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# Malaya's Indian Tamil Labor Diaspora: Colonial Subversion of Their Quest for Agency and Modernity

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MALAYA'S INDIAN TAMIL LABOR DIASPORA: COLONIAL  
SUBVERSION OF THEIR QUEST FOR AGENCY  
AND MODERNITY

(1945-1948)

by

Patricia Spencer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

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2013

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## ABSTRACT

Malaya's Indian Tamil Labor Diaspora: Colonial Subversion of  
Their Quest for Agency and Modernity (1945-1948)

by

Patricia Spencer, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2013

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Department: History

Malaya's Indian Tamil diaspora owed its presence in the country to the British who needed access to cheap labor for large scale agricultural projects. The most lucrative of these projects were the rubber plantations. Economically challenged South Indian peasants from the lowest of castes were the industry's mainstay. Their destitution and India's system of social stratification were factors that the colonial government took advantage of. Regarded by the British colonists and planters alike as malleable, gullible, and easily manageable, Indian laborers were used for light, monotonous work that required very little skill. Achieving upward mobility was an arduous and next to impossible task as the colonists found it profitable to maintain these people as an underclass that could be exploited. Perceptions of these people as an inferior lot with no political economy dominated the colonial narrative.

World War II was to change this perception. The veil of British superiority was removed from the eyes of these laborers when the British lost to the Japanese. Upon their return to Malaya after the war, the British found a more defiant Indian community. War time conditions

severely drained Indians of their resources and left them in an impoverished and destitute condition. However, British return to Malaya did nothing to alleviate the community's suffering as colonial interests were solely to get the stalled rubber industry up and running again.

Laborers' demands for higher wages and better working conditions were met with antagonism and eventually, draconian military suppression. Alliances forged with the Chinese labor community were quickly subverted. Indian labor involvement in radical unionism which was encouraged by the Malayan Communist Party was taken as an affront to colonial domination and was quickly branded as a terror movement. As such, the colonial narrative was able to maintain that resistance during this period was a terrorist movement led by communists, instead of being a labor movement demanding rights from the British. However, an alternate narrative should also exist in history showing that the colonial narrative was challenged by these Indians who had embraced a modern spirit in their defiance towards their colonial masters.

(112 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Malaya's Indian Tamil Labor Diaspora: Colonial Subversion of Their Quest  
for Agency and Modernity (1945-1948)  
by Patricia Spencer

The Indian labor diaspora that settled in Malaya, now known as Malaysia, was a diaspora that was used to further colonial ambitions. Large scale agricultural projects required a workforce that Malaya did not have. South Indian peasants from the untouchable Madrasi caste were taken to Malaya, initially, as indentured servants. When indenture was abolished, they were engaged as contract workers. Inferiority and backwardness were common colonial perceptions that were held against them. These laborers were exploited by the British as they had no bargaining power or the ability to demand more than a meager wage.

World War II redefined the way these laborers started to view the British. Having suffered defeat in the hands of the Japanese, the colonial power retreated meekly. This was a significant development as it removed the veil of British dominance in the eyes of a formerly docile people. When the British returned to Malaya after the war, it was a more defiant Indian labor community who greeted them. These wanted more concessions. They wanted citizenship, better wages and living conditions. They wanted a future that did not retain them on the rubber estates but one where they could finally shed their subaltern roots and achieve upward mobility.

This new defiance was met with antagonism by the colonial power whose main concern was to get the lucrative but stalled rubber industry up and running again. The destitution and impoverishment suffered by the Indians during the war was ignored as they were rounded up like cattle to be put to work again on the estates.

When their demands were not met, Indian laborers joined forces with the heavily Communist influenced Chinese migrant community to go on strikes, the strongest weapon they had at their disposal. The creation of the All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council, a predominantly Indian trade union, is essential in showing how Indian labor became a threat to the British that they eventually had to retaliate with draconian military suppression through the imposition of the Emergency in 1948.

Archival material from the Malaysian National Archives, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, the Labor History and Archive Study Center at the People's History Museum in the United Kingdom, and the Hull History Center in the United Kingdom, were analyzed to present an alternate narrative as opposed to the colonial narrative, in recognizing and attributing a modern spirit and agency amongst this formerly docile labor diaspora. This work presents the events of 1945-1948 as a time when Indians rejected the colonial perception of them as an inferior people, and challenged the colonial power. However, their efforts were subverted by the British and by doing so, the British ensured the maintenance of a labor diaspora that would continue to be exploited by those who ruled over them.

DEDICATION

For my mom, whose patience and perseverance is an  
inspiration to me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Drs. Ed Glatfelter, Colleen O'Neill, and James Sanders, for their patient guidance and assistance throughout the entire process of writing this thesis.

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Patricia Spencer



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## LIST OF DEFINITIONS

AMRWC	All Malayan Rubber Workers Council
AMCJA	All Malayan Council of Joint Action
BMA	British Military Administration
GLU	General Labor Unions
HINDRAF	Hindu Rights Action Force
ILA	Indian Independence League
INA	Indian National Army
ISA	Internal Security Act
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army
MPAJU	Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Unit
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
PMFTU	Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions
SEWTU	Selangor Estate Workers Trade Union
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
UPAM	United Planting Association of Malaya
TNA	The National Archives, United Kingdom

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“We want Indians as indentured labourers, not as free men.”*

*Sir Thomas Hyslop<sup>1</sup>*

Sociologist Robin Cohen explains that a labor diaspora is one that develops when there is “an expansion from a homeland in search for work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions.”<sup>2</sup> The Indian labor community that settled in Malaysia is an example of this. Although contact between Indians and Malaya existed since the pre-Christian era through trade, the mass migration of South Indians to Malaya and their settlement only occurred during colonial rule. Indian laborers were brought by the British to work the sugar and coffee plantations, and later, the rubber estates. Their sole purpose was to provide labor capital.

Under colonial rule, Indian Tamils from the untouchable Madrasi class were treated as tools of production in the colonial capitalist enterprise. Given their subaltern background, it was easy for the British to manipulate them. In this thesis I will analyze how the British viewed this Indian subaltern background and used its perceived backwardness to the colonial power's advantage. I will also explore the significance of World War II in Malaya and its impact on the Indian Tamil laborers. The war was meaningful to the Malayan people as it removed the veil of dominance that the British held in Malaya as they retreated after the Japanese defeat. When the former colonists returned after the war, it was a more defiant Asian community that greeted them. The nationalist struggle in India too, had tremendous influence on the Indian community in

<sup>1</sup> C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas: 1838-1949* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1951), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 57.

Malaya. This struggle inspired Indian Tamils to resist colonial occupation. After the war, Indians no longer appeared docile and understood their importance to the colonial agenda. These Indians demanded more in terms of citizenship and rights, which the colonial rulers opposed.

Many scholars downplay the significance of the resistance put up by the Indian labor class through their involvement in trade unionism post-World War II. This is not surprising given that colonial attitudes and subsequent scholarship on the subject of race during the colonial period often emphasized the Chinese migrant community as more shrewd and militant and therefore aggressive in its demands. Colonial documents retained the perception of Indians as “passive and unaggressive” even after the war, referring to those involved in acts of resistance as “men of straw” under the direction of Chinese militant groups.<sup>3</sup> Colonial rule also worked hard at encouraging divisions between the different races in Malaya before and after the war. The spirit of unity and co-operation between Chinese and Indians in the post-war period that actively opposed British rule was therefore surprising to the colonial power. I will therefore look closely at the issue of race relations between the Indian and Chinese working class in Malaya during this time.

The Indian working class played an important role within the colonial plantation economic structure. The plantation economy, especially the lucrative rubber industry, was an Indian domain. Without cheap Indian labor, the British would not have been able to enjoy a profitable rubber trade. The British needed Indian labor to begin working in the stalled rubber industry as soon as the war ended. As such, the colonial power regarded

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of the State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, “The Situation in Malaya,” 1 July 1948, TNA, CAB/129/28/21, p. 116.

Indian worker defiance and demand for higher wages after the war as troublesome.

In this thesis I will analyze the workings of a predominantly Indian trade union called the All Malayan Rubber Workers Council (AMRWC) and the General Strike that it organized on 25 August 1947. I will argue that the creation of this union and the organization of the general strike was a show of Indian agency and a display of a modern spirit amongst the Indian labor class. Although its resistance was not revolutionary, it did force the hand of the colonial power to give in to its demands, albeit partially. I will show how the growing defiance of the Indians and the alliance they forged with the Chinese working class, was perceived as a great threat by the dominant power that it responded in the harshest way possible through the imposition of the Emergency

### **Colonialism and Indian Migration**

The story of colonialism in different parts of the world have been recounted by many. Of the most striking ideological social categories, class and race, appear to have driven the imperial agenda in many occasions. Indians brought to Malaya were of the untouchable, or lower Madrasi class. As such, they were viewed and treated in a degrading way. Even if they wanted to strip themselves of their subaltern nature, they were not allowed to do so. It was imperative that they were maintained as a lower class so they could be manipulated and used by the colonial power in ways that profited the imperial enterprise. The Indian Tamil community was therefore unable to become an entrepreneurial “mobilized diaspora.”<sup>4</sup>

Political scientist John Armstrong defines a mobilized diaspora as an ethnic group that lacks “a general status advantage, yet which enjoys many material and cultural

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 58.

advantages compared to other groups in the multiethnic polity.”<sup>5</sup> A proletarian diaspora on the other hand is one that is defined as a diaspora with “limited communication skills and comprises a nearly undifferentiated mass of unskilled labor with little prospect of social mobility.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike members of a mobilized diaspora, they did not have the “linguistic, network, and occupational advantages to modernize and mobilize,” thereby making themselves invaluable to the nation state.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Tamil diaspora in Malaya fits the description of a proletarian diaspora for historian K.S. Sandhu explains that the Indian Tamils brought to Malaya were regarded by the colonists as “malleable, [who] worked well under supervision, and [were] easily manageable.”<sup>8</sup> Their main job was to simply perform repetitive tasks that required very little skill. Given their disadvantaged position in society, achieving upward mobility was an arduous and next to impossible task.

Cohen asserts that a labor diaspora is transitional for no one wants to live a life of a servant forever. I argue however that colonial authorities in Malaya robbed and subverted any effort that the marginalized Indian Tamil community asserted after the war in order to keep them in their subaltern state. Cohen rightfully recognizes though, that the assertion of men and women “working a fair day's work for a fair day's pay,” is largely a construction of the bourgeoisie.<sup>9</sup> Such work centric aphorisms benefited colonialism as well. Exploiting those who came from under privilege backgrounds and paying them

meager wages, in the name of giving them a better life was one of the greatest travesties

<sup>5</sup> John A. Armstrong, “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas,” *The American Political Science Review* 70, no. 2(June 1976): 393-408.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kernal Singh Sandhu, “The Coming of Indians to Malaysia,” in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. Kernal S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 78.

to have befallen marginalized communities. However, following James Scott's argument on “public transcripts” and “hidden transcripts,” marginalized communities are quite capable of maintaining an appearance of working with the oppressive system, i.e. the public transcript, while imagining and at times pursuing ends that attack dominant interests, in the hope of securing a better life.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis asserts that the Indian Tamil labor diaspora was not contented with their meager position in society, and when they attempted to show their agency, or tried to speak *truth to power*, they were subverted. The community, while maintaining an appearance of docility for the colonists and planters, did challenge the power structure in the hopes of making their lives better. They therefore challenged the notion that they were weak. While numerous strikes and other forms of resistance did not ultimately lead to major revolution, they did set the tone on how the dominant power would use the community's new found defiant nature as an excuse to ultimately strengthen its own oppressive hold on the labor movement through more repressive measures. As Scott says, “Domination ... can only be sustained by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment.”<sup>11</sup> Although domination won, an alternative memory of these people as being brave, strong, and bold, should also exist in the pages of history.

### **Colonial Attitudes on Race and Class**

British incursion into Malaya began with the acquisition of Penang, an island off the Malayan Peninsular in 1786. As the demand for natural resources such as spices, sugar, coffee, and later 'white gold' or rubber increased in the Western world, foreign

<sup>10</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



corporations rushed to fund and develop large scale agricultural projects in Malaya. By 1909, Britain was in firm control over the whole of Malaya. Thousands of hectares of Malayan countryside was cleared for agricultural purposes. Unable to find local manpower to work these projects and others, the British turned to a true, tried and tested labor workforce - the South Indian peasants of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>12</sup>

South Indian migrants were mainly of the “untouchable or lower Madrasi caste.” According to Sandhu, the British considered them the most “satisfactory type of laborer, especially for light, simple, repetitive tasks.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Chinese, who was the other migrant community in Malaya at that time, Indians did not demand much in terms of wages or working conditions. The Indian laborer settled for very little. Because they were less likely to create problems and demand better conditions, they were a preferred lot for the European officials and planters, especially where menial work was concerned.

Colonial presence in India had also pushed the peasant class into further poverty. The loss of land and livelihood, forced many peasants to seek alternatives to earning a living. Indentured servanthood offered a viable one, and suited the interests of the colonists as well. C.L.R. James, in his research on San Domingo, described a system of exploitation that was led by greed and a racial ideology that justified it. Similarly, early Indian migration to Malaya was propelled by the need for labor to work sugar cane plantations, and other municipal projects. The British, recognizing early the division of castes in India, used that to their advantage. India's repressive system of social stratification which divided people into different categories and discriminated between them, gave further reason for those classified as 'untouchables' to seek a better livelihood

<sup>12</sup> Sandhu, “The Coming of Indians to Malaysia,” 151.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 152.

elsewhere, if that option was made available. This colonial landscape was an ideal environment for exploitation. In the minds of the planters and officials, these simpletons were “highly gullible” individuals, with no sense of “political economy,” and could therefore, be persuaded “to go anywhere.” Although indentured laborers were said to be bound by contract that limited their duration of employment to a few years or until all the expenses incurred for their passage was paid off, planters often found ways to re-indenture them and retain their labor. The lies and deception characterized as “diplomacy” by C.L.R. James, coerced these laborers who either in ignorance or under duress signed dubious contracts that bargained away their personal freedom for an extended period of time.<sup>14</sup> When indenture was abolished in 1910, similar methods of coercion continued to be used to recruit cheap labor from India to Malaya. Statistics provided by Sandhu points out that between 1786 and 1957, approximately 4.2 million Indians entered and left Malaya. Of the 1.2 million that remained in Malaya, many died from diseases and malnutrition. By 1957, the year of independence, the Indian population numbered only 820, 270 of which 62.1% was local born.<sup>15</sup>

Indian labor was necessary in maintaining low production costs. Owing to the number of unskilled laborers India could produce, it was certainly the new 'milch cow' after the abolition of slavery in 1833. The colonial government and the plantation owners regarded these laborers as nothing more than mere tools of production. The rubber plantation eventually became the most profitable area for the government officials and planters to use Indian labor. When it suited them, legislation was enacted, re-enacted,

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<sup>14</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 155.

<sup>15</sup> Sandhu, “The Coming of Indians to Malaysia,” 154.

amended, or abolished to either reduce or increase the number of laborers that could come into Malaya to work on these plantations. Workers lacking collective bargaining power were forced by the capitalist plantation system to accept the minimum wage given to them. Historian Michael Stenson wrote that these Indian laborers

... had almost no capacity to desert the European plantations in favor of independent pioneering agriculture. They were ideally suited to a form of production that had been initiated with slave labor, and which could only survive on the basis of one form or another of bonded labor or in situations of high population density where there was no alternative.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the fact that the rubber industry was the most lucrative money maker for the colonial empire, Indian laborers were not able to negotiate for higher wages.

Although official documentation of exactly how much money the British Empire made off the rubber trade is scarce and difficult to locate, some idea can be obtained from recently released official documents from the National Archives of the United Kingdom.

In one Memorandum to the Cabinet in 1951, the Secretary for the Colonies said that

Malayan rubber and that from other Colonial territories in South-East Asia are the Colonial Empire's most important dollar earner, and supplies are far more than adequate to meet the needs of the United Kingdom itself.<sup>17</sup>

An earlier Memorandum from the Secretary of State to the Cabinet in 1948 concerning the Emergency situation in Malaya gives some indication on the amount of revenue generated by Malaya and Singapore through its exports. Colonial authorities found the emergency situation frustrating as it negatively affected the maintenance of healthy colonial balance sheets.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, "Possibilities of Increasing the Supply of Colonial Foodstuffs and Raw Materials to the United Kingdom," 12 Nov. 1951, TNA, CAB/129/48/14, p.55.

Until the outbreak of the present wave of crime Malaya was, in fact, the most peaceful country in South East Asia and had taken long strides towards the re-establishment of stable, prosperous conditions. During 1947 the total value of the exports of Singapore and Federation together was 151 million pounds, of which Dollar exports amounted for 56 million pounds. It is by far the most important source of Dollars in the Colonial Empire and it would gravely worsen the whole Dollar balance of the Sterling Area if there were serious interference with Malayan exports.<sup>18</sup>

The Sterling Area consisted of those countries, mainly in the British Commonwealth and Empire, whose currencies were linked to the British Pound Sterling. Because World War II had weakened the Sterling, US Dollars were needed to help in the recovery of the whole Sterling Area for what was called post-war rehabilitation. Dollars earned through the sale of Malayan rubber to the United States was therefore essential to the British. Educationist and historian, Muzafar Desmond Tate quotes Sir John Hay, chairman of Guthrie, describing Malaya “as the largest dollar factory which we possess,” and C. F. Cobbold, a senior British Treasury official, declaring that, “without Malaya, the Sterling currency system as we know it would not exist.”<sup>19</sup>

According to historians Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, members of the proletariat known as the hewers of wood and drawers of water performed “fundamental labors of expropriation,” and were necessary components to the success of merchant capitalism.<sup>20</sup> This was clearly the role of Indian labor in Malaya. Michael Stenson argues that Indian labor was solely used for the benefit of metropolitan capitalism. He wrote that the rise of European capitalist interests was spurred along by

<sup>18</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of the State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, “The Situation in Malaya,” 1 July 1948, TNA, CAB/129/28/21, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Muzafar Desmond Tate, *The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future* (Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Center, 2008), 92.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 42.

official policy making, informally through the exclusive metropolitan and colonial clubs, more formally through regular consultations in London between the Rubber Growers Association, mining interests and the Colonial Office, and by representation in Malaya on all relevant official councils and boards.<sup>21</sup>

The British used the Indian and Chinese migrant races to expropriate the resources of Malaya. The sovereignty of Malay rulers was preserved through “elaborate ceremonial, lavish pensions and a position in the colonial bureaucracy” which appeased them and allowed the colonial power to do as it pleased. Likewise, the Malay peasantry was also kept out of the export economy as estate laborers and were encouraged instead to work in the rice fields. This was a way of ensuring food supplies for the Chinese and Indian labor force while reinforcing “peasant conservatism.”<sup>22</sup> While the British on the outside looked like they were advancing the Malay position, in reality the colonial government was merely pacifying the Malay rulers and keeping them satisfied so it could ultimately use the Indian and Chinese labor workforce to extract the rich resources of Malaya for its own economic benefit.

