, but also of working class *communities*, and the complex articulations between the two.[4]

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3 These studies largely focused on the problems of labour recruitment, efficiency, training, control and organisation. For comprehensive reviews of African labour history see, (Zeleza 1983; Freund 1984:1-58; Freund 1988).

4 The work of Charles van Onselen (1982) was a significant exception. He drew sensitive and fascinating portraits of the world the workers lived in, and made, in early Johannesburg. But so absorbed was he in celebrating everyday life that he failed to illuminate the wider structures and processes that dominated the workers' lives and capture their struggles to transform them.

The search for the 'class' or 'revolutionary' credentials of African workers must be abandoned. Many scholars talk of class consciousness without indicating clearly what they mean by it.[5] We still know little about the real world African workers inhabited. Workers need to be resituated in communities in which they lived and from which they drew support when they faced crises, including labour struggles. It is too simplistic to assume that the consciousness of workers could be derived primarily from the work place. What the workers experienced at work, how they interpreted that experience, and accommodated and resisted it was mediated by their lives in, and discourses of, the community. The dialectical relationship between class, community, culture, and struggle requires careful analysis.

Attempts to decipher the moral economy of workers' strikes offer avenues in this direction. But the concept of 'moral economy' needs to be scrupulously defined. It has mostly been applied to peasants.[6] In Hyden's rather simplistic analysis, the 'moral economy' is a relic of the past, an indication of the peasants' backwardness and incapacity to embrace capitalist values.[7] Few scholars have applied the concept to workers. Unfortunately, some of those that have, they have not redefined the concept to fit the different conditions of workers. For example, in his article on the moral economy of the 1946 South African miners strike, Moodie argues that, like in E.P. Thompson's eighteenth century England, the mines had a moral economy whose bounds and obligations were implicitly agreed upon by the workers and employers (Moodie 1986:1-35). This is comparing apples and oranges: eighteenth century rural England and mid-twentieth century industrial South Africa. Moreover, it mixes social orders with very different normative and moral dimensions: one was 'legitimate', the other colonial and 'illegitimate'.

This is to suggest that the moral economy of working class life and struggle under colonial conditions must be conceptualised differently. It must take into account the context of colonialism as an 'illegitimate' and exploitative system. If subsistence constitutes the moral claim of peasants, for workers it is the right to a living wage. Under colonialism, there was

5 Gutkind (1988:10) claims, extravagantly, that social anthropologists may have the answer: 'We know what consciousness is. We often call it ethnicity or identity, a consciousness of traditions, habits and ideas. It is unfortunate that we know less about class consciousness having left this subject to sociologists, political scientists and historians'. One hopes he doesn't mean it: who have produced some of the most facile conceptions of Africa if not social anthropologists?

6 Perhaps the most insightful analysis is that of James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1976), and *Weapons of the Weak*..

7 For a critique of Hyden's (1983) analysis see, Mahmood Mamdani (1985:178-194) and Zeleza (1986b:151-186).

another factor that determined African notions of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation: their view that they were *despised* as a colonised people, as Africans. The racial dimension of colonial rule in Africa, the relationship between race and class, has not been adequately problematised in the literature; at best it is subsumed under 'nationalism' (Brown 1988:42). The concept 'moral economy' should not be used to camouflage colonial racism, exploitation and oppression, like so many other terms used in African studies.[8]

In this paper, the term moral economy is strictly used to refer to the socio-economic, political, cultural and moral imperatives that sustained relations in African working class communities. Relations between African workers and their employers were certainly economic, but colonialism made a mockery of any moral bounds and obligations. When workers went on strike in the cities of colonial Africa they fought for something more than wages and conditions of work: they were struggling for the city as well, trying to alter and redefine the colonial controls over workplace, residence, and movement (Cooper 1983). They were asserting themselves as a collectivity, a community of workers, of colonised people, of Africans. In short, the economic, political and cultural hegemony of the colonial system was being contested.

Strikes are easy to define: they are work stoppages initiated by workers. More difficult to specify is the concept of community, for the term is used in so many different contexts. In general, in the sociological literature the word community is used to refer to either a territorial unit, a unit of social organisation, or a psychocultural unit (Poplin 1972). In studying communities, sociologists have used a number of paradigms, including the human ecology model, according to which the distribution of population in cities is a product of the 'natural' processes of competition, segregation, invasion and succession; the social class model with its emphasis on the role of class factors in the spatial and social organisation of cities and communities; the community power model, which primarily focuses on the nature of community power structures; and 'the paradigm that goes under the rubric Gemeinschaft-Gessellschaft [that] has dealt with the meaning of the spatial aspects of settlement for human relationships. The major component of this paradigm was a generalisation about the differential impact of rural and urban lifestyles' (Bernard 1973:8).

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8 For example, to quote, Catherine Newbury (1980:98), 'State formation under colonial rule is often viewed in positive terms. Progress, development, modernisation, centralisation have all taken the place of the earlier notions of civilisation, pacification, Christianity, commerce... The process underlying these terms is seldom spelled out'.

These paradigms, and others, have been widely used, critiqued, revised and some even abandoned. It is not the intention of this paper to analyse them in detail, except to point out that, as in many sociological and anthropological models, they tend to be ahistorical. In this paper the term community is used in its territorial and relational contexts, that is, as both location and a set of human relationships. It is understood that communities are neither natural nor static. They are social constructions, whose character at any given moment is conditioned by created pasts and the prevailing socio-economic, and political circumstances within the community itself and in the wider society. Community bonds are constructed in situated acts, through shared experiences and struggles. They are engendered by a sense of participating in the same history, and sustained by symbols and traditions which are often invented and evoked in moments of conflict with others.

Communities, therefore, are neither fixed social groups nor structures, but processes, whose features can neither be predetermined nor are universal, inherently congenial or destructive. They are not merely entities to which persons 'belong', but 'points of reference brought into play in particular situations and arenas. The individual brings to these situations a plurality of groups, associations and social networks on which he can draw in defining his an other's behaviour' (Gusfield 1975:41). The community social networks, which are made up of complex threads of kinship, friendship and acquaintance, and sustain daily relationships and conflicts, are usually mobilised in struggles involving large segments of the community and outsiders. In such struggles, the community folds into the protective 'we' of the against 'them'.

Mombassa's Strikes and Social Spaces

Mombassa was the centre of strike action in colonial Kenya. A series of strikes took place in the city from 1900. In that year there was a railway strike which apparently spread to other centres along the line. It was triggered by the withdrawal of certain privileges previously enjoyed by the staff. The strike was initiated by European subordinate staff who were later joined by some Indian and African workers. Two years later African policemen in Mombassa went on strike. In 1908 there were strikes of African railway workers and Indian dockworkers and government farm workers at nearby Mazeras. In 1912 African boat workers went on their own strike. On the eve of the outbreak of the First World War most of the Indian Railway and Public Works Department workers and some African workers struck 'in order to oppose the introduction of poll tax and for the removal of other grievances regarding housing, rations, medical facilities and low wages' (Singh 1969:7; Zeleza 1989b).

Strikes erupted with periodic regularity in the 1920s. But it was not until the 1930s that the era of mass strikes finally arrived. The depression had

wreaked havoc on workers lives, as reflected in falling wages, increased deprivation and insecurity. The strike wave affected the whole country, from the towns to the rural hinterlands. But once again, Mombassa led the way. In July 1934 dockworkers went on strike over wage cuts imposed by the stevedoring companies. This was a prelude to the Mombassa general strike of 1939, which at its height involved about 6,000 workers, according to official estimates, and paralysed the port industry and the city. The strikers demanded such things as higher wages and improved working conditions, housing, recognition of trade unions, workmen's compensation and pension schemes (Singh 1969:Chapter 10; Clayton and Savage 1974:Chapter 5 and 6; Zeleza 1982:Chapter 2; Cooper 1987:Chapter 3).

The wave of strikes gathered momentum during the war. The rapid expansion of the working class and its growing industrial concentration in the urban centres, coupled with the hardships of wartime conditions produced an explosive mixture. Wages failed to keep pace with inflation, the housing problem worsened, and there were severe shortages of goods, so that rationing schemes were introduced in the towns accompanied by a draconian policy of urban 'influx' control in which the state sought to repatriate the unemployed and the wives and children of workers. The strike wave peaked in 1942 and dragged on until 1945. The war ended with another chain of strikes, and with the threat of a general strike looming, and Mombassa was poised to lead it.[9] The general strike was narrowly averted with the appointment of yet another committee of enquiry, the Phillips Committee.

