

## BOOK REVIEWS-REVUE DES LIVRES

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Dr. Jeff Crisp – *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles 1870–1980*. (ZED Press, 57 Caledonian Road – London (1984).

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Dr. Jeff Crisp's book on the Ghanaian Miners' struggles over a period of 100 years (1870 - 1980) has been written in a peculiarly dialectic style, non-technical language, which eases comprehension, and yet the book stands out as a classic in its own right. There is no doubt that enormous research has been put into the work. The wide range of original sources, including secret government and company records, bears out this point.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter tackles the conceptual framework for African Labour history. Crisp conceptualises the framework as being based on two central themes, namely *labour control* and *labour resistance*. He argues that labour control and labour resistance are integral and inseparable features of the capitalist mode of production. The author quotes Karl Marx (Capital Vol. I – (1901) at p. 321) to illustrate how the two features reciprocally bring forth each other:

*«The directing motive, the end and aim of capitalist production, is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus value, and consequently to exploit labour power to the greatest possible extent. As the number of cooperating labourers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and with it the necessity to overcome this resistance by counter pressure. The control exercised by the capitalist is... consequently rooted in the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and labouring raw material he exploits».*

The foregoing conceptual framework employed by Jeff Crisp in his book espouses the dialectical nature of the struggle between labour, capital and state. Ghana's mine workers' struggles over the century are thus analyzed as struggles against exploitative mining companies and authoritarian governments (both colonial and post-colonial governments maintained an authoritarian stance). It is significant to note that using this conceptual framework Crisp ably demystifies the categorisation of labour resistance between 'political' and 'economistic' and rejects the suggestion that 'economistic' (action for higher

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## *Africa Development*

wages) and 'industrial' (action over workplace issues) are apolitical in either motivation or effect. In the final analysis these forms of struggles question the configuration of authority relationships in the manner of organisation and control of the labour process and the 'differential distribution' of benefits inherent to that configuration.

The second and third chapters of Jeff Crisp's book gives an account of the various methods employed by mining capital and/or the colonial state machinery in creating wage labour on the one hand and the resistance of the native population to the wage labour system on the other. The author notes that the most important obstacle to the establishment of capitalist mining industry in the Gold Coast was that became known amongst British entrepreneurs and investors as the 'labour question'. One Thomas Haughton, writing to the *Mining Journal* in 1883 is said to have described the labour question to refer to the need of the mines to have a constant supply of first class (native) labour, and that at a cheap rate.

The situation in the Gold Coast, as in many other areas of the West African coast (and indeed in most of Africa South of the Sahara), was that there was more land available for cultivation than there was labour to work on it.

This was an important factor to the labour question for there was no demographic pressure capable of forcing the Ghanaian natives off the land and into wage employment. Since the local population could subsist without selling their labour power, it became necessary for the mines to offer some financial incentive to mobilise a labour force. Jeff Crisp notes however, that the incentives offered by the mining industry was not sufficient to achieve that objective.

Apart from pointing out that low wages constituted an unattractive feature of the work offered by the mines, the author also notes that the tasks assigned to workers during the period of mine construction were arduous, dirty and quite unlike agricultural labour in which even women from the local population were engaged. Thus from the early days of capitalist gold mining in Ghana, when even no true wage labouring class was in existence, the actions of the prospective workers from the native population clearly contradicted the interests of mining capital. The main mode of resistance in the mines was the withholding and withdrawal of labour. Discontent was also expressed by the so called 'refractory behaviour', the use of abusive language towards European managers and supervisors and the deliberate misunderstanding of instructions.