Sociologist R.K. Jain wrote about the creation of a three tiered class structure on the estates - the managerial class made up of the Europeans, the Asian supervisory class made up of Malayalees and Ceylonese, and the proletariat Tamil class.<sup>23</sup> While the European planters disassociated themselves from the Tamil laborers, the Asian supervisory class usually had day to day dealings with the Tamil laborers. By virtue of their educational attainment, they received better wages and were able to send their children to English schools, thereby assuring upward mobility for their future

<sup>21</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

generations. In contrast, the Tamil class received sub-standard education using only the Tamil language as a medium of instruction, and that also at an elementary level up to Primary Six. Providing a decent education to the children of estate workers was not a priority to estate employers, since it would have been costly. The colonial authorities did not put pressure on estate employers to provide a satisfactory educational system. It was in fact pressure from the Indian Government that introduced the “Labour Code of 1923 that made it obligatory for rubber planters to provide educational facilities if there were ten or more resident children of school going age of six to twelve years.”<sup>24</sup> Resentful of the obligatory nature of the said law, planters ensured that the education provided was minimal and ineffective in ensuring upward mobility for these children. Children of rubber tappers and weeders were destined to live as their parents with the only improvement being that they could perform the same tasks, marginally better, as was observed by E.T. Thompson. Writing on education in the colonial owned plantations, he stated:

The educational policy of the planter class is to insure that the children of plantation laborers will remain plantation laborers. If education there must be, let it be an education designed to make hewers of wood and drawers of water better hewers of wood and drawers of water.<sup>25</sup>

Another strong labor force that was present in Malaya during this same era was the Chinese. Hardworking, with strong cultural connections, and most importantly, coming as free men to a foreign land to “seek a fortune,” they earned better wages, were

feared to an extent by the British, and were respected for their work ethics and resolute

<sup>24</sup> Edgar T. Thompson, “Comparative Education in Colonial Areas with Special Reference to Plantation and Mission Frontiers,” *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 2(May 1943): 710-21, quoted in Thangavelu Marimuthu, “The Plantation School as an Agent of Social Reproduction,” in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K.S. Sandhu, and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 468.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

mind. While the Chinese came to Malaya to make a fortune, the South Indian laborer came to earn a wage, for this was a better path than his continued miserable existence in his homeland. Being defined by a caste system that was forced upon him also made him an easily exploitable creature. The British took advantage of this fact by the wage structure it implemented on the plantations. Low wages were essential in ensuring high profit maximization, and unlike the Chinese who could and would negotiate for a higher wage, the South Indian laborer would not. A Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet in 1951 described the Chinese community with great admiration.

The Chinese, ... are found in all activities of the country - in rubber and tin, as common laborers, as agriculturalists, as proprietors of rubber estates (20 per cent of the rubber on smallholdings and 17 per cent of that on estates is Chinese owned) and of the mines (40 per cent of the production of tin is Chinese owned), as merchants, as contractors, as shopkeepers (of whom they constitute much of the greater part), as bankers and as traders. Every year they gain greater economic strength and increase their hold over the wealth of the country .... highly sophisticated, urbane, shrewd, politically aloof and inscrutable. They are mostly absentee landlords with no following in the villages or among the mass of their fellow-countrymen ..... It is stimulating to argue or negotiate with them but they are generally politicians without constituencies, leaders without followers, remote from the problem, trimming adroitly, ready sometimes with advice and almost always with criticism, but not prepared to lead or even to exhort.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, he had nothing but two lines to say about the Indians.

The Indians, mostly Tamils, provide a good deal of the unskilled labor of the country, many tapping rubber and a few working in the dredging or hydraulic of tin.<sup>27</sup>

This mixture of admiration and fear of the Chinese that was held by the British

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of the State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, "Malaya," 21 December 1951, TNA, CAB/129/48/59, p. 239A.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 239A.

was also one of the reasons the migration of Indian labor into Malaya was encouraged by the colonial power. Some scholars have argued that the separation of labor along racial lines was a powerful way to play one racial group against the other. To have allowed the Chinese greater control over the economy and greater strength in terms of numbers would have severely weakened the position of the British in Malaya, and also risked the Malays losing their claim over the land. The most significant reason the British played the race card remained the maintenance of a low wage structure that ensured profit maximization in the colonial plantation economy. Robert N. Jackson, the Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior cites the following statement in his monograph as an example of the “contemporary point of view of Europeans planters” regarding Malaya's migrant labor community.

To ensure your independence, work with Javanese and Tamils, and, if you have sufficient experience, also with Malays and Chinese; you can then always play the one against the other ... In case of a strike, you will never be left without labor, and the coolies of one nationality will think twice before they make their terms, if they know that you are in a position that you can do without them.<sup>28</sup>

A firm racial ideology was therefore obvious from the way these two migrant groups were treated by the colonizer. Historian David Roediger's statement about “beaten men from beaten races,” as “deficient individuals, as a class, and as a race, they represented the worst failure in the struggle for existence,” could have most certainly been used to refer to the Indian Tamils in place of the Irish, or Greeks, or Southern Italians.<sup>29</sup> The perception held by the British towards the Indians in Malaya was that they

<sup>28</sup> *Selangor Journal* 4 (1895):438, quoted in Robert N. Jackson, *Immigrant Labor and the Development of Malaya* (Federation of Malaya: Government Press, 1961), 104.

<sup>29</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 66.



were a deficient people. Applying Edward Said's idea of reading 'contrapuntally' to the above description of the races offered by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, an attitude belying the Secretary's own prejudice of holding one race in admiration and the other in disregard, is evident.

While the British was successful in using the race card before the war to its advantage, this thesis will show that the colonial power found difficulty in trying to continue playing the same card after the war. The alliance between the Indians and Chinese that was encouraged by The All Malayan Rubber Workers Council proved effective in forcing the British to give in to the demands of the working class. The migrant races had learned that collective bargaining was possible. A unified front was the only way to stand up to the dominant power. Although the concessions on the part of the colonial power were minimal, the British worried about how it would embolden the working class and strengthen this new Indian/Chinese alliance. While previously the British only had to worry about the militant nature of the Chinese, now the Indians gave them a cause for concern too as they took on a more defiant nature. Indian community involvement in radical trade unionism gave these laborers a space to not only voice their grievances but also courage to face their colonial oppressors. The Indian/Chinese working class unity coupled with this new Indian consciousness was not something the colonial capitalist enterprise could afford after the war.

### **The Impact of Colonialism on the Indian Community in Modern Day Malaysia**

Colonialism deeply impacted the countries that it touched. The legacies of

colonialism lives on in many ways till today in these former colonies such as in the classification of people, the division of borders, the set up of government structures, the attitudes towards race relations, and others. Independence in Malaya did nothing to uplift the state of the Indian Tamil proletariat. The discrimination held towards them carried on even after the departure of the British. Lacking proper citizenship papers, many Indians continued to live illegally in a country that their forefathers called home. Unable to enjoy the vital benefits of citizenship such as education that would have enabled gainful employment, many remained stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty and destitution. It is not surprising therefore that a large number of Indians have fallen into crime and considers it an acceptable way of life. Poverty in itself is a crime and crime is a sore that appears in a diseased society when disparity among members of the society pushes those in the poorest category to a way of life that's criminal.

Today Malaysian prisons are filled with Indian men incarcerated for various forms of crime. Without their breadwinners, families struggle to survive and continue to lose more members to a life of crime, reminiscent of what French lawyer Charles Lucas said, that

the same order that send the head of the family to prison reduces each day the mother to destitution, the children to abandonment, the whole family to vagabondage and begging. It is this way that crime can take root.<sup>30</sup>

In order to understand the problems facing the Indian community in modern day Malaysia, one must consider their history for it is a sad history that is wrought with prejudices and discrimination. It is truly a legacy of colonialism that has been passed

<sup>30</sup> Charles Lucas, *De la reforme des prisons* (Paris: E.Legrand et J. Bergounioux, 1836): 64, quoted in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 268.

down. This work draws attention to a time when Indian Tamils fought against the perceptions held towards them and tried to take control of their future, by forming alliances and resisting colonial rule. It was a show of agency that was denied by the dominant power of that time and subsequently by those who wrote the history of Malaya.

In Chapter 2, the different nationalisms that emerged out of the war period in Malaya will be explored. The anti-imperial sentiments felt by the migrant Indian and Chinese communities moved them to demand independence from colonial rule as this would have meant citizenship, and democratic representation for them.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **POST-WAR NATIONALISMS**

This chapter explores the two different nationalisms that emerged in Malaya after World War II. One brand of nationalism united all races in Malaya and was especially empowering to the Indian and Chinese migrant communities who wanted full citizenship rights in Malaya. The other, was a product of fear amongst the Malay elite who felt that their position as “sons of the soil” would be threatened if the migrant races were given the same privileges as them. They used this fear to mobilize the Malay peasantry into forming a strong Malay nationalism that eventually gained the support of the British as well.

World War II was a redefining moment in Malaya. As the Japanese advanced into the country, the Malayan people saw for the first time, the weakened state of the British. Unable to hold its ground, the imperial power left Malaya with its tail between its legs. It armed the Malayan People's Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA) with artillery and ammunition, leaving them to defend their own lives, resources (even those of the colonists and planters), and the country. By this time too, the Indian and Chinese migrant communities had developed a kind of nationalism that propelled them to feel a sense of belonging and therefore, a more militant attitude in wanting to defend Malaya. These were no longer seasonal workers using the country to earn a living while having their patriotism lie elsewhere, but people who were born in Malaya and who had made a conscious choice to stay in Malaya. They regarded themselves as Malayan citizens, though officially they had not gained that recognition yet. The nationalism and struggle

for independence in India were especially inspiring for the Indian laborers. Their own general discontent with low wages and poor living conditions under imperial rule were significant factors by themselves to resist imperial domination.

The Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 was to liberate the most radical groups in Malaya. The predominantly Chinese, Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA) which was formed prior to the war to defend the country, had also very successfully integrated Indians and Malays into the army. By organizing itself as a multi-racial army of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, representative of all professions, it showed that unity among the races was possible. All that was needed was a common experience to unite the different races. The war which was merciless on all of Malaya provided that avenue. This army consisted of “20,000 people and [included] 7 regiments.” These “fought 282 major battles in which they accounted for 5,000 Japanese.”<sup>31</sup> The political counterpart of the army, The Malayan People's Anti Japanese Union (MPAJU), organized passive resistance in the towns. It was in this that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), had tremendous influence. People's Councils or Committees were formed by the MCP who worked in conjunction with the MPAJA to prevent widespread sabotage and destruction by the Japanese as they were leaving the country. In the crucial days after the Japanese surrender and before the arrival of the British Military Administration (BMA), it was these Councils and the MPAJA that “maintained peaceful conditions, ran municipal affairs and looked after the day to day life of the people.”<sup>32</sup> Although the MPAJA and

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<sup>31</sup> Information Sheet on Malaya by The National Council for Civil Liberties, May 1946, Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947, CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

MPAJU were initially organized to combat Japanese imperialism, it was not long before a radical nationalism and the spirit of anti-imperialism was directed towards the British, a cause into which a growing number of the Indian and Chinese working class readily threw themselves.

Many of the Indians who had served in the Indian National Army(INA) and the Indian Independence League(IIL) during the war, believed in the message of Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian Nationalist leader, that they were to fight British imperialism with the help of the Japanese and liberate India. However, they found themselves being “allocated defensive positions in support of Japanese imperialism against Allied invasion.” Many of these Indians gave up the little they had to support Bose's cause. A large number were forced to be involved in the construction of the Siam-Burma railway that took many lives. In the end, Japanese imperialism became as oppressive as British rule and these Indians found themselves exploited again. Disillusioned and impoverished, these Indians were attracted to the MPAJA.<sup>33</sup> To them, the exhortation by the MPAJU to “demand more rice and better pay” from the colonial power at the end of the occupation was especially appealing.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from being disillusioned with Bose's message and methods, these Indians also knew that upon the return of the British, they would be punished for their alliance, forced or not, with the Japanese. The idea of liberating Malaya from imperialism was an exciting and hopeful thought, if it meant liberating themselves as well. Stenson writes that given a choice between the two imperialisms, many Indians preferred the British, who were “leafletting the country with messages of hope for rebuilding 'a new and better

<sup>33</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

country' that would be a 'real homeland for all those who live in it.'"<sup>35</sup> The true intentions of the British were not yet known to Malaysians. Although the MPAJA was officially disbanded on 1 December, 1945, its members continued to take part in many of the radical organizations of that time, namely the MCP, the Malayan Democratic Union, and the Malay Nationalist Party.

### **The Return of Colonial Rule to Malaya**

The British Military Administration (BMA) was given a great welcome upon its arrival in Malaya. Its stated intent was to take over administration of the country and maintain order before completely handing over to a civil authority. It was soon apparent that there was a clash in aims. The BMA wished for a "return to 1939; the Malaysians, on the other hand, because of their experience of 1941-1945, knew there could be no returning to the old Colonial system."<sup>36</sup> Although the British were aware that the perceptions in Malaya towards them had changed, they were undeterred. They were confident in their ability to control Malaya once again for as C.L.R. James wrote, "Those in power never give way, and admit defeat only to plot and scheme to regain their lost power and privilege."<sup>37</sup>

The BMA's policy regarding Malaya was apparent in a number of ways. First, they offered no compensation to the holders of Japanese currency which was repudiated, although "large quantities of pre-1942 currency were recaptured in the Japanese

<sup>35</sup> File 5393, series 203, War Office Records (Public Record Office, London), quoted in Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Information Sheet on Malaya by The National Council for Civil Liberties, May 1946, Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

<sup>37</sup> James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 127.

controlled banks.” Secondly, ignoring the impoverishment of the Malayan population during the war, the BMA did not put into place price controls or rationing for essentials such as rice, which led to much of this being sold on black markets at inflated prices, leaving only “...less than 10% of the population getting a minimum subsistence diet.” Malaya was also not allowed to import foodstuffs from outside the Sterling Block. Prior to the war Malaya imported 60% of its foodstuffs.<sup>38</sup> For the Indian laboring class, this was especially difficult as their loss of livelihood during the war and their forced participation on the Japanese Siam-Burma “death railway” project, had left many families without breadwinners and thus, with hardly any food. Yet, they were expected to return to the estates to jump start the stalled rubber industry.

One of the earliest tasks of the BMA, instead of stabilizing the country and helping the people, was to try and dismantle any sort of unionism that was being encouraged. Aware of the MCP's effort in trying to consolidate an Indian/Chinese working class, the BMA upheld the 1941 repressive legislation against unions. It made it difficult for groups to organize and have meetings, requiring them instead to register themselves and obtain permission for meetings to be held. A typical BMA proclamation stated:

Any person who:-

- a) publishes, circulates, or has in his possession with intent to publish or circulate any printed or written matter which is in the interests of the enemy or which is hostile and detrimental to the British Administration, the Forces or any of the United Nations; or
- b) utter any speech or words hostile or detrimental to the British Military Administration, the Forces or any of the United Nations,

<sup>38</sup> Information Sheet on Malaya by The National Council for Civil Liberties, May 1946, Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.



shall on conviction be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years or with fine not exceeding 3,000 dollars or with both such imprisonment and fine.<sup>39</sup>

This was clearly not the democratic approach the Malayan people were waiting for. It was obvious that the imperial power imposed these sort of proclamations to prevent situations where a consensus of grievances could be reached. These meeting places were rife social sites much like the “hush arbors” of the slaves, and any highly charged social site is a threat to the powers that be. As Scott says, “Large, autonomous gatherings are threatening to domination because of the license they promote among normally disaggregated inferiors.”<sup>40</sup> Gatherings like these needed to be prevented at all cost. The behavior of the British too is in line with how dominant powers maintain their position, through “sustained . . . efforts at reinforcement, maintenance and adjustment.”<sup>41</sup>

### **A Working Class Alliance**

Indian laborers who began to see the value in what the MPAJA and by extension the MCP, was doing, banded together with the Chinese to form General Labor Unions (GLUs). This involvement in unions was a first for the community. The Chinese working class on the other hand, had already established “unions” for themselves long before the war through their involvement in triads and secret societies. Belonging to such groups gave them protection and afforded them the necessary support when they needed to make demands of the British, one of the reasons therefore why they were feared by the British. The British recognized that these organizations having “power over life and death over its

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 65

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 45.

members,” were never to be trifled with.<sup>42</sup> The Chinese also belonged to guilds. These were probably similar to trade unions and “settled rates of wages, hours of work, holidays and terms of apprenticeship, and in addition provided friendly benefits.”<sup>43</sup> Akin to the European craft guilds in the Middle Ages, these provided apprenticeship for those who wanted to learn particular crafts. It was not until the 1920s that organizations specifically for employees began to be established. Known as Mutual Benefit Societies, their

main purpose was social rather than industrial, but whose ulterior or secondary motive was the maintenance or improvement of the status and conditions of their members as employees.<sup>44</sup>

Chinese trade unions developed from these mutual benefit societies.