But the respite proved temporary. At the beginning of 1947, Mombassa was rocked by its second general strike in less than a decade, and the country's biggest strike ever. This paper seeks to explain why Mombassa had such an unusual propensity for labour struggles, by looking closely at the 1947 general strike. The tradition of working class protest in Mombassa can only be understood in the context of the city's economic, social, and spatial structures, which, in turn, conditioned the ways work was organised and contested, working class communities constructed and reproduced, and official, and community discourses articulated.

Mombassa's economic life revolved around the port. It was the port, and the railway that snaked from there into the hinterlands of East Africa as far as Uganda, that had helped Mombassa eclipse the other old coastal towns in East Africa, including Zanzibar, and extend the city's commercial orbit throughout the region (Janmohammed 1986). Mombassa was therefore the

9 Cooper (1987:67-71), notes that the general strike threat was quickly brought to heel in Nairobi, unlike Mombassa where workers were not so easily cowed. He attributes this, quite correctly, to the different urban morphologies of the two cities.

lifeline of the colonial economy, not only Kenya's, but Uganda's as well. Thus the city's workforce had a strategic importance out of proportion to its size. This gave it immense powers of disruption. And strikes thrive on that power. The port industry was relatively easy to disrupt because it was concentrated in a rather small area of a comparably small island. Mombassa was then largely confined to the island, so that it had little room to scatter its workers as was the case in the more expansive Nairobi. The size of Mombassa made the networks of communication and interaction dense. The port industry was also vulnerable to strike action because of its heavy reliance on casual labour. To casual workers a strike fit easily into their calendar of irregular work. For them, the losses were, comparatively speaking, minimal. Moreover, as casuals who drifted from one job to another, the threat of the sack hardly applied. In short, casual labour may have lowered wage costs for the port industry, but it also denied the industry important levers of labour control.

The workers of Mombassa were able to mount these struggles and challenges against the coercive colonial labour control system because they constituted a much stronger community than workers elsewhere in Kenya at the time. The explanation for this lies in Mombassa's urban history and social geography, which differed markedly from that of Nairobi, for example. To begin with, unlike the latter which was established at the beginning of the colonial era, Mombassa was a very old city (de Blij 1968). As a colonial creation and the capital, Nairobi was controlled and organised more stringently than Mombassa ever was. Africans in Nairobi, unlike the residents of Mombassa, were regarded as shifting and temporary population. Consequently, pass laws were strictly enforced and Africans in the city had far less control over their communities and locations than their counterparts in Mombassa (Ross 1968; Macvican 1968; Van Zwanenberg 1972). Not surprisingly, in the early 1920s a number of African settlements in Nairobi were destroyed and a public housing scheme built in Pumwani, in a further attempt to control the residential patterns and movement of Africans in the city. The Pumwani houses, and most of the housing provided by employers, were designed for single men and not for family life. Thus African urbanisation was not only regulated through influx control measures, but also by the provision of public housing for single men.

While efforts were made to impose the colonial urban pattern on Mombassa, the city retained its essential character as a 'native town' (Janmohammed 1977). Pass laws were not as strictly enforced and no effort was made to provide public housing until after the 1947 general strike. Instead workers in Mombassa lived in privately-owned Swahili housing areas collectively known as Majengo. Thus Africans in Mombassa had a much higher proportion of the house owning population than in Nairobi (Stren 1978:36). The design of the Majengo houses also enhanced family

and community life. Typically the Swahili houses had enclosed courtyards, while at the same time ensuring 'the spatial independence of most of the individual rooms — both from the courtyard and its communal or family activities and from each other, which facilitates renting rooms to lodgers without undue inconvenience to the owner's household' (Stren 1978). Majengo houses had their fair share of problems: they were poorly serviced with sanitation and sewerage facilities, and they became increasingly overcrowded, especially from 1935 when the city's Municipal Board banned the village layout schemes which allowed Africans to build their own houses, ostensibly on the grounds that the areas were becoming slums (Stren 1978:133).

It is evident workers in Mombassa lived in a very different world from their counterparts in Nairobi. Majengo was an entrenched, vibrant community, which not only allowed family life, but also absorbed its new comers, the migrant workers, with relative ease, for after all, it was already a melting pot of the different races, ethnic groups, and social classes that made up this ancient city (de Blij 1968:70-71). Majengo, moreover, like Mombassa as a whole, was partly shielded from the corrosive dominance of the colonial order by Islam. Out of historic fear or grudging respect, the colonial authorities made comparatively little effort to confront or destroy Islamic traditions as they sought to do with the cultural and religious heritage of the peoples of the interior in whose midst Nairobi was established. Thus Majengo enjoyed social and cultural space unheard of in colonial Nairobi. It was this space and the concentration of the workers in Majengo which allowed the workers of Mombassa to construct a community with considerable autonomy and the capacity to mobilise and challenge the hegemonic practices and pretensions of capital and the colonial state. Thus the 1947 general strike was a product of the relatively long tradition of labour struggle in Mombassa, fomented by long-standing grievances against the coercive and low wage system and colonial racism. It would be facilitated and sustained by the dynamic social networks within the working class community of Majengo.

Meetings and Grievances

The strike began on the morning of January 13. It came as no surprise. Rumours about an impeding strike had been flying since December 1946. The workers were restive over 'low wages coupled with the high cost of living and lack of consumer goods'.[10] Some employers, including the Port Manager and the Director of the Kenya Landing and Shipping Company,

10 Member of Law and Order in the Legislative Council, 28.1.1947, in CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

took the rumours seriously and suggested a wage raise to avert the strike. For its part the government promulgated on January 9 a minimum wage ordinance for Mombassa, which set the minimum at Shs 40 per month. The ordinance was expected to take effect on February 1. The offer was too little too late. For one thing, it excluded 'casuals or the large number of workers already bunched near that wage figure' (Cooper 1987:79).

The decision to go on strike was made on Sunday, January 12, at a heavily attended meeting held at a soccer field, located in Majengo on the grounds of the Sakina mosque. The field was renamed, during the course of the general strike, Kiwanja cha Maskini, Field of the Poor, and 'became the organisational hub of the strike and its most powerful symbol' (Cooper 1987:81). This was not the first meeting to call for a general strike. A week before another meeting had also been held at Kiwanja. A strike was narrowly averted 'as a result of a speech made by one of the Africans present who advised the meeting that the Labour Commissioner was very shortly coming to Mombassa when discussions could be entered into with him'.[11] The Labour Commissioner arrived on January 9. One of his objectives was to look into the registration of the recently formed Kenya Landing and Shipping Staff Association (KL&SSA) as a trade union and the reorganisation of the Railway African Staff Union (RASU) under the Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Ordinance of 1943. For this purpose he brought with him the Staff and Welfare Assistant of the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, Mr Osgathorp, who had 'many years experience of trade union organisation in the UK' (Legislative Council 1947).

The Labour Commissioner and Mr Osgathorp held three main meetings with the leaders of the KL&SSA and RASU in which they promised to assist the two organisations in their efforts to reorganise themselves as trade unions. They also addressed a handful of additional meetings with other representatives of the workers. The commissioner was at great pains to 'explain in detail numerous steps that had already been taken to ameliorate working and living conditions on the island and the further steps which the authorities had agreed to take'. These steps included the enactment of a minimum wage legislation, the replacement of the European Coast Employers Advisory Committee by a Coast Labour Committee to which Africans would have direct representation, the granting of a special allocation to a large firm to import goods and establish an African retail store, the setting up of two fuel depots where Africans could buy firewood at controlled prices, expansion of water kiosks and extension of their hours of operation, the reduction of meat prices, and the transfer of 600 labourers

11 Member of Law and Order in the Legislative Council, 28-1-1947. Also see Mombassa Times, 18 and 22 January, 1947, and *Kenya Daily Mail*, 24.1.1947.

from the casual labour pool into permanent employment (Legislative Council 1947).

The commissioner was able to persuade some of the people he met, especially the leaders of the KL&SSA and RASU, who promised that it would be 'their intention to advise against a strike' (Legislative Council 1947). But these 'representatives' were out of touch with the anger and impatience felt by the bulk of African workers in Mombassa. This became abundantly clear at the Sunday meeting at Kiwanja. Promises that things would improve rang hollow: the same had been said after the 1939 Mombassa general strike, during the course of the Second World War, and after the strikes of 1945. Between 1939 and 1945 a dozen commissions of inquiry had been appointed to look into labour conditions and disputes and suggest solutions.[12] The 1945 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrest in Mombassa, also known as the Philips Report, made a stinging attack of the colonial labour system, and called for profound changes.[13] But by 1947, most of its recommendations had not been implemented. Indeed, the report itself had been suppressed.[14]

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12 The commissions produced a number of reports including: *Report of the Commission of Enquiry Appointed to Examine the Labour Conditions in Mombassa, 1939; Report of the Committee on Arab and African Terms of Service, 1941; Report on the Conscription of African Labour, 1942; Report of the Committee on Post-War Employment, 1943*, all published by the colonial government in Nairobi, and the Orde Browne report published by the imperial government in London, *Labour Conditions in East Africa*. In addition there were other reports that were not officially published, such as the Trades Dispute Tribunal, 1942; the Fact-Finding Committee, 1942; the Cost of Living Relief Committee, 1942; the Stronach Committee, 1942; the Warren Wright Board of Inquiry, 1943; the War Bonus Commission, 1944; and the Report of Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrest at Mombassa, 1945.