Collective modes of resistance such as go-slows, particularly as a reaction of workers to delays in wage payments, and the more serious power of strike action, were not unknown in the mines during the 19th century in Ghana. Crisp records that in 1898 the Ashanti Gold Corporation experienced two costly strikes by the miners. These were however, confined to small ethnically homogeneous groups of workers who had some degree of skill and therefore with a greater bargaining power than unskilled workers:

Such were the contradictions of the early attempts by mining capital to create a wage labour force in Ghana. Despite these initial failures to attract the regular supply of cheap and efficient labour required by the mines, Dr. Jeff Crisp notes that mining industry managed to survive a 30-year period (1870–1900) of erratic development. The early labour force of miners, however, to a large extent came from outside the gold producing areas. Crisp records the first available statistics in 1903 that the local workers constituted only 57 per cent of the total labour force of 17,000 men. Furthermore, the author notes significantly that the majority of local workers were hired for ancilliary tasks of carrying, clearing, wood cutting and the like. The more important task of underground mining was performed by non-local workers, the most noteworthy group being the Kross of the Liberian coast.

As it has been noted above the period 1870–1900 was one of an erratic development of the labour force and by and large a labour crisis was lurking the mining industry. Crisp underlines three major strategies employed by the mines in an attempt to avert the impending labour crisis. These were attempts to improve labour productivity, stabilisation of the labour force and monopsonizing the labour force. Since improvement of labour productivity necessarily intensified discipline and often allowed the maltreatment of workers, the strategy, ironically, actually exacerbated the problem of labour supply. Stringent discipline and maltreatment of workers deterred prospective workers from joining the mines and encouraged those in employment to quit and seek less onerous jobs.

With regard to the labour stabilization strategy which entailed the building of new and attractive villages for workers, introduction of long service awards and the like, very limited success was achieved.

Crisp notes that only skilled workers showed inclination to provide regular and reliable labour. Unskilled workers maintained an intermittent stance and moved from mine to mine and moved in and out of wage employment. As the Gold Coast during that time offered a range of other means of securing a cash income and at more attractive terms, prospective workers hardly went for the mining industry. Crisp further argues that the strict social control imposed on the 'stabilized' Mining Communities and the consequent «authoritarian nature of the Mining Community reinforced the labour repulsive character of work in the mines».

Attempts at monopsonizing the labour market as a strategy to avert the shortage of dependable labour also met with dismal failures. Apart from the inability of the mining companies and the colonial government to take united action on the labour problem, the failure at monopsonization was largely the result of the successful resistance of workers and prospective workers to this particular strategy of labour control. It was not until after 1905 that a movement from labour shortage to labour surplus could be discerned. This was a

## *Africa Development*

result of a new source of labour, namely migrant labour from territories outside the Gold Coast colony and the Ashanti. Recruitment of labour and at times coercive recruitment in the Northern Territories had the tacit support of the Gold Coast government.

In chapters four and five, Jeff Crisp succinctly explains the growth of consciousness and organised resistance by the mine workers. The author notes that although during 1870–1930 worker resistance was also manifested by strike action, these strikes were sporadic and organised on an *ad hoc* basis and as a result they were relatively easy to suppress.

During the thirties and forties when mining capital had attained considerable strength, a corresponding growth was demonstrated in the consciousness and collective action of the labour force. Strikes took place more frequently and on a much larger scale. Crisp records that between 1930–40 there were 12 major strikes some involving the entire labour force of a mine and others involving the majority of underground workers.

The situation compelled the mines and the colonial state to introduce new strategies of labour control. The colonial state adopted an interventionist policy towards labour action. Significant in this was the system of wage control and labour legislation. Wage regulation which introduced somewhat higher minimum wages constituted one of the colonial state's attempts to prevent strikes. Wage regulation was also complemented by a policy of institutionalisation whereby the state enacted trade union and dispute settlement legislation. The legislation gave a legal basis to picketing and the formation of trade unions but also banned strikes by government employees and strikes in sympathy with workers in different industries, and outlawed intimidation on picket lines.

Crisp's analysis of the Gold Coast colonial state's interventionist policy towards collective labour action finds interesting parallels in some other African and Asian countries which were under British colonial rule. It will be recalled that in 1930 the Secretary of colonies, Lord Passfield issued a circular directing all British colonies to enact trade union legislation. In Tanganyika the enactment was passed in 1932 while the Gold Coast administration did so in 1941. This move by the colonial office is seen by many bourgeois writers as an act of philanthropy and not as a consequence of the struggles of the African working peoples.