Unlike the Chinese, Indians never had associations that they belonged to until shortly before the war. These were formed along caste lines or along “a particular territorial division of Southern India.” Their “objects were social, educational or cultural,” or for “the general improvement of the members.”<sup>45</sup> Indian unionism in the form of their involvement in the GLUs was therefore a first for the community. The intention of the GLUs was to bridge the racial divide among the two migrant communities and mobilize labor throughout the country as the awareness of the importance of cheap labor to the British Empire, began to grow. The GLUs thus consolidated “a new Chinese/Indian working-class alliance.”<sup>46</sup>

To this was added the support of the Malays through links with the Malay

Nationalist Party (MNP). Though the latter's objectives were not completely in line with

<sup>42</sup>Awbery and F.W. Dalley, “Labor and Trade Union Organisation in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore,” (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1948), DDA/7/7, in Papers of Frederick William Dalley, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 107.

the MCP, “there was sufficient common ground in their joint opposition to colonialism to provide a basis for continuing, if uneasy, co-operation.”<sup>47</sup> Eventually, the major flaw of the MCP was to not have included the Malays enough. It should have strengthened the alliance between the Chinese/Indian working class with the Malay peasantry. Communal separateness ultimately drove a wedge between any sort of mobilization that would have effectively included all three races. The Malays, deeply insecure about their position and driven by their fear of the Chinese, took on a violent stance against them. Stenson wrote that, “violent and often indiscriminate Malay attacks upon the Chinese began in November 1945 and continued sporadically on the west coast until June of 1946.”<sup>48</sup>

Although the MCP was predominantly Chinese and appeared to the Malays, as a Chinese party that did not do much in allaying Malay fears and gaining their trust, the role of the British in exacerbating the racial situation through its introduction of a new constitution, is often overlooked. The British had always played the race card in Malaya counting on the fact that communal separatism was a difficult hurdle to overcome. However, archival evidence reveal that although communal separatism was a hurdle, it was not impossible to overcome for there were times when all three communities worked together with a common purpose. Documents archived at the People's History Museum in the United Kingdom about post-war Malaya reveal that the British was constantly working to subvert alliances and provoke tensions, that ultimately succeeded in disempowering the people. The final thrust in achieving communal separatism between the Malays and the former migrant communities came with the introduction of the British proposed Malayan Union constitution. The Malayan Union constitution had all the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 108.

appearances of fulfilling the former migrant races desire of becoming Malayan citizens. Although it fell short of truly bestowing all the benefits of citizenship on the Chinese and Indians, it was considered enough of an affront to the Malays for them to vehemently oppose it. The Malays, already feeling alienated by the Chinese and insecure about their own position took this constitution as an attack on their sovereignty. This then led to a strong Malay nationalism that forced the British to swiftly abandon the Malayan Union in order to propose another constitution that heavily favored and upheld the position of the Malays. As a result, the Chinese and Indian working class found their interests abandoned and were left to fend for themselves.

### **The Malayan Union Constitution and the Federal Constitution**

The Malayan Union constitution warrants a little more discussion in this section as the Indian and Chinese migrant communities had placed much hope in it when it was first introduced by the British on 10 October 1945. The Chinese and Indians expected this new constitution to grant them citizenship and all the benefits that went with it. On the part of the imperial power though, this proposal was an attempt to centralize and consolidate the governing of the country. This proposal decided that the Malay States and the Settlements of Penang and Malacca would be absorbed into the Union, and be administered as a British Colony. The Chinese and Indian migrant population would then be eligible for citizenship under this new constitution. The official statement of policy in January 1946 explained that the pre-war style of administration, while effective for that time, was no longer appropriate. The colonial power made its intent clear in 1946 in its policy statement that

.... the increasing complexity of modern administrative, economic and social developments demand a system of government less cumbersome, more adequate for large common services, and making better use of time and labor.<sup>49</sup>

The British wanted a system of administration that cut through bureaucratic red tape and eliminated the need for involvement by local authorities i.e. Malay rulers. This system would be solely administered by the British at their discretion. This emphasis on efficiency was with the immediate needs of capitalism in mind, and the dependence of capitalism on a strong migrant labor force who wanted a stake in the country. As Stenson noted,

The wartime planners finally accepted the political consequences of a capitalist economic structure which was absolutely dependent upon (or so the British believed) the retention of a large stable Chinese and Indian labor force.<sup>50</sup>

The planners of the Malayan Union were so focused on getting the machinery of capitalism going again that they underestimated the resistance of the Malay Sultans to the whole scheme. That the Sultans who had enjoyed special privileges all this time were not about to transfer their sovereignty to the British Crown, overnight, was somehow a matter that was prematurely overlooked. Furthermore, the influence of the Sultans on the Malay peasantry was also imprudently dismissed. The general attitude of the British was one of insensitivity and arrogance. This can be seen in a Memorandum written by the Secretary of the State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet on 4 October, 1945, prior to the introduction of the Malayan Union where he appears adamant about the British

<sup>49</sup> Malayan Union and Singapore: Statement of Policy on Future Constitution (Singapore: Department of Publicity and Printing of the British Military Administration, 1946), quoted in Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 108.

<sup>50</sup> Michael R. Stenson, "The Malayan Union and the Historians," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 2 (1969): 345, 344-354.

position. He said,

We cannot allow ourselves to be to be deterred by an obstinate attitude on the part of any or all of the Malay rulers with whom Sir Harold MacMichael will have to deal in his forthcoming mission ..... His Majesty's Government should now affirm their intention to carry through in spite of obstruction on the part of any particular Malay Ruler, the policy which they have approved..... All our plans for the Malay States depend upon the success of Sir Harold MacMichael's efforts to secure jurisdiction in each and all of the States. It is essential that his hand should be strengthened by the firm assurance that he can, if necessary, make it clear to any recalcitrant Sultan that we intend to carry our policy through.<sup>51</sup>

The imperial policy of playing the race game was apparent once again in the introduction of this new constitution. The British recognized that the migrant community, especially the Chinese who were now largely “communist,” had the same goal “which corresponds in very many respects with our own [British] policy.”<sup>52</sup> The new constitution was therefore a way to appease the migrant community and cajole them back to their respective estates and plantations by dangling the opportunity for citizenship in front of them. However, the British underestimated the reaction of the Malay sultanate to this new plan.

Feeling threatened about losing *their own* position of power and not necessarily the rights of the Malay peasantry, the Sultans led by Dato Onn bin Jaafar, united to oppose the Malayan Union. It is interesting to note here the role of Dato Onn bin Jaafar as a friend of the British. Used to playing the race card, the British ensured that its position was always secure no matter which way the decision went. In the event that the Malayan Union failed, the British had to make sure that it was aligned with the Malay

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the Colonies to the British Cabinet, “Policy Regarding Malaya,” 4 October, 1945, TNA, CAB/129/2, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 2.

elite. The British had always enjoyed a special relationship with the Malay elite of the country. In order to have exploited Malaya's resources, the colonial power paid tributes and pensions to the Malay sultanate to appease them. Therefore, when the sultanate rose in opposition to the Malayan Union, it was fairly easy for the British to abandon the Union and fall in line once again with the Malay elite because of this past relationship. By promising the Malay elite special privileges, the British were able to gain their confidence and support. A manuscript written by an unknown author archived at the People's History Museum states that Dato Onn was propped up as a seeming national hero among the Malays. It further stated that the British authorities extended Dato Onn every possible co-operation while

.... giving him the necessary facilities for extensive political activities. The slogan 'Malaya for the Malays' is encouraged by Dato Onn to distract the Malay masses from the truly democratic path towards national liberation and democracy, and to prevent them from realizing the urgent necessity to unite with the Chinese and Indians in order to achieve liberation.<sup>53</sup>

His influence was significant as he was able to mobilize the Malay peasantry to hold protests all over the country. The mobilization of the Malay peasantry was a death blow to whatever hopes of a multi-racial alliance that any group may have had. The final act of defiance was the boycott of the inauguration of the new constitution by the rulers on 1 April 1946.<sup>54</sup>

From the outside, the Malayan Union appeared to have had all the right elements for the successful building of a pluralistic nation. It appeared as if the imperial power

<sup>53</sup> "Policy after the Restoration of Civil Government," Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

<sup>54</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 109.

truly had the interests of the people in its heart. The same memorandum quotes the Secretary saying that now was the time “to fulfill our duty towards Malaya and its people.” He affirmed that the destiny of the country was that “of eventual self-government within the British Commonwealth, a destiny to which all of the inhabitants of Malaya can contribute.” It appeared from this memorandum as if the migrant races were now true citizens of Malaya, and as such would enjoy all the benefits of that citizenship. The Secretary asserted,

The essential rights of the Malays must be safeguarded, but henceforth each of the races forming the population of Malaya must have full opportunity of helping build the country's future, of developing and enjoying on a basis of common effort and common opportunity the great material wealth of the Peninsular, and of reaping the benefit of their efforts, provided they in fact regarded Malaya as an object of loyalty. They must be citizens of Malaya, with all the rights and obligations which that term implies. No one must rely on past privilege, or regard Malaya simply as a source of material wealth. While it is to the advantage of all the world, and not only Malaya, that the production of her mineral and agricultural resources should be restored and developed by industry and research, it is right that the Malayan people should be assured of their share in the rewards of their industry and should be able to feel the country's wealth reflected in their own fuller standard of life.<sup>55</sup>

However, the true intent of the British was to appease the Chinese and Indians for its own purposes. By ignoring the need for diplomacy with the Sultans, the colonial power ensured the swift demise of the Malayan Union. At the first sign of trouble, the British, afraid of the connections that could be made with the militant Indonesian independence movement, abandoned the Union to begin negotiations solely with the Malays. J. de V. Allen, the most quoted researcher on the subject, asserted that the Union

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, “Policy Regarding Malaya,” 4 October, 1945, TNA, CAB/129/2, p. 5.



failed because it did not receive the support of the Chinese and Indians.<sup>56</sup> He argued that they looked upon it with apathy because their true allegiances lay outside Malaya, i.e. in China and India. Michael Stenson corrected this argument and suggests that if Allen had read the Indian and Chinese newspapers at that time, he would have come to a very different conclusion. The conclusion by the Chinese press was that while the proposal seemed to address citizenship equality, it did not do enough to touch on the essence of the matter. The essence was “democratic representation.”<sup>57</sup>

The same could be applied to the Indian presses who “consistently called for fully representative politics based upon a universal franchise and leading to independence.”<sup>58</sup> The argument was that had Allen taken the time to really study how the migrant communities felt about their place in Malaya, he would have concluded that these were people whom, by this time, had truly invested themselves in Malaya. Instead, by placing emphasis on what he thought was their lack of loyalty, Allen failed to recognize “the changing nature of Chinese and Indian involvement in Malaya” and their retention in Malaya as being crucial to the British economic enterprise.<sup>59</sup>

The Malayan Union proposition therefore failed not just because the Malays opposed it but because it “neglected to satisfy the aspirations and arouse the enthusiasm of the very groups to which it was most designed to appeal.”<sup>60</sup> *But*, the colonial power was prepared for either eventuality.

When considering the failure of the Union, an important analysis that has been

<sup>56</sup> J. de V. Allen, *The Malayan Union* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967).

<sup>57</sup> Victor Purcell, “A Malayan Union: The Proposed New Constitution,” *Pacific Affairs*, XIX, no. 1, March 1964, 38, quoted in Stenson, “The Malayan Union and the Historians,” 346.

<sup>58</sup> Stenson, “The Malayan Union and the Historians,” 346.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

overlooked is the role of the British in setting the tone on how racial dynamics would eventually be played out. The British, concerned only with its own immediate economic interests, either purposely blinded themselves or failed to see that by abandoning the Malayan Union so quickly and completely siding with the Malays, they were in fact creating a potentially problematic future situation. A situation that in a plural society such as Malaya, would be difficult to overcome, especially for the minority and weakest among the races, the Indian Tamils. Because of their history of marginalization, the perceptions held against them as being weak and having a retarded consciousness, their own communal divisions, and the sheer fact that unlike the Chinese, they did not have the strength in numbers, it was a grave error. Worse still, it was an irresponsible and malicious act on the part of the colonial power to have abandoned what could have possibly been something better for the Indians. If the Malayan Union Constitution had been written or reworked with the intent of preparing Malayans of all races for true self-governance and independence, for equal citizenship, and for betterment of the Malayan people as a whole, it would have had a very different response. However, it was written with selfish motives and as such was never going to receive the support of the people.

In February 1948, The Federation of Malaya Constitution replaced the Malayan Union. It was a product of secret negotiations solely between the British and the Malays. This time, the unity that was shown by the Malays under the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) banner in their opposition to the Malayan Union, was replicated by the Chinese and Indians who “.. on the constitutional issue demonstrated an impressive measure of unity during the whole of 1947.”<sup>61</sup> That year

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 351.

was rife with opposition from the Chinese and Indians who were responsible for organizing rallies and demonstrations, which culminated in a widespread work stoppage in October. A countrywide general strike or “hartal” was organized on October 20, 1947 in protest of this undemocratic constitution, leading to a complete business stoppage throughout the country, as well as closure of schools for a day. This subsequently led to many more work stoppages throughout the country at different times. An article from an unknown source archived at the People's History Museum states:

The unanimous stoppage in October, was held in the face of government intimidation, the Governor of the Malayan Union having threatened forfeiture of pay and disciplinary action against government servants participating.<sup>62</sup>

While organizing themselves to protest, the Indian and Chinese communities also struggled with their own distractions, that unbeknownst to them were being manipulated by the colonial authorities towards their own ends.

The visit of Jawarhalal Nehru in March 1946 was a major distraction for the Indian community. Nehru, while struck by the way that Indian labor had been organized under the GLUs, was cautious in his praise, as the Indian National Congress had only recently expelled the Indian Communist Party. With his nationalist approach of 'India first for Indians,' it is probable that he would have encouraged that Indian labor be extricated from Communist influence. An article written by an unknown source archived at the Labour History Archive and Study Center in the People's History

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<sup>62</sup> “Malaya: Growth of the National Liberation Movement of 1945,” Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

Museum, states that

the hospitality extended to Nehru by Louis Mountbatten when the former was touring Malaya was only meant to deceive the Malayan Indians..... Some of the Congress political mongers are attempting to organize a single Pan-Malayan organization of the Indians. By this they are trying to disrupt the Pan-Malayan General Trade Union in which the Malayan organized workers of respective nationalities have united together.<sup>63</sup>

This was an unfortunate stance to have been taken because when India did obtain her independence the following year, it was Nehru himself who distanced India from her overseas communities, saying,

We have left to the Indians abroad whether they continue to remain nationals or to adopt the nationality of whichever country they live in. It is entirely for them to decide. If they remain Indian nationals, then all they can claim abroad is favorable alien treatment. If they adopt the nationality of the country they live in, they should associate themselves as closely as possible with the interest of the people of the country they have adopted and never [...] become an exploiting agency there. (emphasis added)<sup>64</sup>

Obviously, Indian nationalism was not beneficial for the Malayan Indians who were living in a pluralistic situation. It should have only served its purpose as a point of inspiration. With leadership that constantly turned to India for advice, it created suspicion among the Chinese and Malays who began to doubt their allegiance and that of the community as a whole. With the obstacles the Indians had before them, it would have served them better if they had been part of a strong local racially united front.

The Chinese on the other hand had to contend with the negative publicity they were getting from the involvement of some amongst them in the Kuomintang. The same

<sup>63</sup> "Policy after the Restoration of Civil Government," Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom,.

<sup>64</sup> Bakirathi Mani and Latha Varadarajan, "The Largest Gathering of the Global Indian Indian Family: Neoliberalism, Nationalism, and Diaspora at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 60.

article from the Labour History Archive and Study Center in the People's History

Museum stated:

Among the Chinese, the authorities are making use of the reactionary Kuomintang clique to disrupt unity by slandering the Communist Party with every means in their hands. Being adequately financed, the Kuomintang is rather active among the upper and medium strata of the Chinese community. Although such activities of the Kuomintang still does not constitute as a serious menace to the democratic movement, but positive measure are adopted to nip it at the bud.<sup>65</sup>

The MCP could have had greater influence on the outcome of the situation, if it had not been busy with the reorganization of its party. It would have understood the real significance of the secret negotiations that were taking place between the British and the Malay rulers. When it did, however, it moved quickly

.. and succeeded by means of the Malayan Democratic Union in forming in December 1946 an at least nominally multiracial alliance in the shape of the All Malay Council of Joint Action (later the AMCJA-PUTERA) to demand both the retention of liberal citizenship provisions and the rapid introduction of democratic, representative politics.<sup>66</sup>

Although there were acknowledged weaknesses with this coalition because of the many uneasy compromises, this was still a better alternative than the Federation of Malaya Constitution. It was, in some sense, the true essence of democracy. The combined number of people in this front was

estimated to include some 600,000. It represented the majority of the Malayan people, but was nevertheless completely ignored during the government's pretense of 'consulting' the people about the proposed constitutional change.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> "Policy after the Restoration of Civil Government," Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on the Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

<sup>66</sup> Stenson, "The Malayan Union and the Historians," 352.

<sup>67</sup> "Malaya: Growth of the National Liberation Movement from 1945," Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History

The MCP, although itself not part of the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition, nevertheless had tremendous influence on the various groups especially the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions. It agreed with the principles that were put forward by the AMCJA namely that of “responsible self-government through a fully-elected Central Legislature” for the whole country, and “equal citizenship rights for all who make Malaya their permanent home and the object of their undivided loyalty.”<sup>68</sup>

By this time though, the British were no longer interested in being accommodating in any way. The colonial power took great strides in pointing out “differing objectives of the various groups comprising the AMCJA-PUTERA [while neglecting to look at the commonalities between them].” This was also the colonial power's opportunity to “label the agitation with the communist smear.”<sup>69</sup> By doing so the British effectively killed the hopes of the various groups under the AMCJA-PUTERA coalition. The branding of the agitation with the smear of communism was an especially vicious act as it gave the authorities a blank check to deal harshly with whatever political opposition they regarded as subversive. As Stenson concludes,

The ideal of a potentially independent multi-racial Malayan nation was relegated to the dustbin while the British devoted all their energies to the more congenial tasks of economic and administrative rehabilitation.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, the nationalism that emerged out of this and continued to grow in Malaya was one that created inequalities in Malayan citizenship. It formed a hierarchy in which the Malays sat at the very top, and by virtue of their position was thus able to enjoy all the benefits of citizenship. The others races could never claim this for

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Museum.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Stenson, “The Malayan Union and the Historians,” 352.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 353.

themselves. Instead of a nationalism that could have emerged out of a sense of “fraternity” in resisting colonial rule, what did come into being was a nationalism that according to Claudio Lomnitz, distinguished “full citizens from part citizens or strong citizens from weak ones.”<sup>71</sup> In the case of the nationalism that arose in Malaya, Lomnitz's critique of Benedict Anderson thus holds true, that “nationalism does not form a single imaginary community.”<sup>72</sup> The British in complicity with the ruling elite class in Malaya created a situation of inequality that clearly benefited the Malays over the other races, effectively destroying the aspirations of those who wanted a successful plural society built on equality.