13 The Phillips Report represented a radical departure for it rejected the recommendations and findings of previous inquiries. Specifically, the committee condemned the system of low wages, which contributed to poor living conditions and even malnutrition among workers, as well as the shortage of housing and the accompanying problems of high rents and overcrowding in the African locations. Consequently, the committee recommended the establishment of a minimum wage and an immediate salary increase of Shs 5, the provision of more and better housing, establishment of a permanent machinery to assess and review the cost of living for African workers, price control of basic commodities, among other measures.

14 None of the recommendations had been implemented by the end of 1945. See Labour Commissioner to Chief Secretary, 10.1-1945, KNA Labour 9/60. By 1947 the Shs 5 wage rise had been implemented, but the machinery for assessment and constant review of the cost of living of African workers and a central minimum wage advisory board had not been established; recommendations for family allowance had not been implemented, and not much had been done on the housing question. Other recommendations, for example, for the introduction of rationing were outrightly rejected. See Governor Mitchell to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 31.3.1947, CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

Thus as the workers gathered on that fateful and charged Sunday afternoon neither promises nor threats could dim the collective memory of promises not kept, or dampen the cumulative resolve to flail the system. The Labour Commissioner and the representatives he had met had articulated the grievances of the workers in the discourse of wages and trade union recognition. This discourse did not connect in the sweltering heat and agitation of the meeting at Kiwanja that day. It sounded contrived and stilted. It was also limited. Kiwanja had its own discourse that was loud and impassioned. It was broad as well, encompassing demands for improved wages and denunciation of racial discrimination, provision of consumer goods and the restoration of African pride and dignity, recognition of trade unions and the promotion of community well-being. The official discourse assumed the legitimacy of the colonial situation and the rationality of incremental reform. The Kiwanja discourse was in the language of oppression, exploitation and revolt. One centred on the restricted world of work, the other articulated the diffuse demands of community life, for the Kiwanja meeting was attended by workers and their dependents, the employed and the unemployed, youths and elders. It was the community speaking to itself and to 'them': the employers and state officials.

The meeting decided to begin the strike the next day. The strike began with those seasoned harbingers of labour protest in colonial Kenya, the dockers and railwaymen. The state and employers feigned surprise. The colonial governor declared that the strike was not only 'illegal but entirely irresponsible. No properly formulated demands have been put forward' (Governor Mitchell 1947). The chief security spokesman in the Legislative Council (1947) declared that there could be no doubt that the strike was an attempt on the part of a number of persons to hold a pistol to the head of the community at large. That is borne out by the fact that the strike took place without any notice, and a large number of workers who had no dispute, of any kind, with their employers were persuaded or intimidated into leaving their employment.

This was the language of aggrieved state power, at once arrogant and uncompromising, but also fatuous, for it sought to confine and define the strike on its own terms, terms which were in fact being contested by the strike.[15]

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15 Government officials knew fully well the causes of the strike. As one of them put it, 'the foundation of the unrest was the complaints about the rate of wages and the cost of living. There was also considerable feeling of impatience. During the last few years... there had been 5 or 6 Committees of Enquiry, tribunals, etc. There was an impression among the Africans and among other races also, that nothing much ever happened'. He dismissed the allegation that the strike was caused by 'agitators coming from outside. Most of the so-called leaders were people who had lived in Mombassa

The attempt to delegitimise the strike was gradually intensified. Apart from blaming 'agitators', officials believed that the strike was inspired by the successful African dockworkers strike in Durban, South Africa.[16] Clayton and Savage 1974, echo the official line and argue that the news of the Durban strike was one of the 'three events' that converted the unrest in Mombassa 'into the general strike of 1947'. The other two, they assert, were 'rumours that the railway administration had forced stevedoring companies to abandon a plan for a pool of labourers who would be paid a retaining fee', and finally, the strike was triggered by the appearance of 'a leader to focus and to organise the discontent and unrest. This was Chege Kibachia' (Clayton and Savage 1974:276). These sets of events did not trigger the strike. The strike boiled from the grievances, anger and protests that had been brewing in Mombassa for sometime.

The strike was well-timed. The next day the 27,268 ton white Star Liner Georgic was expected to dock with over 1,000 passengers. The government immediately declared the strike illegal and the police moved quickly to disperse the strikers, but to no avail. That morning 'a few Africans continued at their jobs for a time, but left after pickets spoke at them' (Reuter 1946). The situation did not always go so smoothly. Historians have tended to underestimate the amount of coercion used by the strikers in 'persuading' non-striking workers to join. Clayton and Savage claim that 'there was little need for intimidation' (Clayton and Savage 1974:277). In Cooper's account the strike is portrayed as an outpouring of effortless solidarity, and he commends the one act of intimidation he mentions, that of shaving the heads of scabs, as having been 'carefully orchestrated', and concludes that 'no one died during the strike', as if coercion is only real when it results in death (Cooper 1987:82-83).

Whether intended to correct contemporary official charges of widespread intimidation and violence, or to counter earlier anthropological and historiographical orthodoxies that portrayed a low level of class consciousness among African workers, these interpretations obscure the complex realities involved in sustaining such a massive strike, comprising as it did diverse groups of workers in different establishments and occupations. Solidarity was not given, it had to be constructed and reproduced on a continuous basis for as long as the strike lasted. And that process involved both negotiation and coercion, wherever and whenever the strike was being organised, discussed, and evaluated. It should not be forgotten that, 'in

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for very long'. Testimony of Acting Provincial Commissioner, Coast to the Thacker Tribunal, 20.2.1947, KNA Labour 3/13.

16 See for example, Port Manager to General Manager, Railways, 7.1.1947, Establishment Files, Railway Archives 13/1/1/3.

practice, a picket line is a weapon, security blanket, and propaganda organ in one' (Stewart n.d.:71). It is, therefore, both a compact of solidarity for the striking workers and a shield of intimidation against scabs and strike-breakers. There can be little doubt that during the Mombassa general strike pickets were sometimes used to intimidate non-striking workers. There are reports that 'crowds assembled at all main-road entrances to the town and threatened Africans and Asians who had tried to go to work' and 'taxi cabs driven by Africans were stoned, and windows of the European Carlton Hotel were smashed after an Arab servant had been seen' (Reuter 1946).

By the end of the first day the strike had spread and 'paralysed work at the docks and on the Railway and practically all hotels, offices, banks and private houses [were] without African servants' (*East African Standard* 14.1.47). Later in the afternoon a mass meeting was held at Kiwanja. It was at that meeting that the African Workers Union was formed (Singh 1969:141). Thus, contrary to official propaganda at the time, echoed in the work of some scholars (Clayton and Savage 1974:276, Berman 1990:236), the union was the product, rather than the instigator, of the general strike (Cooper 1957:84-85).

That evening 'armed and steel-helmeted police specially drafted into this great East African (Cooper 1957:84-85) port were on patrol' (Reuter 1917). They apparently 'charged rioting mobs of natives... Native stonethrowers broke shop and hotel windows and the police had to break up gangs attacking volunteer workers' (Reuter 1946). They made many arrests (Reuter 1958; *Daily Herald* 1947). The rest of the night reportedly passed quietly (Reuter 1958).

What the archival data does not tell us is the situation in Majengo and other African locations. The night was charged with excitement and apprehension. In small public congregations inside and outside their homes, and along the winding roads and paths, or in the privacy of family gatherings the workers who were on strike and those who were not and other members of the community talked about the strike, assessed the events of the day, savoured their solidarity or deplored disunity, debated strategy, and worried about the future.[17]

In the meantime, additional police and troops were on their way from Nairobi to Mombassa (Reuter 1958). The next day a statement was issued warning the strikers that the present strike is against the law. Unless you return to work the government cannot beneficially continue investigations into ways and means whereby the difficulties described to the Labour Commissioner by your representatives can overcome (Reuter 1611).

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17 Oral interview, Peter Ndegwa, June 1989; Oral interview, Reuben King'ori, July 1989.

The statement continued that they were 'rendering themselves liable to loss of pay and dismissal' (Reuter 160). This language was distressingly familiar to the workers, and they ignored it. The strike gathered momentum. When the Georgic docked, passengers and troops, helped by crew and European volunteers, carried their own baggage, protected by military police guard, although the strikers made no effort to interfere (Reuter 1519). The ship was 'tied up' by 'senior naval officers, government officials, numerous Europeans and one young woman' (Reuter 1453).