As Crisp clearly illustrates the early trade union legislation in the Gold Coast was deliberately enacted to forestall the development of genuine and effective trade unionism which is ordinarily the inevitable result of the struggles of workers against capitalist employers. The colonial trade unions were tailored in such a way that militant elements were kept off the stage and queer posts of trade union advisors were created by the colonial regime to provide the unions with the so-called sympathetic supervision and guidance. These model trade unions with their package of advisors was born of the British imperialists

harrowing experience in South East Asia and the West Indies where trade unions spearheaded the political struggle for national independence. The colonial policy of institutionalisation in the Gold Coast was an attempt to avoid the 'repetition' of history.

The new strategies of labour control adopted by mining capital and the colonial state in the Gold Coast after 1930's were destined to fail. Gradually, and despite efforts to appease them, the mine workers resorted to collective modes of resistance and subsequently became unionized. June 1944 saw the formation of the Mines Employees Union (MEU) with an educated and literate section of the labour force providing coherence and direction to workers' discontent. As a consequence of unionisation and growing militancy of the mine workers the strategies for labour control employed by mining capital and the colonial state achieved virtually no positive results.

The post-war decade (1947–1956) was a significant period in the political and socio-economic history of the Gold Coast. This was the period of the rise of mass nationalism and the radical politicization of the trade union movement. In socio-economic terms this was also the period of a boom in the colony's economy and significant growth in the social and geographical mobility of the population. Crisp says of this period:

*«The mining industry was inevitably affected by these developments, which combined to produce a period of intense and complex conflict between the mining companies, the mine workers and their trade union and the various factions of the colonial state»* (p. 94).

With regard to the distinctive forms of organisation and action by mine workers in the complex relations which developed in the post-war decade, Crisp argues as follows:

*«... although the mine workers frequently engaged in collective resistance independently of the MEU, and clearly perceived the union structure to be irrelevant to local-level conflicts with management, they nevertheless recognized the need for institutional resistance by a national organisation representing all mine workers»*. (pp. 120–121).

The period 1956–1966, which is when Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) was in power in Ghana is also characterized as a period of emaciation of the Ghana Mine Workers' Union and its increasing alienation from the mine workers. The analysis of the Ghanaian situation made by Dr. Crisp in chapter six is a typical representation of later developments in other African countries which were wallowing in obscurantist African socialism. The attitude of the post colonial state towards the trade union movement was that the working peoples were no longer fighting a foreign power, indeed they were urged to protect the state's property as their own.

## *Book Review*

The developmentalist ideology of the post-colonial Ghana under Nkrumah justified the consolidation of political authority at all costs. The trade union movement which had a history of anti-government activity was perceived by Nkrumah as a threat to CPP hegemony as well as to his economic policy. Jeff Crisp aptly notes in his book that there was a clear convergence of political and economic imperatives pointing to the need for tighter controls over organised labour». It is significant to note that the strategies which were employed by the CPP Government to control the Mine Workers Union, namely, through legislative restrictions on the union's ability to mobilize collective resistance and the integration of the union into the party-controlled Trade Union Congress (TUC), found similar parallels in the strategies employed by the post-colonial nationalist Government in the then Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in East Africa.

Obviously reacting to the CPP institutionalised system of labour control, the mine workers' curled into passivity and resorted to the new tactic of go-slow as a form of protest. However, two years before CPP rule was overthrown by a military coup, the mine workers demonstrated a new militancy which expressed collective discontent against management, government as well as union officials. This pattern of resistance which Crisp illustrates in chapter seven of his book indicates that while the union was being wasted away for lack of nourishment, since the union's pro-state stance had largely alienated it from the mine workers, revolt on the part of the workers against authority was still conceivable in other subtle forms.

There can be no better assessment of Dr. Jeff Crisp's book than that which appears in the blurb, which states in part, that it is a unique contribution to the history of Africa and its working class. One may add eulogistically that here is a magnificent account of Ghana's mine workers who for over a century of struggle against exploitation and subordination exhibited an 'enormous staying power' in asserting their autonomy from the political authority (both colonial and post-colonial) and coopted trade unions. It is a must read book not only for labour historians, students, society-conscious academic labour lawyers but also for labour activists.