Chapter 3 will explore the emergence of class consciousness and agency among Indian Tamil laborers after the failure of the Malayan Union. Reasons for this class consciousness will be looked at. Recognizing their place as a deprived class, these laborers united themselves under the banner of radical unionism in order to resist colonial oppression and voice their demands for better pay and working conditions.

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<sup>71</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, “Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America,” in *The Other Mirror: Grand Theory Through the Lens of Latin America*, ed. Miguel Angel Centeno and Fernando Lopez-A Ives (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 337.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EMERGENCE OF**  
**AGENCY AMONG INDIAN LABORERS**

With the introduction of the new constitution, the working class continued to exercise its demands through its participation in trade unions. Disappointed with the political outcome, Indian Tamil laborers turned to radical unionism. Their demands and hopes for democratic representation were directly tied to their working and living conditions. When the possibility of true democratic representation was thrown out the window, these Indians had no other choice but to voice their demands through the unions with the hopes of improving their lives.

Historian Amarjit Kaur argues that “worker action and organization ... took different forms and proceeded unevenly.” With the eventual creation of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), any sort of labor militancy was quashed as union leaders “imposed constraints upon the activities of the workers and their greater social status over the laborers impaired worker unity.” As a result, she concluded that there was “no real alliance of class and probably not much class consciousness in the rubber plantation industry in Malaya.”<sup>73</sup> While she is right in that the creation of the NUPW advocated conservative trade unionism and was in line with the imperial agenda, she is wrong to assume that there was no class consciousness or class alliance in the rubber plantation industry.

Documents from the Labor History Archive and Study Center in the People's

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<sup>73</sup> Amarjit Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” *South Asia XXI*, Special Issue (1998): 96.



History Museum reveal the opposite. While issues with sub-communal separatism was always present, for the working class who also represented the largest group among the Indians, namely the Tamil laborers, the same problems met them day after day. Their labor was being exploited on the estates and plantations. Their wages were constantly subject to the commodities market and their livelihoods were always under threat by other labor groups that could be employed at any time to keep them in line. Regardless of the leadership problems within the community, labor had only one concern – making their lives better, and to that end they fought. These Indians were exploited because they were unable to shed their subaltern roots. They desired opportunities for themselves and their children but were prevented by the British who wanted to maintain them as an exploitable class.

Although the *failure of leadership* in the Indian community was what led scholars like Stenson, Kaur, and Ramasamy to conclude that there was no class alliance or class consciousness among Indians, I argue that this did not mean that class alliance and class consciousness was absent among the laborers. The Tamil laborers, always suffered the same fate. They did not need leadership to tell them what their problems were. They experienced it first hand. Poverty and hardship were difficult circumstances that they encountered daily. These difficult circumstances created in them a consciousness that they as a community were being intentional left in the backwaters by colonial authorities and planters simply because they carried the baggage of subalternity and could therefore be exploited by which ever dominant power that ruled over them. The only way to overcome this pronouncement of inferiority was to resist colonial

oppression. Only through resistance could a positive outcome be obtained for the community as a whole.

### **Conditions Under which Indian Laborers Worked**

What were some of these oppressive conditions that Indian laborers struggled with? An excerpt from the British newspaper, *The Observer*, gives us an idea:

Several times I have been shown with pride coolie lines on plantations that a kennelman in England would not tolerate for his hounds. There is little or no personal relationship between employer and employee, and a profound contempt (by the employers) for the trade union movement... One continually hears counter-violence being advocated: 'It's all these beggars understand.' There is little consciousness of the poverty and illiteracy that exists in the country. And, too often it is a foul, degrading, urine-tainted poverty, a thing of old grey rags and scraps of rice, made tolerable only by the sun.<sup>74</sup>

Intolerable conditions such as that described above and the impoverishment suffered during the war empowered workers to demand more for themselves from the colonial power.

Indian workers were also bonded to the estates unlike the Chinese workers. As such, managers when calculating wages took into account the “free” housing that was given to these workers. In the event that the workers participated in strikes, they could be easily dismissed and as a direct consequence of that, evicted. Amarjit Kaur's study on the wage structure used on the estates reveal a policy of playing one race against another. She quotes Palmer who wrote that

in prosperous times Chinese laborers' wages usually ranged well above Indian and Javanese workers' wages. Planters justified this wage

<sup>74</sup> “What the Malayan Trade Unionists Are Up Against,” Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

differential on the grounds that the Chinese were healthier and more hardworking than the Indians and employment through contractors meant that the planters could save on housing and other facilities.<sup>75</sup>

After the war, the size of the Malay population was recognized as another way to use race for the purpose of quashing demands for higher wages and the breaking of strikes. This discovery was, according to Stenson, another way of obtaining cheap labor without having to improve on production methods.<sup>76</sup> The imperial policy of playing one race against the other helped in preventing collective bargaining and further ensured that division along racial lines would stifle any sort of political unity that may occur, *or so the Colonial power thought*. Although racial divisions and communal separatism triumphed many times over racial unity, it should be noted that it only succeeded because the colonial power constantly played its divide and rule trump card to create and maintain division.

The value of Indian labor was also tied to the value of rubber. In his early critique of capitalism, Marx spoke about the alienation of the human being from the product of his labor. He said, “Labor becomes the slave of the object, since only through it can the laborer continue to exist, not only as a worker, but as a human being.”<sup>77</sup> Marx's observation is clearly seen in Peter Winn's study of the Yarur factory workers in Chile. The highly repressive Taylor System that was employed at the factory, mechanized workers in their tasks. The system was set up in such a way that profit was its ultimate

<sup>75</sup> Norman Parmer, *Colonial Policy and Administration: A History of Labor in the Rubber Plantation Industry in Malaya, 1910-1941* (New York: J.J. Augustin for the Association for Asian Studies, 1960), 166-170, quoted in Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” 95.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 140 – 141, quoted in Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” 95.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 46.

aim. It completely ignored the welfare of the workers and saw workers as nothing more than an extension to the machines they were using to create the products. As such, it was justified to pay the lowest wages possible while demanding the highest output from workers, the management knowing fully well that the survival of the workers depended on that wage, no matter how small. For every worker that protested and quit, there were many others to replace him or her. The Taylor System was thus, “a capitalist dream but workers' nightmare.”<sup>78</sup> Contrasting the Taylor System with what the plantation system was like, one obtains a somewhat similar scenario. The fluctuating price of rubber controlled the wages of Indian laborers. It even controlled their ability to be employed as colonial planters easily dismissed laborers when the demand for rubber was down.

Despite the horrid conditions under which the Yarur workers were employed, they were still able to escape their work environment when they clocked out. They had a life outside the factory walls that gave them freedom and fulfillment. The Indian plantation laborers could not escape their work environment. They were bonded to the plantation. To desert, or strike, or simply quit, was to lose the roof over one's head. Not only does the laborer suffer the consequence of eviction, but his whole family as well. Workers also constantly felt that they were under surveillance as “the bulk of the workers and their bosses work(ed) and live(d) in the same environment.”<sup>79</sup> Scholar Selvakumaran Ramachandran described life on a typical rubber estate as being “highly disciplined” and the daily work, “monotonous, repetitive and routine.”<sup>80</sup> There was no escape from the

<sup>78</sup> Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>79</sup> Selvakumaran Ramachandran, *Indian Plantation Labor in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Social Analysis, 1994), 96.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

feeling of drudgery and being weighed down. These conditions instilled in them a type of discipline that Foucault observed as being necessary for the creation of docile bodies. He claimed that, “The aim is to derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences (thefts, interruptions of work, disturbances and 'cabals'), as the forces of production become more concentrated; to protect materials and tools and to master the labor force.”<sup>81</sup>

The level of surveillance became even more pronounced during the time of radical unionism when Indian laborers were heavily influenced by the MCP. Stenson wrote that laborers activities were carefully monitored by plantation managers who searched laborers in the day to ensure that “they took no extra food to the field that might be handed to the Communists.” Laborers were also “effectively locked in their lines” by night to prevent them from meeting with anyone connected to the MCP.<sup>82</sup> Control over Indian laborers freedom was imperative in ensuring that the daily work on the rubber plantation was carried out without any subversion.

Poor wages was the number one concern for Indian laborers. Because their wages were tied to the demand for rubber, the Indian working class was unable to depend on a steady income. Labor regulations prior to the war allowed for labor to be repatriated during down times and increased during peak times. During the years of depression between 1930 – 1933, “labor surplus was shipped back to India under the aegis of the Tamil Immigration Fund,” thus avoiding labor unrest and reducing planters overheads.<sup>83</sup> The costs of labor reproductions was thus borne by the South Indian villages. As Jomo

<sup>81</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 142.

<sup>82</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race, and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 168.

<sup>83</sup> Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” 88.

Kwame Sundram noted, it was “subsistence peasant production which actually subsidized the necessary costs of reproduction of labor required by capitalists.”<sup>84</sup> After the war, labor could not be repatriated so the colonial authorities had to ensure that wages were kept at a minimum.

Amarjit Kaur, in her study of the plantation wage structure wrote that there were three principal methods of payments – check-roll, task, and result. Wages were decided not just based on job classification, but also along race and gender lines, resulting in the Indians always getting the shorter end of the stick. Such divisions naturally contributed to tensions between the Indians and Chinese. Planters justified the wage differential by explaining that the Chinese were healthier and therefore better workers. Also, because they eliminated planters' overheads by working under contractors who took care of their housing and food. She explained that

The check-roll laborer was paid a fixed daily wage, providing a whole day's work was completed. Under the task method of payment the worker was assigned a certain amount of work (by law... no more than nine hours) and paid according to the number of tasks completed .... In the category payment by result, the tapper was also given a task but was paid at so much per pound of dry rubber contained in the latex obtained from the task. Generally, although Indians and Chinese worked on similar tasks, the Indians were employed under the check-roll system, whether as tappers or field workers. The Chinese were usually remunerated on the payment by result method.<sup>85</sup>

This wage structure ensured that Indian laborers always received less than the Chinese workers. Planters were anxious to continue this trend after the war but received much opposition from Indians who demanded an increase in wages. More of them also chose to

<sup>84</sup> Jomo Kwame Sundram, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State and Uneven Development in Malaya* (Singapore: O.U.P., 1986), 192, quoted in Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” 88.

<sup>85</sup> Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia,” 93-94.

be employed as contract workers in order to receive wages on par with the Chinese. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, this new situation was not at all appealing to the colonial authorities and planters who were only interested in profit maximization.

### **Indian Consciousness and Agency**

Amarjit Kaur and Michael Stenson have both written that the bonded and isolated nature of the Indian workers on the estates created in them a consciousness that was both “subservient and retarded,” which allowed for their exploitation by the British. In contrast, the Chinese workers were aware of the value of their labor to the colonial plantation structure and the economic implications on their wages. They were aware of the lucrative rubber market and when it was doing well on the commodities market. As such, they knew when to make demands for higher wages. However, a change in Indian consciousness began to show in the late 1930s. Indians understood the crucial role they played in the plantation capitalist structure as cheap labor, and wanted to change this dynamics of exploitation. This was evident through intermittent strikes prior to the war demanding increases in wages and other benefits. An example of this new consciousness is seen in the call for Indian labor to unite against colonial capitalists reportedly made by R.H. Nathan, a member of the editorial board of the *Tamil Nesan*, a leading Tamil newspaper in Malaya in 1941:

A lot of coolies now understand what is the difference between laborers and capitalists. Co-operation is our watchword. The estate proprietors and agents will try to break this co-operation. But we cannot allow this to interfere with our work. Unity is strength.<sup>86</sup>

Yet another example is seen in the remarks to Indian laborers by Y.K. Menon, a labor

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<sup>86</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 57.

activist around the same time who said, “Before we organized this Union you all thought that Capitalists were Gods and we were slaves. Now at least 25 percent of you realize that this is not so. We are Indians and slaves to nobody.”<sup>87</sup>

After the war, similar remarks like those above were echoed by new leaders that continued to show an understanding of the colonial exploitation that was going on and how Indians figured in the whole labor – colonial capitalist relationship. An example of this can be seen in the following statement by Budh Singh, the radical socialist leader of the Malayan Indian Congress who had this to say just before the declaration of a State of Emergency in June 1948:

.. the Congress is convinced that the root cause of the industrial unrest is ... in fact that the production relations between the vested interests and the laboring forces is wholly out of keeping with the present economic set-up of the country.[The root cause of the unrest] is in the distribution of ... wealth. Somebody is taking too much leaving an inadequate residue for the laboring many.<sup>88</sup>

Indian laborers were also very familiar with a hierarchical plantation structure that placed white planters and fellow English educated Indians above them. In this structure, the Tamil laborer saw no opportunity for himself or his family for upward mobility. In contrast, his Ceylonese (from Jaffna in Sri Lanka) and Malayalee (from Kerala in India) countrymen, obtained supervisory jobs from the British by virtue of their missionary school education in India. The British favored them. Their elevated status enabled them to ensure that their children obtained better education in English schools, compared to Tamil children on the plantation who received mediocre education. E.T. Thompson

<sup>87</sup> J.D. Dalley, Annexure Report F, Selangor Estate Strike File, Colonial Office Records, 11 March 1941, quoted in Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> *Indian Daily Mail*, 10 June 1948, quoted in Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 151.



described the power structure on the plantation as “.. having the characteristics of a small state with a classification of people into different statuses together with a formal definition of the relationship between them.”<sup>89</sup>

Amarjit Kaur's description of a “retarded consciousness” among the Tamil laborers can therefore be attributed to this organization of placing the most marginalized of people at the bottom and not giving them any recognition, placing any value, or having any expectations of them beyond the menial tasks that they were required to perform. However, in his critique of false consciousness which is similar to Kaur's description of 'retarded consciousness,' James Scott argued that history has many examples in which subordinate classes have been “at the base ... of revolutionary movements ... seeking goals well within their understanding of the ruling ideology.” Scott asserted, “Falsely conscious subjects are quite capable, it seems of taking revolutionary action.”<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, Amarjit Kaur is wrong to assume that there was no class consciousness or class alliance in the rubber plantation industry. The Indian working class was conscious of how important they were in the colonial plantation structure and wanted change. They refused to be exploited. While they were willing to remain in the confines of the plantation structure, they were unwilling to take the meager allowances that the British were giving them. They demanded more.

The period after the war was a time of discovery of agency. The war only strengthened this new awareness especially since it removed the veil of British dominance. Not much recognition is given to specifically Indian agency during this time

<sup>89</sup> Edgar T. Thompson, *The Plantation Cycle and Problems of Typology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960): 31, quoted in Ramachandran, *Indian Plantation Labor in Malaysia*, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 78.

period because of the briefness in its display and the subsequent counter through draconian measures. Colonial intervention in the form of the declaration of the Emergency clamped down on the challenge Indian laborers made against the British. Their end pursuit for better wages and a generally better quality of life, was denied. Nevertheless it was a significant time. Significant because dominance was threatened and the threat came from a usually subservient group of people. The usual order did not matter. James Scott says,

Hidden transcripts can occasionally be openly declared in the face of power. When suddenly subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations.<sup>91</sup>

It was therefore involvement in the trade union movement, encouraged by the MCP, that gave these people hope and they used the only effective weapon they knew and could use against the colonial power. That was the strike weapon. In this way they showed their agency. The failure in leadership compounded with the imperial agenda of subversion based on a smear campaign of the MCP and trade unionism, was what ultimately drove the movement among the Indian masses aground.

The first step in repressing unionism was to split up the 300,000 strong Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU), formerly known as the General Labor Unions (GLUs). Special Trade Union Advisers were sent in to do this and the mode applied was to split the unions up along racial lines – Malays, Indians and Chinese. An article written by an unknown source from the Labour History Archive and Study Center in The People's History Museum stated:

Though the propaganda in this country has maintained that the Unions

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 6.

were repressed because they were “not real unions,” and that they were “Communist organizations” and that they were guilty of “terrorism” – the official Government reason given for the repression on June 13<sup>th</sup> was that the PMFTU was not registered. Under the Malayan law all Trade Unions must be registered and they are only legally entitled to do so if they are Unions catering for workers of the same race. Unions affiliated to the PMFTU duly registered. But the PMFTU, being a Federation, couldn’t and didn’t – any more than the TUC registered in Britain. For that “crime” it was outlawed, its leaders arrested, shot or driven into the jungle.<sup>92</sup>

Stenson writes that “by 1949, the number of registered unionists was down to 41, 305 or about one-fifth the level of 1947.”<sup>93</sup> The only unions that eventually survived were the colonial sanctioned ones under the auspices of John Brazier, the Trade Union Adviser from Britain, and those approved by the Registrar of Trade Unions in the period before June 1948.

Official colonial records downplay the emancipation movement by workers through strikes but interestingly it is also official records through its disclosure of the difficulties faced by the Colonial power during the Emergency period and the request for arms and military support, that also belie the fact that perhaps the movement was not so insignificant. The very fact that the “Emergency” was issued to counter the MCP influence is an indication by itself that the post-war period was indeed one of major resistance and the atmosphere, one of liberation with a willingness of its participants to fight for it till the end. While the colonial authorities attributed violence during this time to the actions of the MCP, labor documents question this assertion. There was a lack of consensus between colonial authorities themselves on how much influence the MCP had

<sup>92</sup> “What the Malayan Trade Unionists Are Up Against,” Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947, CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom,.