The state augmented the feeble voices of propaganda with the armed fists of physical force. Police patrols were increased and more arrests were made. Altogether, by the end of the day 'about 200 Africans had been arrested at Mombassa on charges of intimidation and molestation' (Reuter 1443). Despite this, 'the stoppage of work was almost complete' (Reuter 1443). By the third day, 'troops had arrived in Mombassa and, according to press reports, 421 workers had been arrested by police' (Singh 1969:141). Instead of terrorising the workers, this merely reinforced their resolve.

As had become customary, that afternoon the workers gathered at Kiwanja and the AWU got a shot in the arm with the appointment of Chege Kibachia as its Executive Officer. Up to that point the fledgling union had had little impact on the organisation of the strike. The strike was coordinated and mobilised through word of mouth (Clayton and Savage 1974:277). The existing service associations, especially the railway clerical and civil service associations, gave little support to the strike. This discredited them in the eyes of many workers. In short, in the first few days of the strike there were strike patrol groups which largely functioned independently and sometimes in isolation, and temporary strike committees were formed among several groups of workers employed in the same industry or occupation (Zeleza 1982:233-234).

Kibachia was a twenty-eight year old salesman for the East Africa Clothing Company. He had moved to Mombassa from Nairobi in late 1946 (Clayton and Savage 1974:276). That same day he left for Nairobi to try to contact Eliud Mathu, the lone African representative in the colonial Legislative Council. Cooper believes that Kibachia was appointed as Executive Officer 'because he knew Mathu' (Cooper 1957:85). But he offers little evidence for this. In fact, the union sent Kibachia and another representative not only to meet Mathu but also Kenyatta and other leaders of the Kenya African Union and government officials (Singh 1969:142). Kibachia's appointment had a lot to do with the fact that he had already established a reputation as an effective labour organiser.

In Kibachia the union found an educated, articulate, and militant leader and a fiery speaker, someone who spoke their language and the language of state power. Three days after his appointment, and a day after returning from Nairobi without having contacted Mathu, Kibachia wrote to the press,

refuting official propaganda and asserting the union's position. The letter (*East African Standard* 21.1.1947) stated:[18]

> We wish to clear the allegation advanced in your paper today that the strikers are under the influence of 16 Ex-Service Askaris who have been to England without ground. The strikers are under the influence of those whom they have chosen to lead them. The motives behind the strike are: (1) Indifference towards paying them equally with the other workers of other races who performed identical or same duties; (2) Partiality and disrespect shown to African workers wherever they are employed; (3) Deliberative devices to keep the Africans poor that he may keep at his work all the time...; (4) Not giving wives and children allowances; (5) Taking no notice of the present high cost of living.

It can be seen that as far as the union was concerned the strike was over the issues of wages and racial discrimination.

Pickets and Patrols

Employers and the state found the strike increasingly intolerable. 'Senior staffs', one report lamented, 'in Mombassa's hotels, offices and homes swept the floors and did the dusting because of the six-day-old strike of all African labour in the port. Some of the women had never previously done such work' (Reuter 0025). Ship crews and passengers loaded and unloaded their own baggage, or were assisted by volunteers.

As the strike entered its second week the state intensified its efforts to break it. Four major tactics were used: propaganda, recruitment of strike breakers and scabs, development of police and troops, and conciliation. The propaganda offensive was stepped up. For example, on the eight day R.A.F. aircraft 'showered 10,000 leaflets in English and Kiswahili over a big crowd of strikers' (Reuter 1958). This was the first time the colonial government 'had used aircraft for a purpose such as this' (Reuter 1958). The leaflets combined appeals, warnings and threats as can be gauged from the following:

> Have you stopped to think a little how the strike is injuring yourselves? Have a look round. The life of town goes on. Big steamers are going and coming, they are being loaded and unloaded. Shops, hotels and clubs are carrying on as usual. The only difference is that no Africans are getting wages. Now what about your condition? Are you getting enough to eat? Have you rent to pay at the end of the month? Who brought [the food] to you? Does food grow in the Mombassa Shambas? If the government and railway didn't bring this food, do you really think your leaders could do

18 The letter was written on January 18, and published three days later.

> so? You should realise that at the very time when you began to strike the Labour Commissioner was busy investigating the grievances which your representatives explained to him. But as you chose to follow the foolish advice of those people from afar off who claim to be your leaders, the Labour Commissioner is unable to continue to consider your grievances until you've returned to work (Reuter 2106).

In addition to the leaflet campaign loudspeakers blared in the streets. During one afternoon, for example, loudspeakers implored 'street sweepers to return to work to prevent the possibility of an epidemic' (Reuter 2056).

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the propaganda offensive. Many workers eagerly read the leaflets. To some what was striking about these leaflets was not the message they contained, but the manner in which they were delivered. It was quite a spectacle watching them fluttering from the skies.[19] A few feared that this was a prelude to a bombing campaign. Wild rumours and fear were most pronounced the first day that the leaflets were dropped. In the subsequent days they were received with weary amusement.[20]

The fact that the strike dragged on meant that propaganda and threats did not have the desired effect immediately. The state and employers, therefore, recruited gangs of strike breakers, consisting of hundreds of African, Asian and Arab volunteers, over 800 European men and women volunteers and about 700 Italian civil internees, including 12 prisoners-of-war who were awaiting a ship to Italy. A Central Manpower Committee was formed for the duration of the strike to co-ordinate the distribution of this labour corps. The strike breakers were able to maintain a few essential services.[21]

Employers and the state tried to enlarge the ranks of the strike breakers by encouraging scabs. While the strikers generally did not molest the strike breakers, they reacted more violently towards scabs. They were jeered at and sometimes beaten.[22] On a number of occasions scabs were violently removed from their work places. For example, 'a gang of between 20 and 30 visited the house of Mr Hoey and removed all the workers but one by force'.[23] Groups of strikers went to various premises where scabs were

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19 Oral Interview, Peter Ndegwa June 1989).

20 Oral Interview, Abdul Hassan, June 1989.

21 Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18.1.1947; Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for the Colonies 21.1.1947; Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for the Colonies 22.1.1947; Reuter 0708, all in CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

22 General of Command in Chief East Africa to War Office, 20.1.1947, CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

23 Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for Colonies, 3.3.1947, CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

suspected, warning them of severe consequences if they did not stop scabbing. The strikers worked these patrols in shifts. Sometimes they carried letters from the AWU to the employers. One of the letters read:

> Sir, having knowledge that some postal staff are privately being taken to duty which is against our wishes and an act which may constitute disturbances, we beg upon you kindly ask the withdrawal from duty of such people to avoid trouble, as we are peaceful strikers.[24]

This represented an attempt by the union to monitor, coordinate and control the growth of the strike. But its capacity was limited.

The workers themselves and their communities proved to be the most effective in mobilising and maintaining the strike. Many taxi drivers offered their services for free and took carloads of union organisers all over the city to oversee the way the strike was progressing. [25] Ethnic associations also played an active role. There were numerous ethnic associations in Mombassa. They served many functions: assisted and welcomed new comers, supported members in times of crisis, and organised festivities. Above all, they offered the workers, many of whom were rural migrants who came far from Mombassa, a sense of belonging, the comfort of custom and tradition. Through these associations the often lonely, alienated workers sought to reinvent the social and moral spaces they had left behind. The ethnic associations, which were mostly led by workers in permanent positions, used their moral weight to call on their members to join and remain in the strike. For example, the Meru 'association joined the strike voluntarily on account of hunger'.[26] The Kikuyu General Union,[27] the Mombassa Tabora Association,[28] the Taita Union,[29] and the Wakamba Union[30] did the same.