<sup>93</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case*, 168.

on trade unions. The following is an excerpt from an article written by an unknown source from the Labor History and Archive Center at the People's History Museum:

There is no evidence to show any connection between the killings in Malaya and the PMFTU. In fact, the Government itself has produced no evidence – and never even accused the PMFTU of this crime .... The Government can't even make up its mind on this question. Creech Jones [The Colonial Secretary], in the House, said that the Communists had taken up arms because they failed to gain any support in the Trade Unions. If that is so, why were the Trade Unions banned? On the other hand, Malcom MacDonald[High Commissioner] says the unions were banned because they were dominated by communists.<sup>94</sup>

Violence was the order of the day once British authorities started clamping down on what they termed as subversive activities. More militant MCP members took to arms and were responsible for a number of killings of planters and officials. However, British forces were equally responsible for deaths of union leaders and workers who continued to resist. This was noted by Budh Singh, the Chairman of the Malayan Indian Congress in his following remarks before the declaration of the State of Emergency in June 1948:

Congress contends that violence today in the economic field is not from the workers side alone. There is a good deal of violence of a subtle and corrosive nature from the side of vested interests. Witness the latest piece of Federal legislation for trade unions in the country. A deliberate cold-blooded attempt on the part of the vested interests working in collusion with the Government to deny labor the right of a united labor front to strengthen the cause of labor. Congress is aware that on the one hand workers, in the frenzy of desperation, driven to the furthest wall by the force of economic destitution, have resorted to sticks and stones and other puny missiles to wreak their anger on those whom they believe are the cause of their poverty. Congress is also aware on the other hand the vested interests moving in close association with Government are indulging in cold-blooded violence disguised under the innocent and legal form of bills and ordinances to repress and coerce labor ....

Government has therefore decided for itself that a solution can be found

<sup>94</sup> “What the Malayan Trade Unionists Are Up Against,” Papers on Communist Party of Malaya including Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947, CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

in a brutal and merciless exploitation of the police forces in the country, aided no doubt by the military to maintain law and order.<sup>95</sup>

Official documents representing the public transcript have poorly represented the struggles of labor in Malaya post-World War II. As the official representation of “truth,” the public transcript denies the actors of that time any agency. Instead it presents them i.e. the Indian and Chinese working class as a people influenced by Communists and not as a people fighting for their rights against an imperial capitalist domination. As James Scott said:

The “official transcript” as a social fact presents enormous difficulties for the conduct of historical and contemporary research on subordinate groups. Short of actual rebellion, the great bulk of public events, and hence the great bulk of the archives, is consecrated to the official transcript. And on those occasions when subordinate groups do put in an appearance, their presence, motives, and behavior are mediated by the interpretation of dominant elites. When the subordinate group is almost entirely illiterate the problem is compounded.<sup>96</sup>

Chapter 4 looks at the colonial mindset upon its return to Malaya after the war. The colonial power's intent to get the stalled rubber industry up and running again is obvious in the way Indian workers were “rounded up.” The number of strikes that took place in 1947 indicate strong working class organization. The most significant part of the next chapter is an analysis of the creation and influence of the AMRWC.

<sup>95</sup> *Indian Daily Mail*, 10 June 1948, quoted in Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 151.

<sup>96</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 87.

**CHAPTER 4**

**WORKING CLASS ORGANIZATION THROUGH**

**STRIKES AND UNIONISM**

World War II severely drained Malayans of their resources. With a food shortage after the war, Indian laborers and others in Malaya suffered miserable conditions. Colonial interests were of course to regroup as many laborers as possible to work again. A report on the labor situation after the war written in 1945 by the Labor Office indicates that destitute laborers, particularly Indian Tamils, were found all over the place after the departure of the Japanese, more prominently in the larger cities where they would beg for money and food. The report while stating the condition of these people, also stresses the immediate needs of the Empire to obtain as many fit laborers as possible:

The last week has been spent in tracing and collecting together in various camps as many unemployed and destitute laborers as could be found in and around the town. Most of these laborers are under-nourished and many of them are ill, some being affected with dangerous infections and contagious diseases. Priority has, in the circumstance, been given to the transfer of all dangerous cases to hospitals in order to prevent the outbreak of a serious epidemic in this town [Kuala Lumpur]. The next consideration has been the restoration to health of the remaining laborers, so that they may be fit to work again as early as possible.<sup>97</sup>

This emphasis to get laborers in working condition comes up again in a situational report in October, 1945 from the Labor Department. It states:

Already, therefore, we have begun to achieve one of the final objects in regard to labor – getting the unfit on their feet again and earning. A sustained effort has been made to get work started on rubber estates once

<sup>97</sup> Report on Labor Situation in Kuala Lumpur, 25 September, 1945, in Labor Situation in Kuala Lumpur and other Districts; Laborers Wages; Report on the Labor Strike, 1945-1946. Reports. 1957/0290065, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

more, but it has been very much like climbing a steep and slippery slope.<sup>98</sup>

The above statement portrays a complete disregard for the workers humanity and is an indication of what the colonial mindset was towards these Indian laborers. They were nothing more than tools of production. Colonial officials noted the state of destitution of Indian laborers in many documents written in 1945 and the general consensus of the day was that the Indian Tamils and the Javanese workers from Indonesia were the most sickly and unfit of all the races after the war. A Labor Report for 1945 commented that,

the Chinese seem to have been well able to look after themselves and stand on their own feet to-day. There are batches of unemployed, but they are not destitute or unfit to anything like the extent that the Tamils and Javanese are.<sup>99</sup>

It was this recognition of the state of destitution in the Indian laborer that made it easier for British planters and officials to agree on lower wages for they knew the desperate state of these laborers. They understood quite well that for those destitute laborers, earning something was better than earning nothing. They underestimated the influence of the unions and the MCP on the laborers. Of greater significance was the laborers' own discontent with everything. The combination of these factors eventually led Indian laborers to go on strikes, bringing the industries they were involved in to a virtual standstill on many occasions. E.P. Thompson, a foremost historian on the British working class, said that no account of labor unrest could be fully understood without taking into account “the total life experience, the manifold satisfactions or deprivations,

<sup>98</sup> Labor Department Weekly Situational Report, 7 – 13 October 1945, in Labor Situation in Kuala Lumpur and other Districts; Laborers Wages; Report on the Labor Strike, 1945-1946. Reports. 1957/0290065, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>99</sup> Report on Labor Situation, 25 September, 1945, in Labor Situation in Kuala Lumpur and other Districts; Laborers Wages; Report on the Labor Strike, 1945-1946. Reports. 1957/0290065, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

cultural as well as material, of the people concerned.”<sup>100</sup> The period after the war was indeed one of deprivation and destitution in Malaya but a state the colonial government refused to recognize and address properly, leading the people to revolt using the only weapon they had at their disposal, the strike.

1946, 1947, and 1948 were therefore years filled with strikes and protests, more often violent than not, from laborers who were trying to recover from war conditions. Indian, as well as Chinese laborers felt that they needed to demand higher wages to meet the high costs of living and especially staples like rice. The British knew that these frustrations were eventually going to boil over. A situational report written to the Chief Secretary of the BMA from the Labor Department in October 1945 states that

the urgent need at the moment remains, as stated .... the fixation of the price of rice at a reasonably low figure. Labor will not continue to work much longer under existing wages and prices.<sup>101</sup>

Although some among the colonial authorities recognized this, laborers' demands were mostly met with antagonism from the majority of the planters and colonial authorities.

The Annual Report for the Labor Department in the year 1947 by R.G.D. Houghton, the Colonial Labor Secretary, dismisses the workers' grievances as their inability to understand the workings of economics. He states:

Most of the commodities produced in Malaya were in acute demand as a result of shortages accruing during the war. In addition, wage rates in some industries were too low. In other instances, they were uneconomically high because the law of supply and demand had been allowed to reign at a time of labor shortage and intense demand. Adjustment of wage rates in such circumstances is always difficult and it was more so in Malaya owing to the inability of the workers or their

<sup>100</sup> Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Vintage Books, 1963), 444.

<sup>101</sup> Labor Department Weekly Situational Report, 30 September – 6 October 1945, in Labor Situation in Kuala Lumpur and other Districts; Laborers Wages; Report on the Labor Strike, 1945-1946. Reports. 1957/0290065, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.



trade unions to appreciate that it was not to their ultimate advantage to maintain uneconomically high wage rates or to pursue the mirage of increased wages for less output.<sup>102</sup>

This comes in the same year when the Labor Department in a report on Trade Unionism in Malaya stated that the European employers in the tin and rubber industries had returned to Malaya after the Japanese Occupation with one thing in mind and that was to “assist the United Kingdom in securing [a] dollar exchange,” and getting the “industries ... back to full production as quickly as possible .. to secure dividends for their shareholders.”<sup>103</sup> Yet, the onus was put on struggling laborers to understand the workings of economics and not the shareholders, who expected their dividends regardless of the state of poverty and destitution in post-war Malaya.

This was a crucial time for Indian laborers. They had understood the capitalist agenda. The war had also changed the way they perceived the colonial power. They had developed a spirit of defiance and were not afraid to confront the authorities with their demands. They took on a nature quite contrary to their perceived docile demeanor. This new demeanor was surprising to planters and officials who were previously

accustomed to the patriarchal atmosphere of pre-war estates, [and] expected as a matter of routine to cope with the day to day problems of their laborers, financial and domestic, and who had difficulty in adjusting themselves to the post-war spirit of independence.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> R. G. D. Houghton, *Annual Report for the Labor Department for the year 1947 by the Commissioner of Labor, Federation of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1948), 1, in Houghton, R.G.D., *Annual Report of the Labor Department*, 1947. 2006/0019549, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>103</sup> Report on Trade Unionism in Malaya, in “Trade Unionism in Malaya,” Labor Department, Malayan Union, September 1947. Report. 1998/0003858, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>104</sup> Malaya: Federation of Malaya Confidential Dispatch No. 158 from the Chief Secretary to the Deputy Commissioner General(Colonial Affairs) dated 26 September, 1948, in Houghton, R.G.D., *Annual Report of the Labor Department*, 1947. 2006/0019549, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### **All Malayan Rubber Workers Council (AMRWC)**

Amidst the numerous strikes organized by different groups, one in particular stood out. The August 25, 1947 Malayan wide strike organized by the All Malayan Rubber Workers Council (AMRWC). This organization was a fairly young predominantly Indian trade union that was established on June 6, 1947. It was headed by S.V. K. Moorthi, the President of the Selangor Estate Workers Trade Union (SEWTU), an organization that represented 240 estates. Initially, its main task was to demand a 100% wage increase for Indian laborers. Had the demand been successful its concession would have applied throughout the Malayan Union.<sup>105</sup>

The AMRWC came into being when meetings held between the United Planters Association of Malaya (UPAM) and the Central Committee of the SEWTU collapsed. The UPAM was an organization representing mostly European planters. The UPAM agreed to all of the SEWTU's demands *except* the 100% increase in wage rates for Indian estate workers.<sup>106</sup> UPAM's denial of the 100% increase in wages for Indian laborers became the first cause that the AMRWC took up on its inception. Its second aim was to oppose the 20% cut in contract tapping rates imposed by the UPAM, which would have mainly affected the Chinese estate laborers. By combining these two causes, the AMRWC projected itself as an organization that cut across racial barriers and fought for the rights of all workers. Eventually, the AWRWC succeeded in forcing the hand of the UPAM to concede to the re-establishment of the 20% contract wage rates.

By mobilizing all estate laborers to participate in a one day General Strike on the

<sup>105</sup> Labor Department, "Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – June, 1947," in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

25 of August, 1947, this young organization exerted pressure on the UPAM to concede to its demands. The agency of the Indian workers in particular comes out through this strike and although the effectiveness of the strike is eventually down played in the colonial documents, it is also some of these documents that give important recognition to the beginning of agency among the Indian working class, and further, how it was only expected to grow.

The dismissal of the Malayan Union by the British was empowering to organizations like the UPAM. While the failure of the proposed Malayan Union constitution was a tremendous blow to the working class in Malaya, it emboldened colonial sanctioned businesses. These businesses that owned plantations felt that they could dictate the conditions governing workers and the latter would have no choice but to adhere. The brazen behavior of the colonial power in completely dismissing the demands of the Chinese and Indians passed on to the planters as well. Planters took the opportunity to find ways to further reduce wages of workers. On June 7, 1947 planters denied the demands for a 100% increase in wage rates for all Indian estate workers. In the same month, the UPAM suggested that wages would have to be “reviewed because of the fall in the price of rubber” and recommended “a 20% wage cut be imposed on the tapping rates of contract workers.”<sup>107</sup>

Trade unions affiliated with the strong communist influenced Pan Malayan General Labor Union (PMGLU) however, were “convinced that the UPAM's decision was motivated less by the fall in the rubber price than the calculated attempt to reduce the

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<sup>107</sup> Palanisamy Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 76.

wages of Chinese labor to the level of Indian labor.”<sup>108</sup> This was a very real suspicion on the part of the trade unions as the Labor Report for June, 1947 when addressing this 20% wage cut in contract tapping rates by the UPAM admits,

... the paradoxical position of negotiations going on on the one hand, to consider a demand for a 100% increase in time work rates which would mainly affect Indian estate workers, while on the other employers were imposing a 20% cut in contract tapping rates, which would affect namely Chinese labor, therefore, opening UPAM up to accusations of using this retrograde method of narrowing the gap between Indian and Chinese earnings, instead of increasing the rates of pay to Indian laborers.<sup>109</sup>

Unions accused the UPAM of making this decision out of its own “selfish determination and self-preservation,” while ignoring the plight of the workers who had to deal with the rising cost of living. In a letter written by The Union of Rubber Employees to the Malayan Union Secretariat in July, union leaders stated that even the “government authorities admitted that the standard of living for June had averagely become higher,” therefore making “the wages earned by the workers prior to June .... hardly .. enough to upkeep their living.”<sup>110</sup> The letter further denounced the Government for avoiding any kind of involvement in settling the dispute between the workers and UPAM, stating that they were surprised and disappointed that the “Labor Commissioner [who has] the legal authority to settle labor disputes said that he has no power to do so.”<sup>111</sup>

The AMRWC, acting as a representative for all laborers, consistently wrote to the

<sup>108</sup> Charles Gamba, “The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labor Unrest,” (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 1962), 296, quoted in Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 76.

<sup>109</sup> Monthly Report on Labor Conditions – June, 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>110</sup> Union of Rubber Employees Selangor to the Commissioner of Labor, MU Secretariat, “Malayan Union: 20% Wage Cut on Contract Labor by UPAM,” 17 July 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

UPAM and the Malayan Union Secretariat with its demands, warning that the matter could take a serious turn. At every juncture it assumed a more aggressive tone, unafraid of consequences and willing to challenge the UPAM. The Labor Department Report for July 1947 acknowledges that the AMRWC appealed to the Government “to discuss both the 20% cut and the former demand for a 100 % increase in time work wages,” threatening that “100,000 estate workers may be forced to take active steps to defend their interests.”<sup>112</sup> It urged UPAM “to convene a round table conference of UPAM and AMRWC,” or otherwise, to jointly appeal “to the Malayan Union Government in calling for a Tripartite Conference (Representatives of Government, Employers and Employees) ... to carry out timely negotiations in settling the .... matters amicably.”<sup>113</sup> Another letter sent to the Governor of the Malayan Union indicated that the high costs of living incurred by the Indian workers was the main reason for demanding a 100% increase in wages. It stated that the increase in prices of essential commodities presented major problems to the Indian workers who could not afford these prices.

As such, if no further steps were taken to solve these disputes amicably then undoubtedly Malayan-wide strikes, which are direct result of unbearable conditions of workers, would be unavoidable.<sup>114</sup>

Further, on the issue of the 20% wage cut on contract labor, the union accused UPAM of “[threatening] defenseless workers with unemployment and [driving] them to the borderline of starvation,” if workers disputed this cut.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Labor Department, “Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – July, 1947,” in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>113</sup> All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council to the United Planting Association of Malaya, 19 July, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>114</sup> All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council to the Governor of the Malayan Union, 19 July, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

They questioned its authority saying, “if you have not the authority for the formation of a machine of negotiation, then what machine do you have for the declaration?” The union pressed on, describing the UPAM as “a machine of contradiction and confusion.”<sup>116</sup> Receiving no positive response for negotiations from either the UPAM or the Malayan Union Secretariat, on August 22 the AMRWC declared they had no other option but to carry out their threats. In its second meeting, AMRWC members agreed to use “the only weapon in the armory . . . . and call for a General Protest Strike on the 25 of August, 1947 for the duration of one day.”<sup>117</sup>

Breaking with the past Chinese workers supported the AWRWC, indicating a working-class solidarity. Previously the Chinese were always more militant in their demands and the Indians less vocal. That pattern would change in the post-war period. Indians had also discovered their voice. Although Michael Stenson acknowledges that “Indian laborers were more militant than Chinese throughout 1947,” he goes on to claim that Indians received little Chinese support and were “unwilling to strike in solidarity with the Indians when this would prejudice their own living standards.”<sup>118</sup> This thesis proves otherwise. Colonial documents on labor from the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur show this solidarity. Before the war, each community functioned separately. However, both communities now realized that they had to stick together in order to stand up to colonial authority. This was an important development and something the colonial power had tried very hard to prevent all those years before.

<sup>116</sup> All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council to the United Planting Association of Malaya, 1 August, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>117</sup> All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council to H.E. The Governor of the Malayan Union, 22 August, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>118</sup> Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism: the Indian Case*, 138.

After the one day strike on August 25, a letter sent from the *all Chinese* Batu Pahat District Rubber Workers Association to the Governor of the Malayan Union, said to represent the views of “2200 odd male and female laborers” under its jurisdiction, had this to say:

On the 25 of August, the laborers went on a one day strike as a protest against the UPAM, They have been forced to do so. The main point is the maladministration of the UPAM. The latter did not take into consideration of the livelihood of the laborers. In all Labor Dispute Negotiation meetings, the laborers have pointed out the inability of the laborers' to meet even the minimum cost of living. The UPAM did only look after their own pockets, and knew nothing of present day conditions. They should be held responsible for the strike. It is hoped that H.E. will earnestly comprehend the miseries of the laborers for the sake of the benefits of capital-labor co-operation, social peace, and the prosperity of Malaya, and urge the UPAM to expedite negotiation with the Malayan Rubber Workers Council, and to guarantee the livelihood of the laborers. We once more repeat that the protest against the unreasonable 20% wage reduction and support for the 100% increase in wages asked for by the Indian workers are rational.<sup>119</sup>

This letter clearly represented the views expressed by Chinese workers regarding the UPAM's unfair decision on wages, but its main importance lies in the support it showed for the Indians. The Indians and Chinese had developed a like minded attitude in supporting each other's cause.

On August 26, a day after the strike, the Malayan Union Secretariat informed the AMRWC “that as a result of the unanimous advise of the Labor Advisory Board to His Excellency the Governor, a draft Wages Council Bill is being prepared.” This was with the intention of introducing “a democratic method of fixing wage levels which retain all the chief elements of collective bargaining yet has the advantage of requiring that the

<sup>119</sup> Batu Pahat District Rubber Workers' Association to H.E. The Governor of the Malayan Union, 29 August, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

minimum rate fixed shall be enforced by law.”<sup>120</sup> Although this merely passed the buck on to the new Wages Council Bill, colonial officials acknowledged that the AMRWC efforts worked. This acknowledgment was significant in determining Indian agency. The colonial authorities felt the pressure from the AMRWC and the Indian laborers, leading them to write in the Labor Report for 1947:

One thing seems very clear – given only a good cause – the organizers will be able to call out practically the whole industry pretty rapidly. Their control is more effective than was generally realized.<sup>121</sup>

Once the effectiveness of trade unionism started to show itself, a decision was taken by colonial authorities to clamp down on it.

According to political scientist P. Ramasamy, the August 25 nation-wide strike was effective in most parts of the country. In some states it led to 90 – 95% closure of estates while in others, about 50 – 75% closure of estates.<sup>122</sup> The Labor Department's report on trade unionism released in September of that year estimated that the day's strike led to “a stoppage of approximately 70% of the European owned section of the industry.”<sup>123</sup>

Ramasamy also wrote that the AMRWC was successful in organizing strikes *but unsuccessful in obtaining wage increases*. However, Labor Department reports from 1947 reveal contrary information. These reports provide evidence that the 20% cut in

<sup>120</sup> Malayan Union Secretariat to the All Malayan Rubber Workers' Council, 26 August, 1947. Letters. 1957/0623766, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>121</sup> Monthly Report on Labor Conditions – August, 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>122</sup> Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 78.

<sup>123</sup> Trade Unionism in Malaya, September 1947, in “Trade Unionism in Malaya,” Labor Department, Malayan Union, September 1947. Report. 1998/0003858, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



contract wages was overturned and wages were restored. Although the AMRWC' efforts appear to have helped the Chinese only, information from the Labor Department also indicates that by this time, an increasing number of Indians were also engaged in contract work, and benefited from this wage restoration. Indian laborers, struggling to make ends meet, increasingly wanted to be paid contract tapping rates like the Chinese laborers. The November labor report in 1947 noted, “.. the increasing tendency for estates to employ Indian tappers on contract rates.”<sup>124</sup> The combined pressure from an increasing number of Indians and Chinese engaged in contract work, would have worried the UPAM and forced its hand into conceding. Even so, these concessions were given slowly and in parts as planters and colonial authorities attempted to maintain control over the situation.

The Labor Department report for November 1947 states that employers relented and offered an initial 5% restoration of wages early in the month of November. This was after indication from the UPAM that “there was a chance of the complete restoration of the 20% cut in contract tapping rates imposed in July.” The report goes on to say that laborers were disappointed when only a further 5% was restored in the middle of the month. This led the union to adopt “a smug attitude” and make “pointed remarks regarding the generosity of the employers.” However, employee-employer relations improved when “employers issued a notice on the 28<sup>th</sup> of the month that the full cut of 20% would be restored as from the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month [November].”<sup>125</sup>

Employers giving in to the union's demands in order to restore stability is evident in the Labor Report for December 1947, where it is stated that “... the complete

<sup>124</sup> Monthly Report on Labor Conditions – November 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

restoration of the 20% cut in contract tapping rates which was granted in November had a steadying effect on labor.”<sup>126</sup> This was affirmed again in the Annual Report of the Labor Department for the year 1947 by R.G.D. Houghton, the Commissioner of Labor himself. Although his report downplays the significance of the August 25 strike and those other strikes, and gives the impression that labor was not at all unhappy and that in fact, “there was a definite improvement in employee-employer relations in spite of the reduction made,” he admits to the 20% wage restoration and credits it to the employers.<sup>127</sup> His statement that “workers were impressed by the initiative which had been shown by the employers,” however, is clearly meant to diminish any role that a collective working force or the AMRWC played in obtaining that restoration.

Here, the employers set the tone of the public transcript making themselves look good. Anything positive had to appear as if it came from the benevolence of the colonial authorities and not through the demands of the workers. The colonial authority attempted to control the narrative. At the same time though, they acknowledge the agency of Indian laborers. The colonial power now recognized that there was an awakening in the Indian laborer. The Tamil laborer was no longer passive. He was not going to blindly follow the dictates of those who ruled over him. He questioned those dictates and resisted if they were contrary to what he desired. This colonial recognition of Indian agency comes through in the following labor report in September, 1947:

The Indian agricultural worker has been used to control by domination

<sup>126</sup> Monthly Report on Labor Conditions – December, 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>127</sup> R. G. D. Houghton, *Annual Report for the Labor Department for the year 1947 by the Commissioner of Labor, Federation of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1948), 1 in Houghton, R.G.D. *Annual Report of the Labor Department*, 1947. 2006/0019549, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

from above. In India and prior to the war in Malaya, he was quite prepared to accept the dictates of the panchayat of his village or estate, despite the fact that he had no say in its election. It saved him the trouble of thinking for himself. It seems that his awakening and willingness to take responsibility will be slow in developing *but there is no doubt that it is taking place.*<sup>128</sup>

This recognition of the beginning of agency amongst a formerly docile and easily manipulated community put fear in the hearts of colonists. They were used to the militancy among Chinese workers but not the Indians. The race card always gave them the ability to use the latter to keep the former in check. The Dalley/Awberry Report on labor and trade unionism, commissioned by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1948 was clear in stating that the Indians *outnumbered* all races on the estates.<sup>129</sup> This report was written with the intention of looking thoroughly at the situation of labor and trade unions in Malaya. Recommendations made in this report were given the highest consideration by colonial authorities. If this report recognized Indians as a formidable force on the plantations, how could the colonial power then allow these laborers to become more aggressive in their demands? Something needed to be done.

The Indians' new militancy, albeit in its infancy, compounded by working-class racial unity, was going to be crippling to the colonial capitalist enterprise, and the British knew it. Hence, its harsh draconian response in suppressing the power and influence of “leftist” trade unions and declaring a period of Emergency in 1948, the very next year after the victory of the AMRWC and a collective racial working-class.

<sup>128</sup> Trade Unionism in Malaya, September 1947, in “Trade Unionism in Malaya,” Labor Department, Malayan Union, September 1947. Report. 1998/0003858, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>129</sup> S.S. Awbery and F.W. Dalley, “Labor and Trade Union Organisation in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore,” (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office)1948, DDA/7/7, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

By this, the display of agency by the Indians was quickly subverted. It was a victory for the AMRWC and the Indians but the colonial power was not going to give them that recognition, which may have legitimized their position. The number of working days lost (see Table 1) illustrates the Indian workers' growing power. The statistics available for the month of August however would have been much higher had the labor report for that month taken into account the one day strike on August 25, but it was not included. According to the Labor Department accurate figures were not available.

Table 1 - The number of days lost to strikes on estates in Malaya for the second half of the year in 1947.<sup>130</sup>

<b>Month</b>	<b>Number of Disputes</b>	<b>Number of workmen involved in all stoppages in progress during the month</b>	<b>Aggregate number of working days lost in all stoppages in progress during the month</b>
Jun	15	1712	13601
July	46	6538	63071
August	36	5520	72973
September	22	5969	70150
October	12	2927	12143
November	26	3318	18831
December	14	2019	25140

<sup>130</sup> Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – June - December, 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 1957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### **Colonial Subversion of Indian Agency**

When the British declared a state of emergency in Malaya in June 1948, they were projecting their dominance and authority by defining who was a terrorist and who was not. The Emergency period in Malaya was bloody and lasted until 1960, by far the longest state of emergency in any British colony. Left wing unions were denied registration. Leaders were arrested, even killed. More militant trade union leaders fled to the jungle to wage an armed struggle against the British. Colonial forces pursued and killed these militants. The declaration of the Emergency was an indication of refusal on the part of the imperial power to recognize post-war struggles for independence and freedom from the shackles of colonialism. Sociologist Frank Furedi defines this state of emergency as confusing times. He said that,

these conflicts were either actually or potentially colonial wars. The term emergency was essentially a public relations concept. It had the advantage of allowing Britain to adopt wide-ranging coercive powers while maintaining the pretense of normal civil rule. Above all, emergencies helped create the impression that the issue at stake was that of law and order rather than a political challenge to colonialism. An emergency was called to restore order – by definition it aimed to curb those who caused disorder. Emergency measures allowed colonial governors to label their opponents as law breakers. At a stroke anti-colonial activists could be transformed into criminals or terrorists.<sup>131</sup>

Conventional wisdom will say that a combination of factors such as the rise of left-wing trade unionism, a destruction of civil order through trade union activity, and the involvement of the Malayan Communist Party in trade unions, was what led to the creation of the Emergency period. A better explanation will include the inability of the colonial power to control the working class. No recognition is given to this because of

<sup>131</sup> Frank Furedi, *Colonial Wars and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1994), 1.

the way the public transcript has been presented by the colonial power. The masses had discovered their voice and their strength, not just within their own communities, but the strength of a combined racial unity. The trade unions were just a means to carry out their purpose. Just as the British industrial manufacturers saw “themselves as Hercules and the industrial workers who challenged their authority as the hydra,” so did the British colonizers in Malaya see themselves as a power that needed to destroy a combined force of peasantry that rose up to challenge their colonial interests.<sup>132</sup> The Malayan working class struggle was a threat to British dominance.

As early as 1946, the UPAM was determined to curb left-wing unions. According to Michael Stenson, “The numerous strikes and labor agitations that year was simply interpreted as the work of agent provocateurs.” They suggested the following measures:

.. the non-recognition of the Federal Trade Unions, the application of the Secret Societies Ordinance to all unregistered groups, the banishment of subversive elements, strengthening of police power, the use of the military when necessary and the introduction of an arbitration mechanism.<sup>133</sup>

Trade unionism was the bane of British interests and the MCP was blamed for using trade unions to get their agenda across. The Emergency period was used to get rid of these “subversive elements” and replace them with compliant and conservative trade unions. In 1947, the colonial authorities claimed that over 70% of trade unions in Malaya were under the influence of political parties with a Communist agenda. The usually pliant Indian workers were seen as being taken advantage of by these Chinese

<sup>132</sup> Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, 4.

<sup>133</sup> Michael R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), 156-157, quoted in Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 82.

communists, who as the British claimed

have been clever enough to see how useful the Indian, who is a British subject, can be for their purposes. They can use the Indian vernacular press to further their views in this country and in India, and with the advent of India's independence, they can make the old story of imperialism and its link with capitalism seem more real and true than ever.<sup>134</sup>

Imperial authorities could not believe that Indian workers wanted peace, justice, order, and decent wages. They could not understand that Indians might have felt empowered by India's nationalist struggles and their service in the Indian National Army and Indian Independence League, during the war years. The British agreed that the nationalist movement in India had an effect on the Indian workers but only in so far as raising a consciousness that “he was an Indian and that India was aiming at full independence and the exercise of sovereign rights.”<sup>135</sup> Apart from that, the worker did not fully “understand” the struggle for freedom from colonial exploitation. This consciousness was however sufficient for workers to draw a parallel between colonial control and capitalism, and how Indian workers figured in this relationship. They understood that their labor was being appropriated for the benefit of the empire. They understood that they were not going to gain anything but a continued life of misery, unless they fought back. They connected this day-to-day through the humiliation and poverty they suffered in the hands of the colonial planters and administrators. They understood what it meant to be appropriated by a colonial regime for as Scott said:

Appropriation is ..... the purpose of domination. The very process of appropriation however, unavoidably entails systematic social relations of

<sup>134</sup> Trade Unionism in Malaya, September 1947, in “Trade Unionism in Malaya,” Labor Department, Malayan Union, September 1947. Report. 1998/0003858, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

subordination that impose indignities of one kind or another on the weak. These indignities are the seedbed of the anger, indignation, frustration, and swallowed bile that nurtures the hidden transcript .... Resistance, then, originates not simply from material appropriation but from the pattern of personal humiliations that characterize that exploitation.<sup>136</sup>

It was this consciousness that moved Indian laborers to get involved in trade unions. It was a last resort on the part of the collective working class as the British refused to listen to their grievances. Only the MCP was willing to listen. Therefore, the working class consciously *allowed* the MCP influence over them. For the colonial power to say that these external elements took advantage of the working class, or mere uneducated laborers, is again to say that these people had no ability to think for themselves, therefore denying them any agency. They did have agency and they knew fully well the repercussions for exercising their rights. The *Tribune* political writer, S. Raja Ratnam, in his critique of the Dalley/Awbery Report said that communist influence on trade unions was inevitable as workers

receiving no sympathy from either the Government or the employers ... turned to the Communists for leadership – and the Communists gave it. They acquired some reputation as the 'true' champions of the working class. The main purpose of the Communists was to embarrass the 'imperialist-capitalist' government. They did this by making impossible demands – 'impossible' from the point of view of the employers but not necessarily from the workers .... which made them [the Communists], appear as real champions of the workers.<sup>137</sup>

The Dalley/Awbery Report commissioned by the colonial government was a way to whitewash the real problems in Malaya in the post-war period. It was of course, meant to set the path for conservative unionism and it succeeded in getting that done. S.S.

<sup>136</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 111.

<sup>137</sup> S. Raja Ratnam, "Why the Unions Turn Towards Communism," *Tribune*, 1948, U DDA/9/1, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.



Awbery, Labour M.P. and also an official of the Transport and General Workers' Union, and F. W. Dalley, an ex-assistant general secretary of the Railway Clerks' Association spent eight weeks in Malaya beginning February 1948, with the purpose of looking thoroughly at the labor situation and trade unions in Malaya. Being appointed by the government, it was not surprising that they would have concluded their report by saying that the colonial government gave every effort and encouragement in the period after the war “for the exercise of freedoms of a democratic country – including freedom of speech, Press, and association, while preserving law and order.” Further, “..... that due regard was paid to the aspirations of the people of Malaya and the progressive policy of His Majesty's Government.”

With regard to trade unions, the report stated that, “Particular encouragement was given to the formation of responsible democratic Trade Unions, and as a special help in this connection a Trade Union Adviser's Department was established,” but that the MCP “... however continued with their post-war plans” by setting up “‘cells,’ dubbed Trade Unions, for every type of trade and worker – from miners and rubber workers to cabaret girls. None of these was in the smallest degree representative or democratic.”<sup>138</sup> The conservative press in the United Kingdom when writing on the Dalley/Awbery report, chose to highlight facts such as those above.<sup>139</sup>

Communist influenced press and propaganda however chose to focus on the labor struggles mentioned in the report. On the causes of the Malayan people's upsurge against

<sup>138</sup> S.S. Awbery and F.W. Dalley, “Labor and Trade Union Organisation in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore,” (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1948), U DDA/7/7, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

<sup>139</sup> “Communists in Malaya: Influence in the Trade Unions,” *Scotsman*, 4 November 1948, U DDA/9/1, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

imperial rule, the report blamed high prices of essentials and low wages, and recommended how industrial grievances should be handled. The *Daily Worker* countered, “Although their report makes admission of the appalling conditions in Malaya, they do their best to whitewash the Government's terror campaign against the people.”<sup>140</sup>

The crux of the matter was that the report neglected to focus on the workers' economic rights. Indeed Communists had a stronghold on the trade unions because they were providing leadership to the workers, and encouraged them to voice their grievances. The workers wanted democratic leadership and they were being deprived of it by the government and the planters, who much preferred the pre-war paternalistic way of doing things. The *Standard* in an article on July 10, 1948 summarized it well by saying that

the paternalistic system, however gratifying it may be for the ego of an employer, is today considered an affront to his ego by the worker who is moved by a new sense of his dignity. The worker is no longer content to depend on the generosity of his employer. He thinks in terms of economic rights.<sup>141</sup>

The article continued to say that employee-employer conflict was necessary, and unavoidable, “but well organized trade unions and employers' associations are effective guarantees that such a conflict does not descend into the anarchy of class war.” However, this was precisely what was happening in Malaya at this time. Entrenching the Indian working class in their menial tasks and not allowing them true democratic representation was to ensure a destruction of their future and those of their children. Eventually, with no real union to support and protect their interests, they lost their 'agricultural stronghold.'

Coming into power at independence, the Malayan government that was propped up by

<sup>140</sup> “Appalling Facts in Malaya Report,” *Daily Worker*, 4 November 1948, U DDA/9/1, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

<sup>141</sup> “A Necessary Evil,” *Standard*, 10 July, 1948, U DDA/9/1 in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

the British, continued the policies of the British, and neglected these Indian laborers, leaving them to a worse state of destitution.

In his well written critique of the Awbery/Dalley Report, journalist S. Raja Ratnam, aptly pointed out some of the more salient points that the report seemed to have missed. Labor struggles in Malaya was in a setting of colonial rule, something that the authors overlooked. It was not in a free, democratic, developed nation such as Britain. Where labor had taken a long time to establish itself and create a unionism with a democratic flavor, Malayan workers were trying to do in a few years while contending with a legacy of colonial culture. That they achieved what they did was something to be applauded, albeit under communist influence. The fact remained though, that if the colonial government had given them the proper recognition and means to establish truly democratic unionism, communist subversion may have been prevented.