Religion also appears to have played some part in the organisation of the strike. It is significant to note that the football field where the strike

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24 Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for Colonies, 3.3.1947, CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

25 African Workers Federation letter quoted in Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for Colonies, 3.3.47 in CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

26 P. Mtondoka, (in mosquito control, the municipality), Secretary, Meru Association, Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

27 J.O. Kinanga (lab assistant in a government department), Secretary to Kikuyu General Union, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

28 S. Manyonga (a mason in the Railways), President, Mombassa Tabora Association, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

29 A. Kubo (clerk at Smith Mackenzie, a large company), Secretary, Taita Union, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

30 W. Kihege (time keeper, New European Bakery), Secretary, Wakamba Union, Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

meetings were held was on the grounds of Sakina mosque. The mosque authorities must have approved or at least been sympathetic to the strike. That may also help explain why the police hesitated to break up these meetings: they would not only be incurring the secular rage of striking workers but the spiritual wrath of believers. If this supposition is correct, it could be argued, then that Kiwanja cha Maskini, was not only propped up by the size of the crowds that came, but also the sanctity of faith.[31]

These pressures did not only come from the organised institutions in the community. They also emanated from the diffuse discourses of the community, discourse understood both as verbal process and action (Cooper 1990:167). Moral pressure and physical coercion were applied to rally the reluctant and reclaim the scabs. Some unlucky scabs were rounded up and had their heads shaven and 'stretched in the sun' (Reuter 2108). If all this did not work, the threat that 'their relatives living in the native portion of town would be beaten up' often did the trick.[32] Oral data indicates that relatives of scabs were, indeed, sometimes harassed by being jeered at, shunned, and even molested. Pressure against scabs did not only come from the other strikers. It came from the scab's neighbourhood and community at large. Women played a critical role in 'shaming' the scabs, either directly or indirectly through their spouses, who, in turn, put pressure on their scabbing husbands or partners. These pressures, or fears of such humiliation, prevented many workers from scabbing and helped maintain the morale of the strike. But there were some unrepentant scabs, mostly single up-country migrant labourers, who often had weak local networks of support.[33]

It can be seen that the community provided the moral force and sanctions to sustain the strike. It was at Kiwanja that the community was at its most palpable and animated. Meetings were held there every day to express the collective goals of the strike, cement the solidarity of such a diverse group of workers, and rally faltering spirits. The meetings had a free, carnival atmosphere. As one participant later recalled: he 'never saw anyone telling people what to do. It was open to anyone to speak'.[34] Kiwanja was the organisational hub of the strike, the social matrix where people met, established, renewed, and sealed friendships. At Kiwanja the strike was

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31 This subject awaits more research. Some testimonies to the Kibachia hearing intimate the active participation of Muslim imams and Christian clerics in the strike. See, for example, S.A. bin Said Aderhaman, Arabic teacher and Imam, and C. Mwangi, elder Church of England Mission, CO 537/2109.

32 Governor Mitchell to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 3.3.1947, CO 533/544 38091/b part 1.

33 Oral Interview, Reuben King'ori, July 1989; Oral Interview, Zaihnabu Faisal, July 1989.

34 W. Kihege, Secretary, Wakamba Union, Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

constructed and reconstructed daily, and through the workers who periodically returned to their rural homes and families, the strike radiated to the countryside from which came the solidarity and sustenance of food, which was sometimes brought to Kiwanja to be cooked and shared (Cooper 1987:81-82).

It is important to note that the migrant labour system, which prevented many workers' families from reproducing themselves on the workers' wages, now helped sustain the strike. Labour casualisation and low wages, against which the workers were fighting, also fortified many of them against hardship, for they had never been able to depend entirely on wages for their survival. It was a supreme irony of the strike that poverty was both the curse and armour of the workers. The strike was waged against low wages and labour casualisation, but during its duration it was sustained longer than it would otherwise have been by these very conditions. The low wages and prevalence of casual labour also militated against the atomisation of workers and their households, and strengthened the networks of community interdependence.

The role of these networks cannot be overemphasised, for the union had no resources to help the striking workers, so the latter either relied on themselves or their families, relatives, neighbours and friends. The role of women, whether in the rural areas, from where migrant workers brought supplies, or in Majengo itself, in organising the distribution of food and other forms of relief was critical. As one former striker recalled:

> Three of us used to live together. Kamau and Ogenga were from upcountry. I was lucky because I was from the coast, no too far from Mombassa. I used to go home every weekend. During the strike things were hard. We had no money. Usually we had no money, anyway. But this time it was worse because we were not paid. I did not even have enough money to travel home. Fortunately, my wife came with one of the children and brought me food. That's what we lived on during the strike. It was not just me. I knew many other workers who depended on their wives for food. When it comes to food, women can be resourceful, you know.[35]

Zaihnabu Faisal, a woman who combined her job as a domestic worker with petty trade, remembered that during the strike, in which she participated,

> I was the leader of a Muslim women's group. We thought we should help the strikers in our neighbourhood, especially those that came from afar and did not have families to depend on. So we collected foodstuffs, and we would ask young men to deliver it to those who needed it. I can tell you they were so grateful. Those were tough times, but also wonderful.[36]

35 Oral Interview, Juma Said, 1989.

36 Oral Interview, Zaihnabu Faisal, July 1989.

There can be little doubt that women, often invisible in the historiography of strikes, were often the bedrock of community support that sustained those strikes. Strikes are not simply made and broken on the picket lines, but in the homes of the striking workers as well.[37]

Thus community support was not confined to expressions of moral solidarity. The community also rendered essential material assistance. Striking workers facing difficulties were provided with food, free accommodation, and sometimes money by their neighbours or relatives.

In the words of one striker:

> Because of the strike I did not have money to pay rent. My landlord was quite harsh and unreasonable. He evicted me and my family, all six of us, my wife and four children. It was rough. We moved into my brother's house. There were so many of us there. We lived like rats. But we managed until the strike was over.[38]

This shows that the tensions generated by the strike were reproduced in the community, while, simultaneously, community relations mediated the organisation of the strike.

The community did not of course always have its own way; just as its actions were responses to provocations by the state and employers, the latter also responded to community actions. Police protection was mobilised for the scabs and strike breakers. 'A large draft of King's African Rifles with three Bren Gun Carriers', a Reuter despatch reported as the strike entered into its second week,

> has arrived in Mombassa... bringing the town's military strength to five companies of the 4th Battalion of the KAR... additional police reinforcements have been drafted into the town and a majority of the European population and many Asians have been enrolled as special police. Patrols of troops and police with fixed bayonets are guarding key points in the town (Reuter 0703).

The government was getting edgy not only because the strike was holding longer than it had been anticipated, but also because there was 'talk of a mass meeting to be held in Nairobi at the end of the week to consider calling a general strike throughout Kenya and Uganda to commence on Monday next'.[39] More arrests were made. And for the first time, some were charged 'under the Trade Unions and Trade Disputes ordinance of 1943 —

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37 As one author puts it: 'more strikes collapse under the withering stare of a workers' family than are ever beaten on a picket line' Stewart *(n.d.*:21).

38 Oral Interview, Kilongo Maitha, July 1989.

39 Governor Mitchel to Secretary of State for Colonies, 21.1.1947.

that of being concerned in "picketing in such numbers as to be calculated to intimidate"' (Reuter 2053).

While the state was flexing its coercive muscles, it also extended the hand of conciliation. It sought to use the good offices of negotiators who had some credibility with African opinion. The first to be tried was the Rev. L.J. Beecher, one of the two representatives of African interests in the Legislative Council. He was hurriedly sent to Mombassa on the seventh day of the strike where he addressed leaders of the strike. His mission failed when he told them that:

> he 'could not support an illegal strike', but as soon as the strikers returned to work he would do his utmost to further any legitimate demands. The strikers replied that they 'would not budge' from their present position (Reuter 2329).

In fact, Beecher was apparently 'threatened by the strikers demanding that he should support their claims' (Reuter 2149). Times had indeed changed: the paternalistic admonitions of a missionary now carried little weight.

The strikers then called for Mathu, the first African member of the Legislative Council.[40] Before his arrival in Mombassa on January 23, he had secured a guarantee from the government that a tribunal with mandatory powers would be appointed and a survey of living conditions in Mombassa would be conducted. He came with the attorney general and the member for Mombassa in the Legislative Council (Reuter 2332). But he went to meet the workers alone. First he talked to the strike leaders at his hotel. He persuaded them to end the strike with assurances that their grievances would be addressed by the government. That evening he held meetings with government officials. Next morning he held more meetings with the strike leaders. They agreed to end the strike. In the afternoon he appeared at a mass meeting attended by 10,000 strikers (Reuter 2332). He asked them to return to work with a promise that the matter would be settled within three months. The workers agreed to call off their strike.

That same evening the government announced that an investigator would be appointed to ascertain the facts which must be known in order to ensure that wages are such as to provide a reasonable standard of living... an investigation into the cost of housing in Mombassa has also been ordered (*East African Standard*, 25.1.1947).

The workers began returning to work on Saturday morning, January 25, convinced that they had won a great victory. However, it was not a joyous day for everyone. Many workers 'are reported to have been told on reporting back for work that their services were no longer needed, the strike having

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40 For a biography of Mathu see Roelker 1976.

shown that they could be dispensed with'. The government was also keen to dampen any sense of victory on the strikers' part. It distributed leaflets denying that their grievances would be settled within three months. 'It can't be too strongly emphasised', the statement said, 'that there is absolutely no truth to the rumour' (Reuter 2237).

Benefits and Costs

When it appeared that the government might be backtracking the workers became restive once again. A week after the strike had ended rumours began flying that the strike would resume. Police patrols were reactivated and voluntary workers were put on standby to maintain essential services (Reuter 2112). The threat of a new strike probably forced the government to act quickly. At the beginning of February the Thacker Tribunal, named after its leader, Justice Thacker, and a social survey team were appointed.

The tribunal issued an interim report on March 20 and a final report three months later. The interim report made an award that increased wages by 10% for those earning less than 54 shillings 50 cents. But the wage increase was restricted to monthly workers employed in government departments, Municipal Boards, the Railways and Harbours, the three stevedoring companies and the East African Power and Lighting. All casual workers, and workers in small firms, domestic servants, and agricultural labourers were excluded. The African Workers Union, now renamed African Workers Federation on Mathu's suggestion in order to distinguish it from the Kenya African Union, held a mass meeting on March 23 where the award was denounced for being selective, and 'inconsistent with the democratic approach to the question of labour' (*East African Standard* 1.4.1947). Kibachia reportedly 'advised the Africans not to accept the interim award and stated that he and his organisation would make representation in London for a special commission to be sent out to do the work of the tribunal'.[41] The award was rejected, although it had initially been accepted by the workers concerned.

The meeting went further to articulate issues of persistent popular discontent. The speakers railed against the government's 'removal of unemployed Africans from Mombassa, as this action was inconsistent with the principles of the Atlantic Charter and freedom of movement in their own country';[42] condemned the monopolisation of shops by non-Africans, and called for the boycott of municipal 'tembo [palm wine] canteens which are demoralising, injurious to culture and contrary to moral purposes, and [were]

41 E.J.A. Leslie, new District Commissioner for Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, in CO 537/2109.

42 Director of Intelligence to Chief Secretary, 24.3.1947, KNA Labour 3/17.

used as a trap for the arrest of Africans' (*East African Standard* 1.4.1947), 'and were a means whereby African money was transferred to municipal pockets other than African pockets'.[43] The constitution of the Tribunal was also criticised for having inadequate African representation.[44]

It was a mark of the federation's power and the lingering solidarity of the workers that 80 percent of the monthly workers rejected the salary increases in their April paycheques. But it proved difficult to sustain this level of solidarity. Given the low wages, the money was simply too tempting. But the end of May the number of workers rejecting the interim award had dropped to 40 percent. Some casual workers also accepted a Sh/50 raise offered by a number of companies. The final tribunal award made in June 'added slightly to the cost of living adjustment given monthly workers and significantly to the wages of casual workers... Monthly workers were guaranteed leave, holidays, and paid overtime according to a specified formula' (Cooper 1987:100).

The impact of the Mombassa general strike was felt beyond Mombassa. The minimum wage raise was not confined to the city. The government decided to give similar increases to workers in Nairobi, Kisumu, and elsewhere 'without waiting for the recommendations of the Minimum Wages Advisory Board' (*East African Standard* 24.4.1947). Also, Mombassa provided some impetus to a series of strikes in other parts of the country, reaching as far as Kisumu where a general strike erupted from 14 to 16 April (Labour Department 1947, Singh 1969:146-147). The *East African Standard* (16.4.1947) lamented:

> Kisumu, like other urban centres in Kenya, has recently been experiencing a not unexpected, not blameworthy, unrest among African workers. The effects of the Mombassa strike have not yet worn off. They will continue until Africans are satisfied that steps are being taken to deal with legitimate grievances, and to study their problems. They will continues, also, until Government takes firm action against those who are fomenting the agitation... What everybody would like to know is who is responsible for setting such a futile movement as the Kisumu strike on foot and what is going to be done about so-called 'leaders' who delude ignorant Africans, jeopardise their livelihood and propose to defy Authority.

Thus Mombassa was identified as the centre from which the virus of labour unrest had radiated. It followed that efforts to introduce industrial peace had to be concentrated there, too.

It could be argued, therefore, that while the general strike brought considerable and immediate benefits to workers in Mombassa and elsewhere

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43 Cf. E.J.A. Leslie *op.cit.*

44 Director of Intelligence to Chief Secretary, 24.3.1947, KNA Labour 3/17.

in the country, it also strengthened the coercive colonial labour control system. To be sure, the industrial relations regime that subsequently evolved differed in important ways from that of the pre-war era. Its authoritarian core was encased in a paternalistic exterior. This coercive-paternalistic industrial relations system was consolidated in the 1950s. This latter period lies beyond the scope of this paper.[45] Suffice it here to point out that the origins of the 1950s industrial relations system lay in the 1947 Mombassa general strike.

Following the strike, important elements in the state apparatus, functionaries of local capital, and influential sections of the press, who wanted to avoid the 'confusion' of 'unwieldy' mass strikes in the future sought to promote 'apolitical' trade unionism. As the tribunal was being appointed the colonial government was planning to bring 'a trade union expert' 'to organise African labour' (Reuter 2114). He arrived in April 1947. His name was James Patrick, a right-wing Scottish trade unionist, who believed that 'the institution of trade unions in this country constitute[d] the most fearful threat of all' (*East African Standard* 14.1.1949), and that he could not imagine 'anything more disastrous to the progress of the colony than the development of trade unionism by uneducated people'.[46] He vowed to work hard to have unions that were 'unsatisfactory de-registered'.[47]

True to his word, Patrick was instrumental in the dissolution of the AWF in 1948. In a memorandum written the following year he proudly stated:

> When I arrived in Kenya two years ago (in 1947) an organisation calling itself the African Workers Federation was very much to the fore. The Leader became such a danger to the maintenance of law and order he had to be deported. I personally had to discourage the growth of the Federation because I believed it would be completely impractical to administer. There was no restriction, limitation, or qualification on membership. You could be a baker, a tailor or a candle-stick maker, it didn't matter what your occupation was, if you wanted to join, the African Workers' Federation would only be too pleased to accept you.[48]

Patrick played a major role in the subsequent formation of more 'responsible' trade unions, and in framing Kenya's repressive and restrictive trade union legislation enacted in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He also

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45 For comprehensive analyses of the consolidation of this system see: Amsden (1971), Berman (1981), Zeleza (1982:chapter 6).

46 James Patrick, Memorandum on Trade Union Development and Policy, 1949, KNA Lab.10.

47 James Patrick, Memorandum on Trade Union Development and Policy, 1949, KNA Lab.10.

48 James Patrick, Memorandum on Trade Union Development and Policy, 1949, KNA Lab.10.

engineered the removal of union leaders whom he found too militant and disagreeable and rewarded and promoted those he found moderate with scholarships and other favours.[49]

This is to suggest that the demise of the federation had more to do with the determined opposition of the state and capital, rather than the internal weaknesses of the federation itself, as some historians have argued. For Clayton and Savage the federation weakened itself because of its overextension outside Mombassa and, more importantly, because of its poor accounting procedures (Clayton and Savage 1974:280). Thus, shoddy administration was the main cause of the federation's eventual collapse. To Cooper inadequate analytical skills on the part of the federation was the central problem. The federation failed, in Cooper's words, 'to develop a critique of the award or an appreciation of how much both its benefits and the sense of victory it entailed meant to the workers' (Cooper 1987:104). No amount of good administration or penetrating analysis would have saved the federation from a state that was determined to destroy it. This is not to say that the federation did not have internal weaknesses. It did. But those weaknesses in themselves would not have resulted in the federation's collapse at the time it did. That dubious distinction lies squarely with the state.

To the state and employers the federation embodied the dangerous urban mass, rather than trade unionism. As Patrick made clear, it had to be crushed at all costs. Opposition to the federation was not confined to the functionaries of the state and capital. The federation's activities were of grave 'concern to all responsible opinion in Kenya, including', the acting governor wrote, 'such important unofficial opinion as Archdeacon Beecher and Sir Alfred Vincent', who believed that a serious political situation would' arise unless the government [took] action 'against the growing campaign of the AWF' 'to discredit not only the government but also all European institutions'.[50]

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49 For a detailed analysis of Patrick's career in Kenya, see Zeleza, T., (1987:6-8). Patrick's activities were even attacked at the Annual Conference of the British TUC in 1952 by some British trade unionists, although the TUC General-Secretary defended him, TUC Annual Report 1952 (London: TUC), pp.351-2.