The authors description of the workers also largely treats them as migrants. The grave error of the British when abandoning the Malayan Union constitution is repeated here. The political, social and economic climate was no longer the same as when Indians were brought to Malaya by the British, or when the Chinese came as free laborers. In the minds of the British, this was still a country with a people under colonial rule. In the minds of the working class, the terms had changed. These were people who had already decided to make Malaya their home. They wanted more than a mere wage. They wanted a future. If the basic things that they were demanding were not being addressed, then what hope was there for a better future? As S. Raja Ratnam reflected,

The labor problem must be studied in a situation which is a continual flux – a situation burdened with a heavy heritage of past neglect and

unresolved grievances. The labor situation must not be described as though it is divorced from the economic, social, and political environment . . . [Authors have failed to appreciate] the way in which Malaya's labor problems influence and are influenced by the environment in which they operate.<sup>142</sup>

The important thing about colonial rule in Malaya was that it failed to prepare the Malayan people for a future that was good, especially the former migrant races. Of the two migrant races, the Indians would be the ones worse off. The short term capitalist interests were always foremost in the minds of the British planters and officials. The colonial power knew that it would not be able to control the colony for much longer as costs mounted in maintaining its hold in Malaya and fighting the “reds,” so the focus was to get as much out of Malaya as it could. Concentrating labor in the extraction of resources ensured the under development of the country. Charles Gamba, an economist in the 1950s, wrote:

The fact that virtually the entire production of raw materials is exported offers an indication that the industrial development of the country is relatively low. Furthermore, the high degree of dependency on rubber, tin, and coconut – as exports – exposes Malaya to violent fluctuations in external demand and prices; fluctuations almost entirely outside Malaya's control and having the severest repercussions on the national income and, thus, on the labor body – wages and salary earners – of the country.<sup>143</sup>

Gamba complained that Government was not interested in a more effective control over the economic life of the colony, giving preference instead to the interests of rubber and tin groups. He foresaw this being a problem for the almost 500,000 rubber and tin workers once production levels started depleting or being replaced by other

<sup>142</sup> S. Raja Ratnam, “The Guides Who Took The Wrong Turn,” *Tribune*, 1948, U DDA/9/1 in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

<sup>143</sup> Charles Gamba, “Problems of Labor Economics in Malaya,” *Free Labor World*, 1953, U DDA/11/11, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

products. At that time, the United States had reported a new processing method for the production of synthetic rubber at much lower costs, a process Gamba envisioned being taken up by other countries. It did eventually happen and it was the Indian laborers that bore the brunt of it as they lost their traditional source of livelihood.

A further subversion of Indian agency came in the form of an amalgamation of unions under the umbrella of a conservation trade union called NUPW. Its leader, P.P. Narayanan, was a rather unknown person among the larger Indian laboring community, but one that caught the eye of John Brazier, the Trade Union Adviser of Malaya as a potential British ally. Ramasamy has written extensively on the formation of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW).<sup>144</sup> Until the introduction of the Emergency, Brazier had little success in the promotion of unions rivaling the left-wing ones. Despite the government machinery on his side, he was not able to influence the mass-based trade unions organized under the Pan Malayan General Labor Unions (PMGLU). It was then that he turned to little known leaders such as Narayanan. According to Ramasamy, “It was on Narayanan that he placed much hope in providing the much needed leadership for the development of alternative unions in the plantation sector.”<sup>145</sup> The British recognized in him someone who would put their policies into place. On November 2, 1954, the National Union of Plantation Workers was officially formed. It was anointed by the British High Commissioner, who declared, “By my presence I want you to know how welcome is [sic] this important step you have taken.”<sup>146</sup> That its membership was largely Indian is indicative of the colonial way of maintaining dominance through segregation.

<sup>144</sup> Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>146</sup> *Straits Times*, 3 November 1954, quoted in Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 96.

The working-class racial unity that developed after the war was effectively broken down. Gamba noted that “the NUPW leadership was content for its members to remain largely Indian in order to retain hegemony and because it was administratively convenient, even though the exclusiveness may have been at the expense of its bargaining power.”<sup>147</sup> In the end the Emergency period of “police and military repression, strict censorship of news and information, [and] the powers of arbitrary arrest and detention, gave impetus to conservative political and trade union organizations,” one of them being the NUPW.<sup>148</sup>

With the creation of the NUPW, the hopes of the Indian agricultural workers to have a better life, was crushed. Agency was taken away from them, and they remained an exploitable laboring class, with very few being able to free themselves from the horrible cycle of poverty and destitution. Colonial dealings in Malaya ensured that the Indian labor community would remain a permanent labor diaspora. However, an alternate memory of them as being a people who struggled against the colonial power and who achieved some victory; and a people who exercised their agency, even if it was for a brief time, should exist. It inspires the community to believe in themselves and not always think in terms of how others negatively perceive them. It gives a glimmer of hope to the youth in the community to know that a long time ago, their forefathers did fight to make their lives better.

Chapter 5 concludes this thesis with the recognition that a modern spirit was displayed by Indian Tamils after World War II. In their resistance to colonial rule, Indians

<sup>147</sup> Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya* (Eastern Universities Press: Singapore, 1962), quoted in Narayana Menon and Chris Leggett, “The NUPW in the Nineties: Plantation Workers in Malaysia,” *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 32, 1 (1996): 59.

<sup>148</sup> Palanisamy Ramasamy, “Socio-Economic Transformation of Malaysian Indian Plantation Workers,” in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kernial S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 322.

showed a defiant nature quite contrary to the colonial perception of them. Radical unionism was a display of agency as Indians attempted to change the course of their lives by taking on the British through strikes, the strongest weapon in their hands.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Schmidt and Patterson in their introduction to *Making Alternate Histories*, observed that “the erasure of local histories,” was the main reason why it was important to have a different perspective of history, as opposed to the accepted historical narrative presented by those in power.<sup>149</sup> An alternate perspective reveals how dominant forces manipulate facts in order to present a picture that is only acceptable to them, and a picture that presents them in good light. Their research provided “several insights on how colonial and neo-colonial powers manipulate the production of histories, encouraging certain forms of history while discouraging and even silencing others.”<sup>150</sup> This thesis, like the work presented in Schmidt and Patterson, gives an alternate perspective on how the Indian labor struggles after World War II should be viewed. These struggles were a display of agency and the start of modernity, something the state-sanctioned historical narrative completely neglects because of the transition from colonialism to neocolonialism that Malaya went through. As Patterson and Schmidt explain,

Whereas colonialism is the expression of power relations between dominant metropolitan countries in the West and the politically, economically, and culturally subordinated peoples on their margins, neocolonialism is based on economic and cultural subordination in the era after colonized peoples gained political independence.<sup>151</sup>

The true account of Indian labor struggles has been hidden, giving an impression

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<sup>149</sup> Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas C. Patterson, “Introduction: From Constructing to Making Alternative Histories,” in *Making Alternative Histories: The Practice of Archeology and History in Non-Western Settings*, ed. Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas C. Patterson (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



of a community that has always been inferior to the Malays and Chinese, one that never stood up for anything, and one that's not able to succeed in life because it was lazy and quite content with the little that it had. Such a view over time allowed for the continued repression and manipulation of these people. Linguistics scholar Shanthini Pillai argues that it is the subaltern nature of the Indian coming as an untouchable to Malaya to perform menial work under imperial bidding, and as such seen as being only able to fill insignificant roles, that has shaped the perception of Malayan Indians. She asserts that they were subalterns,

... manipulated by the imperialists in their bid to secure a labor force, and relentlessly accentuated in colonial discursive articulations of their presence in Malaya; vestiges of its garb still cloak contemporary Malaysia's perception of them.<sup>152</sup>

Pillai eloquently argues that this subaltern nature was never a given in the lives of the Indians, since there were many moments in which they tried to break from the shackles of colonialism through acts of insurgency. Yet, the present work shows that there was a point in Malaya's history when these Indians went beyond acts of insurgency and confronted the colonial power, placing themselves on an equal platform. They were no longer interested in deserting the plantation life or settling for the little advances that came their way. They wanted more. They wanted citizenship and rights. They wanted fair wages and better living conditions. These rights they were willing to fight for and they were willing to do it in collaboration with the other races. The imperatives of the concept of unity within a plural society was not lost on them. It was only through unity

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<sup>152</sup> Shanthini Pillai, "Unpacking Imperial Crates of Subalternity: The Indian Immigrant Labourer of Colonial Malaya," in *Bodies and Voices: The Force-field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Merete Falck Borch, Eva Rask Knudsen, Martin Leer, and Bruce Clunies Ross (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 137-152.

that they could stand up to the British. It was only by supporting each others' demands that they could possibly gain anything from the colonial power. The effect of World War II therefore was to strip the Indian coolie of his subaltern nature and awaken in him a character that was no longer willing to be subservient to the colonial power. Historian Michael Morgan writes:

For the Indian worker in particular the war years were to be a baptism in politics. He above all had been mystified by the paternalistic curtain behind which the British exploited his cheap labor. Once it had been torn down it was to prove extremely difficult to draw again.<sup>153</sup>

### **The Beginning of a Modern Spirit**

Modernity in the Malayan Indian context was therefore that moment in history when these Indian peasants *decided to think decolonially*. Walter Mignolo in his criticism on Western notions of modernity said that, “the darker side or hidden agenda of modernity was coloniality.”<sup>154</sup> Colonialism in Malaya was to throw people back into a pre-modern state. For the Indian peasantry, this was especially true. These were a people who had embarked on a journey that took them away from their villages decades before, where they lived under an oppressive caste system, only to find that their new environment was not that dissimilar. In this new order, the Brahmins were in fact the British, and they, the Tamils, remained a dispossessed community. In his discussion on decolonial thinking, Mignolo stresses that it is important to not reject the colonial past but rather to embrace it and re-imagine the society that one lives in. To think this way

<sup>153</sup> Michael Morgan, “The Rise and Fall of Malayan Trade Unionism, 1945-1950,” in *Malaya: The Making of a Neo-Colony*, ed. Malcolm Caldwell and Mohammed Amin (London: Spokesman, 1977), 150-198.

<sup>154</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

requires “changing the rules of the game rather than the content.”<sup>155</sup> I assert that this was the consciousness of the Indians in Malaya after the war. They could *finally imagine* a better future for themselves, but they also realized that it was not going to happen without a fight. Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and its Fragments*, raised an important observation of peasant consciousness in Colonial India which resonates with Mignolo's decoloniality. He wrote that while nationalists tried to mobilize the peasantry into an anti colonial force, the peasantry *chose* to “make sense of it not in terms of the discursive forms of modern bourgeois politics but rather by translating it into their own codes,” undergoing therefore “a quite radical transformation of meaning in the peasant domain of politics.”<sup>156</sup> Because Chatterjee was making an observation of a situation *during* colonial occupation in India, it could be said that these peasants were *already thinking decolonially, and therefore being modern.*

Similarly, the Malayan Indian laborers understood the ramifications of supporting trade unions heavily influenced by communism. The All Malayan Rubber Workers Council was in fact a communist creation. It gave voice to Indian workers grievances and was a space in which they could make their stand. It was a justified cause given the misery they were in. Aligning themselves with the Malayan Communist Party was a calculated move. It was peasant politics being played out at a time when Western powers were seeking to keep people in Asia under continued suppression.

Historian Barbara Watson Andaya contests the idea that all things “modern” originated in Europe. She argues the need for broadening this idea of modernity in

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>156</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

Southeast Asia in order to find “evidence of a modern spirit in earlier times.”<sup>157</sup> The emergence of a predominantly Indian trade union in the form of the AMRWC that stood in support of both the Indian and Chinese working class, bridging the gap between old cultural differences in a time when the world had witnessed a challenge to Western dominance and hegemony, was in keeping with this 'modern spirit.' Naturally, criticisms towards this trade union movement such as that by an Indian lawyer as quoted below, would not have found favor with the AMRWC or any trade union movement in the period concerned.

The present leaders of some of the trade unions lack the experience which leaders in England and America have. The systems in England and America have been developed 'gradually' and slowly from broad precedent to precedent, and their machinery and the system under which the machinery functions have been developed after a lapse of hundred years at least. The leaders of some trade unions in Malaya are trying to do overnight what the English and American trade unions are doing now. They are ignorant imitators.<sup>158</sup>

Criticisms such as this from those within the echelons of the colonial structure implied that Malaysians needed to be taught trade unionism by the West. This sort of thinking was as Dipesh Chakrabarty argued, in line with the “first in the West, then all else,” type of reasoning, giving credence only to those ideas coming out from the West.<sup>159</sup> The Malayan working class was not waiting to be taught, rather they were going to define the workings of unionism themselves. In its subversion of the trade union movement, the British eventually proved that there was nothing modern about their brand

<sup>157</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, “Historicising 'Modernity' in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social history of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997): 391-409.

<sup>158</sup> Monthly Report on Labor Conditions – August, 1947, in Monthly Reports on Labor Conditions – Reports on Labor Strikes and Disputes, 1947. Reports. 957/0291825, Malaysian National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>159</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

of trade unionism. It was a unionism that protected colonial interests and destroyed true worker representation. It was repressive in nature and ensured the marginalization of the Indian working class. This repression of colonial peoples was perhaps the Western notion of modernity that the British was propagating throughout its colonies. However, over time the colonial peoples appropriated this notion of modernity for themselves and began to redefine it from their vantage point as is indicative of the Malayan Indian labor struggles post World War II.

Ranjit Guha in his book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, recognized the peasant as being a modern person, insisting that “instead of being an anachronism in a modernizing colonial world, the peasant was a real contemporary of colonialism, a fundamental part of the modernity that colonial rule brought to India.”<sup>160</sup> He stressed that theirs was not a “backward consciousness” but a consciousness that took into account the political and economic institutions before them. They knew and understood the power relations of their time. Peasant insurgency in India, Guha wrote, was a political struggle.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, the struggle of the Malayan Indian laborers after the war should also be seen in the same light. These were a people who had partaken in the colonial notion of “modernity,” thereby making them into a modern citizenry. They no longer lived in the confines of a village that boxed them into subaltern roles. They were free having discarded those chains generations before. They had the Japanese invasion and the war to thank for stripping the colonial power of its veil of dominance. All these experiences created a new consciousness in the Indian Tamil. A modern

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>161</sup> Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 75, quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14.

political consciousness that led to a political struggle.

Colonial documents however, were not going to paint the truth. Rather, these sources were going to present all that happened post-World War II as a destruction of civil order by diabolical forces that used the Indian and Chinese working class as pawns. Morgan, writing on trade unionism after the war said that those interested in the history of the Malayan working class had, “unfortunately to rely primarily on sources and accounts largely hostile to the politics of the labor movement during the period under consideration.”<sup>162</sup> This was not surprising given the need by the elite or the dominant power to monopolize the public discourse. What was actually happening was a contradiction to what the colonial power wanted to project of itself. As Scott said, “If a 'people's democracy' claims to exist to promote the interest of the working class, it cannot easily explain why it is breaking strikes and jailing proletarians.”<sup>163</sup>

This was what colonialism did to Asia. It created muted voices in history, while overwhelming it with a strong dominant narrative. The British never intended Malaysians to be free. It viewed racial unity in Malaya with pessimism. A pessimistic view was easy to adopt when the British themselves knew how hard they had worked at and succeeded in fomenting racial divisions in Malaya. The colonial power doubted the Malayan peoples ability to bridge cultural differences and create a successful plural society because they knew that the divisions were deep and would require extraordinary effort from all the races to overcome. For their purposes, it was better to dissuade ideas of unity and focus on the improbabilities of a racially united society. British intent after the war

<sup>162</sup> Michael Morgan, “The Rise and Fall of Malayan Trade Unionism, 1945-1950,” in *Malaya: The Making of a Neo-Colony*, ed. Malcolm Caldwell and Mohammed Amin (London: Spokesman, 1977), 150-198.

<sup>163</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 54-55.

was the “creation of new Dominions, self-Governing but part of the Commonwealth owing allegiance to the Crown.” They decided that Malaya was not ready for *true* self-governance and that the policy regarding self-governance in plural societies such as these should be “the expression [and] not the instrument of unity.” They placed a paternalistic tone on the creation of a Malayan nation by convincing themselves that the Malayan people still needed and wanted British rule. The following quote by the Secretary of State for the Colonies clearly shows this:

These fears [of communal violence] haunt the various races; none of them in their heart of hearts wish to see us go. They still believe in British justice. We must not break down their belief ... All know that we are their hope and stand-by. I say therefore, that we must persist. I believe that with patience and wisdom there is a reasonable chance – if we are given the time – of reaching our goal, a united Malayan nation within the British Commonwealth and Empire.<sup>164</sup>

Statements like this gave the impression that the Malayan people themselves were not convinced that there could be racial unity and therefore needed the colonial power to act as an overseer and arbitrator. In truth, the colonial power was not ready to part from its cash cow. It needed to stay as long as it could to milk the country of its resources. That it could only do with the domination of Malaya's working class. It was certainly not going to allow Malaysians to experience their own version of modernity. Demands for self-governance, self-organization, and an end to exploitation were all appalling thoughts to the imperial power. Rediker and Linebaugh wrote that self-organization was a threat to the ruling class, whose sole concern was the manipulation and exploitation of cheap labor.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, the Malayan peoples' demand for independence and self-governance

<sup>164</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, “Malaya,” 21 December 1951, TNA, CAB/129/48, p.11.

<sup>165</sup> Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, 40.

was a threat to the imperialists.

Bassey W. Andah wrote that the practice of archeology in Africa needed to be rewritten if it was to yield “inside” history and “an authentic African biography such that the ordinary African is enabled to rediscover a true historical self (individual, social, and cultural) and thus a sense of history and creativity.”<sup>166</sup> Similarly, a different approach needs to be taken in the study of history in Malaysia. History as Malaysians know it, needs to be rewritten in order to strip it of its colonial and neo colonial traits. This process of stripping away is especially beneficial to the Indian community, as a marginalized race in Malaysia. It is empowering for such a community to know the truth. It is important that such a community should know that it was involved in a project for modernity and self-independence years before as it is empowering knowledge, if nothing else came out of it. For their own personal empowerment, a different version of history as opposed to the usual narrative is necessary in motivating them to strive for a better life. It presents them a picture contrary to one which maintains them as a subaltern community.