50 Acting Governor 8.6.1947, in CO 537/2109.

The offensive against the AWF began in earnest following the federation's successful campaign against the Thacker tribunal's interim award. The federation was also critical of the final award in that it applied to less than half the city's workers, although it accepted it.[51] The provincial administration believed that the federation was muted in its response to the final award because the majority of workers are not yet anxious to undergo the discomfort of a general strike so soon after the last one, and the leaders realise this and wish for time in which to prepare the ground for the next move. No doubt they will return to the charge when the time seems ripe.[52]

The workers who had been excluded decided to take action. The domestic workers were so 'angry' by the exclusion that they decided to form the Domestic Servants Union.[53] Drivers and mechanics formed the Drivers and Mechanics Association.[54]

Given the fact that so many workers were excluded from the award it is not difficult to see why the AWF could argue in its memorandum to the Colonial Office that the Thacker Tribunal had 'left things as they were before'.[55] This was not a 'misanalysis', 'a political error, a misreading of the importance of success in the course of a struggle' as Cooper (1987:106), contends, but a reflection of the fact that many workers were left out of the settlement and others were dissatisfied with what they received. Those at the top of the pay scale were not too impressed with the awards. Neither were some government officials and observers.[56] It is quite ahistorical, therefore,

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51 The AWF apparently advised the workers covered by the award to demand that the final award increase be included in the end of June paychecks. Refusal by some employers led to a few incidents. Senior Labour Officer, Coast to Acting Provincial Commissioner, 9-7-1947, KNA Labour 3/14.

52 Acting Provincial Commissioner, Coast, to Member for Law and Order, 12.7.1947, KNA Labour 3/14.

53 S. Bin Abdulla, Chairman Domestic Servants Union, submission in the matter of Kibachia's deportation, in CO 537/2109.

54 P.H. Brown, Municipal African Affairs Officer, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

55 The memorandum was enclosed in a letter from Chege Kibachia to Creech Jones, 12.8.1947, CO 537/2109.

56 For instance, the Acting Coastal Provincial Commissioner argued that the award was not generous enough, although he thought it should have been confined to government and railway firms 'who could be trusted to honour it' rather than extended to the small employers who couldn't. One of the most extensive and scathing attacks on colonial labour and wage policy following the Thacker Tribunal interim award was made by T.P. O'Brien. In his view the low wage system was a 'major error', rationalised by ignorant 'western anthropologists and economists', intended to satisfy the needs of 'the metropolitan country'. T.P. O'Brien, Colonial Labour and Wage problems: Memorandum Submitted to Mombassa Trades Disputes Tribunal, 26.5.1947, CO 533/544.

to expect the federation to have gone out of its way to celebrate 'the workers' success'.

Cooper's argument that the award package as a whole marked a success for the workers is tantalising. The awards, he believes, marked an important step towards paying African workers a living wage. The workers had also struck a blow against casual labour. Moreover, the strike forced the government to take African workers seriously, while its resolution through Mathu's intervention showed the importance of African politicians as mediators (Cooper 1987:88-93). In short, the strike forced changes in the organisation of work and the structure of wages. The achievements were real, but they should not be overemphasised. From the vantage point of the Mombassa workers in June 1947 or in the next few years there was little to celebrate. The weight of economic deprivation, social dislocation and political marginalization remained as heavy as ever. The problem with Cooper's analysis is that it is not about the discourse among Africans, but among colonial officials, especially those in the Labour Department who relished the language of liberal reform at the same time that they were busy fortifying the authoritarian industrial relations system.

The AWF memorandum presented not only a perspective analysis of the cheap labour system and its disastrous effects on rural life, culture and values, and the insidious cancer of racial discrimination, but also a poignant account of African despair and anger. Its demands were comprehensive: dispatch of a British Parliamentary Delegation to look at the grievances of Kenyan workers afresh; promotion of equal pay for equal work; payment of Shs 100 minimum wage, sick pay, workers' compensation and family allowances; provision of better housing, sanitation, travelling expenses, and educational facilities; abolition of pass regulations and beer canteens; recognition of trade unions, including the federation; and instituting the practice of advance notice before discharge.[57]

This memorandum was sent in August.[58] It clearly reflected the continuing dissatisfaction with the labour situation in Mombassa. Tensions

57 Chege Kibachia to Cree Jones, 12.1.1947, CO 537/2109.

58 There was no response until April the following year. In March, 1948, the Acting Governor drafted a response to the Secretary of State for the Colonies which dismissed the AWF memorandum point by point. A sample - on sending a British Parliamentary delegation: 'no useful purpose would be served' given the fact that 'Orde Browne's Report on "Labour Conditions in East Africa" was only published last year'; on equal pay for equal work: it was inappropriate not only because the three races in Kenya 'have vastly different standards of living, but generally speaking, the African at present displays a marked lack of responsibility'; On minimum wages: Not only are they 'hard to enforce', but 'any further considerable increase would be beyond the economic means of the colony and would result only in gradually increasing unemployment'; on travelling expenses: 'not enforceable'; on warning

were rising. On 18 June 1,500 people gathered when they heard that the fire Brigade had 'imprisoned' a woman, and a riot ensued.[59] By the end of July there were still many employers who had yet to enforce the final award.[60] For its part, the government was procrastinating on granting recognition to the AWF, which the latter had applied for about four months earlier. The meetings at Kiwanja became increasingly defiant and strident. As the Acting Governor observed:

> It is generally true to say that until recently those meetings were conducted in an orderly manner, and while many of Chege's utterances were entirely political his behaviour gave little cause for anxiety, as he proposed constitutional action. On 20th July, however, and in marked contrast to the general tone of previous meetings, the Secretary (James Muchenda), at a meeting under the Chairmanship of Chege, informed those present that arrangements were in hand for a countrywide general strike... He informed the meeting that a much sterner attitude would be adopted by the Federation leaders against persons who continued in their employment once a strike had been called, mentioning, in particular, that, whereas heads were shaved on the occasion of the last strike, persons refusing to obey their leaders on the next occasion would be permanently maimed by having an ear removed... at a meeting the following week, on July 27 Chege himself reiterated that plans were afoot for the calling of a general strike in the comparatively near future.[61]

The government began making plans to silence Kibachia and the federation's secretary. The only problem was to find a convenient method and an appropriate charge. The Attorney General advised that 'the facts would not support a criminal charge of incitement to violence', but any evidence of threats was sufficient to deport Kibachia and Muchenda 'to a suitable place in Kenya'.[62] The persecution of the AWF and its officials escalated. For example, the federation was refused permission to hold a procession on 3 August, because of Kibachia's 'remarks at the meeting of

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before dismissal: 'advance notice of discharge cannot of course be given in respect of labour employed by the day'; on beer canteens: they are 'run by municipalities and any profits are devoted to the welfare of the African'. Acting Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6.3.48, CO 537/3587. For the response, see, Secretary of State for Colonies to Governor Mitchell, 6.4.1948, CO 537/3587.

59 M. Kinyanjui, Labour Assistant, Native Civil Hospital, Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109. According to this report, the 'mob threw stones' against the 48 police officers who were there, and 'the AWF Secretary tried to assist in restoring order... the AWF was not responsible for riot'.

60 The Labour Department was even forced to launch a campaign after these employers, some of whom were convicted or fined. See *East African Standard*, 23.5.1947, *Mombasa Times*, 16.7.1947, and Clayton and Savage (1974:281).

61 Acting Governor, 8.8.1947, CO 537/2109.

62 Acting Governor, 8.8.1947, CO 537/2109.

July 27',[63] and one of the federation's officers, James Mwangi, 'was arrested for entering Coast Province without a permit' (Cooper 1987:155).

Kibachia was not deterred. On August 16 he went to Nairobi to open a branch of AWF. That afternoon he addressed a large meeting at Kaloleni Social hall, Nairobi's indoor Kiwanja, attended by some of the country's leading nationalists, including Kenyatta, at which he announced that the federation's headquarters would be shifted to Nairobi. The site of the office was identified the next day in Shauri Moyo, a densely populated African location. He declared that the office would be known as Ofisi ya Maskini, Office of the Poor. For the next three days he kept a frantic schedule attending meetings and conferring with trade union and nationalist leaders (Singh). The prospect of the AWF and the Kenya African Union (KAU) working together in Nairobi alarmed the government.[64] It decided to drop the gauntlet.

Kibachia was arrested on August 22 upon his return to Mombassa under the charge of 'conducting himself so as to be dangerous to peace and good order'.[65] His trial lasted about two weeks. It was a farce. The public and press were barred from attending. Great play was made of the threat to cut the ears of future scabs. The testimony of the Africans and the Europeans on this issue varied considerably, underscoring the different racial perceptions and discourses that divided settler colonial society. To the Africans, a laughing Kibachia had made the remark 'in a joking way'[66] 'the crowd laughed and clapped'[67] and 'no one showed alarm'.[68] To the Europeans, 'tension did undoubtedly increase considerably... as a result of the threat'[69] and it was apparent many workers feared that if there was 'another strike they would be subject to violence, so much so that they intended to run away'.[70] There were of course dissenters. A European police officer stated

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63 K.J.M. Holmes, Superintendent of Police Coast Province, Headquarters, Mombassa, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

64 Annual Report of the Native affairs Department, 1946-47 (Nairobi: Government Printer), p.80.

65 Acting Attorney General, 18.8.1947, CO 537/1209

66 Dickson Alaba, Assistant Inspector of Police, Kilindini, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

67 S. Manyonga, President, Mombassa Tabora Association, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

68 L.V. Macharia, Chairman, Municipal Staff Association, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

69 P.H. Brown, Municipal African Affairs Officer, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

70 P.J. Bostock, Priest, Church of England and Rural Dean of Coast, Kibachia Hearing, CO 537/2109.

that Kibachia made no 'unlawful remarks' or were there any' unlawful acts at those meetings'.[71] Most of the testimony was in Chege's favour. But this was not enough to save him.[72] He was found 'dangerous to peace and good order', and duly deported to Kabarnet in Baringo District, then a remote part of the Rift Valley Province where he languished for a decade.[73]

The state was not simply after Kibachia, but to crush militant trade unionism. Eighteen other leaders of the federation were also arrested.[74] Five days after Kibachia's arrest, Singh, probably Kenya's most indefatigable trade unionist before the rise of Mboya in the 1950s, was ordered to leave the country' within thirty days. He had arrived back in Nairobi from India only five days earlier' (Singh 1969:157). Singh was the General Secretary of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, successor to the Labour Trade Union of Kenya, and the oldest omnibus union in the country. The era of general worker's unions was drawing to a close. The ground was being laid for the deradicalization of the Kenyan labour movement, which would be accelerated during the state of emergency in the 1950s (Zeleza 1982:Chapter 6).

More difficult to decipher is the aftermath of the strike on community life. Testimonies to the Thacker Tribunal and Kibachia Hearing indicate little sense of elation with the results of the strike. Many Africans giving evidence pledged that if there was another strike they would not join it, although it is more than likely that these statements were made for the benefit of the hearings. The fact that there was little organised protest

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71 R.J. Joseph, Assistant Inspector, Kenya Police, CO 531/2109.

72 The remark on cutting ears amused the House of Commons. Mr Rees-Williams, responding to a question about Kibachia, 'that this man was rather a dangerous individual. In July 1947, he threatened that unless people came out on a strike he proposed to call, they would have their ears cut off (laughter). The government did not think this contributed to good trade union practice (loud laughter).Until the man learned to behave himself he would be detained. (Renewed laughter). *Times* (of London), 26.2.1948. So much for the view that the governing post-war British Labour Party was 'enlightened' when it came to colonial labour movements, see T. Zeleza, *Trade Union Imperialism*..

73 The government insisted that he was 'not under detention'. S.F. Sutton, Attorney General Chambers to A.B. Cohen, Colonial Office, 28.1.1948. CO 537/3587. The AWF was given official recognition by June 1948. But by then it had lost most of its leaders. Its fate was sealed when it lost use of the mosque grounds for its Sunday meetings. By 1950 its impact had paled into insignificance. In the meantime, the government actively tried to promote ethnic and other voluntary associations, see Stren *op.cit.*, p.70-71.

74 *East African Standard*, 26.1.1947, 1.9.1947, 10.9.1947, 24.9.1947, 2.10.1947; Mombassa Times, 28.8.1947.

following the arrest of Kibachia and the other leaders had little to do with Kenyatta's denunciation of 'illegal strikes'[75] (Cooper 1987:107). The fact that the workers did not protest was not remarkable; it would have been remarkable if they had, having just waged the colony's longest general strike earlier that year. After the tumultuous events of the past few months, the strike, tribunal hearings, awards, threats of further strikes, arrests of labour leaders, including Kibachia, it would not be farfetched to argue that fatigue or despair or both had set in.

Some of the testimonies also indicate that tensions persisted, at least for a while, between those who had participated in the strike and the scabs. The strike and its resolution also exacerbated the underlying strains among the workers themselves, especially between the lowly and relatively higher paid, as this exchange intimates:

> We really went on strike because of low wages, not because of no mosquito nets or anything like that, and if these highly paid friends of our say that they had nothing to do with it, and if they only came to the meeting place pretending to sympathise, then if they come next time there is a strike, they are the people who should be killed'.
> The President [of the Tribunal] warned him that this was violent language. 'You're on very dangerous ground, young man'.
> **Mr Orongu**: 'I'm not on dangerous ground, I'm only stating facts...'
> **The President**: 'Are you advocating that anyone should be killed?'
> **Answer**: 'All the lower paid people are very much against the statements of these men who are highly paid. My food expenses are the same as those of a clerk'.[76]

The Mombassa working class had never been homogeneous. The Thacker awards reinforced its internal cleavages and differentiation.

Already before the general strike sections of the Mombassa working class, especially the local Swahili, were stabilised. After the strike the process of stabilisation quickened. For some workers it came because their wages had risen to the point where they could sustain family life, while for others diminishing access to productive resources in the rural areas was the impetus for stabilisation. Sustaining and reflecting the growing stabilisation of Mombassa labour was the provision of more housing by the state and employers. The need to construct more working class housing received urgent attention following the general strike.[77] It was recognised that the

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75 It had already becoming clear by this time that Kenyatta was no firebrand. His message usually cautioned moderation. See Zeleza T., 1989:166-168. Spencer 1985.

76 Tribunal Hearings, 26.2.1947, CO Labour 3/13.

77 The growing preoccupation with the housing question is readily apparent in official reports and correspondence. For instance see KNA Labour 3/3 on 'Housing of Labour 1940-48', and the report therein by P.E.D. Wilson, Labour Officer, On Labour

problem was immense because it had 'been neglected over a number of years'.[78] In 1949 construction began of Port Tudor Housing Estate, the first public housing estate in Mombassa (Stren 1978:136-137). Old housing estates provided by large corporations and government agencies were criticised for 'overcrowding due to the fact that no provision was made for wives and families in labour lines in the past'.[79]

The construction of new working class housing, although far from adequate, away from Majengo gradually dispersed the working class community, so that the dense social and spatial community networks which had facilitated the general strikes of the past began to fray. The better off workers moved to Tudor and other estates built later. A study done in the 1960s found that the Tudor residents, unlike those of Majengo, were mostly recent migrants who were less predisposed to regard Mombassa as home, and had weaker family structures. Moreover, they were predominantly Christian and less ethnically diverse than Majengo, although they had more ethnic associations (Stren 1978:Chapter 9). The fracturing of working class Mombassa into several urban communities undermined the capacity of the city's workers to act collectively in the future. It is significant that there was never another general strike in Mombassa after 1947 until 1992-93, although there were numerous strikes confined to particular industries and communities.

Conclusion

The paper has tried to show the development and social dynamics, containment and aftermath of the Mombassa general strike, a major landmark in the history of the Kenyan labour movement. In this struggle both the strikers and the employers mobilised external resources: for the former it was the moral weight of the community, and for the latter coercive might of the state. This was, therefore, much wider struggle, one that transcended the grievances over wages and conditions of work. The strike was a challenge against, and an attempt to redefine, the hegemonic practices of colonial society. It was a moment in which the amorphous urban mass transformed itself into a working class community with its own discourse, symbols, and conventions.

Conditions Generally in the Coast Province of the PWD with Special Reference to Housing; also see Progress Report on Phillips Report, especially Part IV, KNA Labour 3/15; and (Booker and Devrill n.d.) *Report on the Economic and Social Background of Mombassa Labour Disputes* (Nairobi: Government Printer). Also see Stren (1978: chapters 7 and 8).

78 Director of Public Works to Labour Commissioner, 26.11.1947, KNA Labour 3/3

79 Director of Public Works to Acting Chief Secretary, 12.7.1947, KNA Labour 3/3.

Thus what happened in Mombassa in 1947 during and after the strike cannot simply be measured in the nebulous terms of success or failure, victory or defeat, or assessed exclusively in terms of changes in the organisation of work and nationalist politics. Far more happened to the people of the city. Their relationships and views of themselves were transformed in ways that are difficult to measure. It would be fascinating to know how many friendships were lost or gained, marriages broken or strengthened, careers built and destroyed, neighbourhoods enriched and impoverished, of opportunities seized and lost, dreams realised and shattered, and the subtle ways in which gender roles, age hierarchies and power structures were dissolved and reconstructed. Such a rich and textured story can perhaps best be captured in a novel rather than an academic paper.[80]

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80 See, for example, the brilliant portrayal of the 1947-48 rail strike in colonial French West Africa in Sembene (1981). I have dealt with the subject, in fictional form, of how a strike in a post-independent Africa country profoundly alters the relationships, identities, and politics of a community. The story focuses on the lives of two families from different social classes, one working class and the other middle class, drawn together by the strike (Zeleza 1992).

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