### **Looking for Evidence of Modernity**

In his analysis of the different approaches taken by scholars on the subject of modernity, historian Frederick Cooper concluded that it was important to not just focus on the Euro-centric notion of modernity but take into account the debate and struggles that emerged out of the spaces where this was contested. He said:

The struggles were unequal, but they were not one-sided. Colonial voices might have to shout to be heard in European capitals, but at critical moments, the intensity of colonial conflicts, uncertainties about colonial

<sup>166</sup> Bassey W. Andah, “*Studying African Societies in Cultural Context*,” in *Making Alternative Histories: The Practice of Archeology and History in Non-Western Settings*, ed. Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas C. Patterson (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1995), 180.



policies, disagreements between those who wanted to save souls and those who wanted exploit bodies, and competing visions of national missions and national interests provided fissures that colonized subjects, ..... were able to pry open.<sup>167</sup>

Cooper's encouragement to listen to what was being said about modernity in the world is a useful approach in trying to locate modernity in any situation. In the Malayan context, the struggle put up by the Indian and Chinese working class post World War II exposed the colonial power's selfish motives. Labor struggles exposed the colonial power's idea of wanting to create a society that was acceptable to its own notion of what was right. The Malayan people as a whole wanted something better after the war. To “listen” as Cooper said, to the voices emerging out of the war, was to recognize this desire. Self-governance, independence, better jobs and higher wages, were all cries for a life free of colonial rule. In a situation where such voices were muted, it is difficult to obtain evidence that voices such as these ever existed, however, evidence of these voices can be found.

People were not afraid to speak boldly, one of the first indications that they were ready to embrace modernity. The language against the colonial power was confrontational and no longer docile. Ramasamy, writing on the influence of the All Malayan Rubber Workers Council, quotes a trade union leader saying the following while addressing estate workers in 1947:

Workers, the Manager is afraid of the Labour Union in as much as to say that the Union will instill into your head to demand better wages and better living conditions. Look at your houses, what are they? Mere replicas of pig-stys? Workers, why must you suffer so. This world is not for the capitalists, who number a mere fraction against countless hoards

<sup>167</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Ewing: University of California Press, 2005), 149.

of workers.<sup>168</sup>

Slogans written in Chinese reading, "Fellow workers! Let us use the strength of united action to smash the UPAM's entry [sic] for wage cut and retrenchment of employees;" "Hold firmly to the demand of Indian workers for a 100 percent increase for wages," and, "Support with determination the call of the All Malaya Workers United Committee," were of special significance.<sup>169</sup> These slogans were of importance because they were written in Chinese for Chinese *but in support of the Indians*, indicating a working class solidarity – another marker for modernity. While colonial rule created and encouraged divisions, this new consciousness amongst the working class was striving for unity. This show of solidarity was quite contrary to the Colonial Secretary's statement that the Malayan people had "fears of communal violence."<sup>170</sup>

Another instance is seen in a letter to the British newspaper *Daily Herald* on March 29, 1950 from H.B. Lim, the editor of the *Malayan Monitor*, in response to an editorial written by the *Daily Herald* regarding the Malayan revolt. It condemned the newspaper for its biased reporting of the situation in Malaya. The letter stated that the editorial attacked the "Malayan Liberation movement as 'murder, arson and terrorism,'" therefore giving the impression that the revolt in Malaya, did not exist. The letter urged the British public to consider why such a show of military force was necessary if the problem in Malaya was merely one of 'murder, arson, and terrorism.' Its claim that the "heavy concentration of British army, navy and air force [had] after 22 months, signally

<sup>168</sup> Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 77.

<sup>169</sup> Ming Sheng Pau, 1 September 1947, quoted in Ramasamy, *Plantation Labor, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, 79.

<sup>170</sup> Memorandum of the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the British Cabinet, "Malaya," 21 December 1951, TNA, CAB/129/48, p. 11.

failed to quell the 'murder, arson and terrorism,'" raised the question if there was more to this picture. This show of force during the Emergency, it claimed, of some 120,000 British, Gurka, and Special Constabulary signified that, "... the British forces must indubitably be up against something far more widespread and far more rooted in the people of the country, than mere 'murder, arson and terrorism.'" Using Cooper's approach in "listening" to what was being said about modernity, this letter is then significant as it claims that what was actually happening in Malaya was a people's revolution or movement, and it was a movement under siege. It was one that was being wrongly represented to the British people. H.B. Lim asserted:

The facts are plain. The Malayan people are fighting to be free. They have no wish to kill for the sake of killing; but it is Britain's imperialist policy which demands that they should be put down with force. Every freedom loving and peaceful people opposes such a policy. Not to do so would be a total surrender to slavery, and the perpetuation of the crime of exploitation of one people by another.<sup>171</sup>

Yet another instance is found in a letter written to Frederick William Dalley, one of the co-authors of the Dalley-Awberry Report, by a former Assistant Trade Union Adviser whose employment was terminated. When locals within the colonial structure recognized the problems about colonial rule and became vocal about these problems, they were dismissed. Colonial rule did not tolerate subversion. When that subversion came from those who were singled out to assist the colonial power, it was not tolerated. M.S. Dhoos was terminated on the suspicion that he was sympathetic to the workers' grievances. He wrote this letter with the intention of pointing out all the problems he

<sup>171</sup> H.B. Lim to *Daily Herald*, March 29, 1950, Papers on Communist Party of Malaya, Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.

recognized as being detrimental to the relationship between workers and the colonial power. As someone who worked closely with the workers he could point out succinctly what was being demanded by the workers and what were their grievances. What stands out in his letter is his denouncement of the Labor Department. He wrote that, “.. [the] department which is supposed to look after the interests of the worker has not fully appreciated the worker as human and hence the gulf between them is growing.” His letter pointed out that the lack of understanding between the central authority and the workers was the main cause of distrust. The colonial power did not truly appreciate the problems workers were facing. With the standard of living higher than before the war, daily wages were inadequate to make ends meet. Workers wanted better wages. They wanted employers to listen to their problems. They wanted adult education in order to find better jobs. None of these were of concern to the colonial power who was solely interested in getting the machinery of capitalism running again. Dhoss wrote that the harsh Emergency regulations were curtailing personal freedom and, “when and if this is denied, democracy becomes a farce.” Dhoss also argued that his termination was unfair and illegal, stating, “British justice is something that anybody should be proud of for it is built on the assumption that a man is innocent till he is proven guilty.” Dhoss accused the British of “high-handed” action saying that he was sure this would not have happened if he were a European.<sup>172</sup>

Those whom the British had set apart to “run” Malayan affairs were increasingly becoming critical of colonial ways. Another instance in which we “listen” to this voice for change is in an article written by Ooi Thiam Siew, Secretary to the Penang Division

<sup>172</sup> M.S. Dhoss to Frederick William Dalley, 15 August 1950, U DDA/11/5, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

of the Malayan Trade Union Council. Ooi gained recognition among the British as someone who would make a good trade union leader. As such, he was sent to Britain to learn about the workings of trade unionism under the tutelage of known union leaders. However, Ooi developed his own opinions and criticisms about the situation in Malaya, writing to authorities regarding all the appalling conditions he saw. He was especially concerned about the rubber plantation workers as he believed that they were the “backbone of ... the working class movement in this country.” He said,

It is tragic that employing interests and Government are not acutely aware of the need to satisfy the human needs of the tappers. It would be a real calamity for this country if we were to value the tapper more for his output than for his human personality. Such mistaken ideas of human values in this democratic era are – in the words of the General Secretary of the Malayan Trade Union Council - “a subsidy for communism.”<sup>173</sup>

Ooi argued that the workers only wanted “a fair wage for their toil,” and that the employers “had not proved that the rubber industry could not pay what the workers asked for.” Bringing up testimonies held before the Whitton Arbitration Tribunal and Justice Taylor, Ooi pointed out that the planters were “holding back facts of production costs from impartial arbitrators,” thereby showing “a lack of faith by employers in negotiations and arbitration,” and “making a mockery of democratic institutions and procedure.” On the other hand, Ooi said that “unions leaders .. gave conclusive evidence on both occasions that efficient estates could well afford to pay the rates asked for by the unions and still pay dividends to shareholders, even if the price of rubber went down to fifty cents per pound.”<sup>174</sup> Ooi was in fact challenging the colonial authorities and accusing

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<sup>173</sup> Ooi Thiam Siew, “Malayan Workers and the Trade Unions,” 4 November 1948, U DDA/11/9, in Frederick William Dalley Papers, U/DDA, Hull University Archives, Hull History Center, Hull, United Kingdom.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 2.

them of exploitation, a dangerous road to take as it would embolden the working class to stand up for their rights. In trying to make his case of exploitation even stronger, Ooi quotes Richard Deverall, an American Trade Unionist who met with planters when he visited Malaya in 1950 under the aegis of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' Mission:

Many of the plantations pay their stockholders annual dividends of 25 per cent, 50 per cent and up to 150 per cent! Contrasting this against the mud huts and the degraded lives of the working people, one appreciates the exploitation of the Asian plantation economy.<sup>175</sup>

When the mission asked the planters the number of vacation days the rubber tappers were allowed, the planters replied, “Well, we allow them three days free time per year!” When pressed further by Deverall if the tappers had Sundays off, the reply was, “Well, they can have it if they want, but they are so anxious to make money and they like their work so much that we just can't keep them from working.”<sup>176</sup> Revealing these facts, Ooi in his position as a trade unionist was breaking away from the colonial power's notion of what unionists would stand for. He was not going to be a stooge of the British. In speaking this kind of language, leaders like Ooi were in a good position to mobilize the already discontented workers into fighting the colonial power. His use of language was of vital importance as he said that the workers “right to live” was more than just an ideal. “It is a fundamental human right. It means that all workers must be paid a living wage. While it is debatable what should constitute a living wage, here in Malaya, it is not difficult to assess what should be the minimum required to keep a worker and his family from starving.” He saw the arguments put up by employers such as, “We cannot pay them,”

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

and, “If they want such wages, we have to close down our business,” as nothing more than mere excuses. He said,

Such excuses by employers are not valid when wages paid to workmen are not even sufficient for mere subsistence. It is inhuman. To all who believe that this is not so, I will quote the words of Mr Frank Walsh: “The industry which cannot pay a living wage has no right to exist. It is profiteering in human blood and tears.” Therefore, I appeal to all workers in Malaya – Keep up the struggle for your right to live. Fight a clean democratic fight. With unity and the will to win, you can achieve a better life for yourselves and your families.

That last invocation was especially important when considering modernity. It was a call to not accept things as they were but to resist and strive for something better. Ooi was pointing out that the system as it stood, was not a democracy, but, as Dhoss also pointed out, a “farce.” In encouraging a spirit of resistance and urging the workers to put up a *democratic fight*, Ooi was asking them to take on a modern consciousness – a significant marker of modernity.

Mobilization, according to Ranajit Guha, was divided into two categories. In the “domain of elite politics mobilization was achieved vertically whereas that in the domain of subaltern politics was achieved horizontally.” While the former was more “cautious and controlled,” the latter was “more spontaneous.” Subaltern politics in India involved those who came together through an organization of “kinship and territoriality or on class association.”<sup>177</sup> While in India this popular mobilization “was realized in its most comprehensive form in peasant uprisings,” in Malaya it took the form of labor strikes and organized revolts under the influence of the MCP. It was a mobilization of the working class that cut across the boundaries of race. It was a struggle against imperialist

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<sup>177</sup> Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40

exploitation, thus the beginning of modernity in Malaya. On the part of the British, it was the need to repress this insurgency so rubber revenues would not be affected which led to draconian Emergency regulations and the increase in British forces in Malaya. As the *Malayan Monitor* reported,

The rubber imperialists are therefore, making hay while the sinking sun still shines a little, and are at the same time howling for more British troops to be sent to stem the tide of defeat. More blood for more profits is an appropriate slogan for the financial manipulators of British and Malayan lives.<sup>178</sup>

### **Present Day Indian Struggles in Malaysia**

November 25, 2007 was a significant day for the Malaysian Indian Tamil community. 20,000 people gathered in an unprecedented show of protest towards the Government of Malaysia. They marched to the British Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to deliver a 100, 000 signature memorandum to the Queen of England. The memorandum urged the Queen to help this Indian community by appointing a Queen's Counsel to represent them in a legal case against the British Government. It claimed that actions of the former colonizer abandoned them to harsh discriminatory policies that ensured the continued marginalization of Indians and their future generations through the unfair practices of the Malaysian Government.

The said legal case was a class action suit filed by P. Waytha Moorthy, a lawyer representing the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), for USD 4 trillion. The suit that was filed on August 31, 2007, incidentally the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Malaysia's

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<sup>178</sup> "The War and Rubber Profit," *Malayan Monitor*, April 1950, Papers on Communist Party of Malaya, Information on Malayan Independence Struggle and the Malayan National Strike, 1946-1947. CP/CENT/INT/36/08 1946-1947, Labor History Archive and Study Center, People's History Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom.



independence, specifically stated that it was seeking damages from the British government for “150 years of exploitation.”<sup>179</sup> HINDRAF's legal adviser, Uthayakumar Ponnusamy said that, “The British brought us here, exploited us for 150 years and left us to the mercy of a Malay Muslim government. They should compensate us now.”<sup>180</sup> The march to the British High Commission was prevented by the police who had refused to grant a permit for the rally. Roadblocks were set up to screen motorists entering the city center with the purpose of identifying trouble makers. Members of the public were urged to stay away from the rally. Foreign media, like Al Jazeera, documented the excessive use of force by the police in the form of tear gas and water canons. Although the memorandum was never delivered that day, HINDRAF claimed to have faxed it to the British High Commission. The High Commissioner, Boyd McCleary, issued a statement on November 28, 2007 saying that the Commission had been prepared to accept the petition but it was never delivered. On the HINDRAF claim that the memorandum was faxed, the Commissioner said that some information was received but declined to elaborate on its nature.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, then Prime Minister warned that the government would invoke the Internal Security Act (ISA) against the demonstrators if needed. The ISA was a legacy of the British which was first introduced under the Emergency Regulations Ordinance of 1948 as “preventive detention.” When the Emergency ended in 1960, the ordinance was repealed and the government passed the Internal Security Act under the authority of Article 149 of the Malaysian Constitution. The ISA has been criticized

<sup>179</sup> Baradan Kuppasamy, “Facing Malaysia's Racial Issues,” *Time*, November 26, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1687973,00.html>

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

repeatedly by both international and domestic human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch, the Malaysian Bar Council, and the Malaysian Human Rights Commission on grounds that it violates fundamental international standards.<sup>181</sup> The Malaysian Human Rights Commission or SUHAKAM is however limited in the amount of pressure it can exert as it is an organization established by the Malaysian Parliament under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act 1999, Act 597, and therefore under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's Department. The ISA allows for the detention of any person the police deems as a threat for up to 60 days, a period in which legal counsel is denied. As long as there is, "a suspicion that an individual has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia or any part thereof or to the maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof," that individual can be arrested under the ISA. Because the use of the Act has been repeatedly criticized by human rights groups and members of the public, the Malaysian government under Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that it would be replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012. This new Act was passed by the Parliament and given the royal assent on 18 June 2012. However it has yet to come into force and is still awaiting an announcement by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Two days before the HINDRAF rally, three lawyers including Waytha Moorthy were arrested for allegedly making seditious remarks but were subsequently released when the prosecution could not provide the trial judge with the necessary evidence. On the 26 of November, Waytha Moorthy was released. He left Malaysia before the ISA could be invoked on him. He was granted amnesty by the British Government and lived

<sup>181</sup> "Malaysia: ISA Detainees Beaten and Humiliated," accessed November 28, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2005/09/26/malaysia-isa-detainees-beaten-and-humiliated>

in London till this year. While in London, his Malaysian passport was revoked and he was given special documents by the United Nations to travel on. His main efforts while in exile included rallying support for HINDRAF and the Malaysian Indian cause around the world.

The significance of the HINDRAF led rally was the fact that it garnered the support of the other races in Malaysia. Having brought their grievances to the forefront, Indians drew the support of the Chinese and the Malays in the country and this was manifested in the outcome of the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian general elections of 2008. The ruling UMNO led government lost its two thirds majority in Parliament simply because of the swing in Indian votes and those that supported HINDRAF. The racial solidarity is reminiscent of the unity shown after the war. It made a significant impact then and here again. The 13<sup>th</sup> Malaysian general elections is set to take place by the end of this year. It will be interesting to see if the homecoming of Waytha Moorthy will have an influence on the Indian Tamil community and if this will impact the next elections.

The fact that such an event as the HINDRAF rally took place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of great historical significance. It supports the idea behind this thesis that a colonial subversion indeed happened. Like the group's claim, this thesis also states that the British were responsible for the suffering of this former labor diaspora. Indian Tamils were denied agency after World War II and that denial of agency had serious consequences. As a minority race, the community was thrown into the backwaters. All opportunity for upward mobility was destroyed and they were pushed to the fringes of society where they and their progeny would suffer poverty and destitution. Vestiges of

colonialism still cling on them like ugly rags. They seem to have remained, untouchables from those remote South Indian villages, who were crammed unto steamers and brought to Malayan ports to work on coolie lines all over the country so very long ago.

Susan Johnson spoke of the power of memory and remembering. She hoped that alternate memories, rather than historical memories would separate difference from domination.<sup>182</sup> Alternate memories lend a voice to modern day struggles. Instead of looking at the period after the war as a time in history when people lost out to domination, perhaps inspiration can be drawn from the fight that was put up and the show of agency. The present generation of Indian youth can draw hope and strength from an alternate historical perspective of their forefathers. Perhaps the march organized on November 25, 2007 signifies another moment for change in the lives of this former labor diaspora. It's history in the making and certainly one to be watched carefully.

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<sup>182</sup> Susan L. Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: Norton, 2000), 343.

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