

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Coolie Revolts

If estates cannot pay a living wage, the estate should be shut down. It is usually the estate that is best off that is the worst payer or worst employer and should be black listed by the government.

—E. A. DICKSON, *Old Malaya Hand*, 1934<sup>1</sup>

The Selangor strikes have shown very clearly the growing strength of Indian political organisations in this country. . . . The second series was purely a strike against authority, in protest against the arrest of a sedition-monger, who had posed as the champion of oppressed labour against the employers.

—SIR SHENTON THOMAS, High Commissioner,  
Federated Malay States, May 17, 1941<sup>2</sup>

The plantation system was based on the super-exploitation of labor. Pay was so low that the English assistant Leopold Ainsworth wondered how the Tamil workers and their families could “possibly exist as ordinary human beings” on the wages paid on his boss’s Malayan plantation.<sup>3</sup> In 1926, the cost of a Papuan indentured laborer was 20 percent of that of a white worker, 25 percent of that of an employed estate manager, and 10 percent of that of a white unskilled laborer.<sup>4</sup> Racist humiliation, insult, and cruelty were part of the everyday lives of the coolies: “I’ve been greeted only with cudgels/And a pot-bellied, red-faced French colon/Who swears all day long: ‘shit, pig, scum!’” laments a Vietnamese *vè* poem about work in the colonial era.<sup>5</sup> The plantation workforces were largely

made up of new proletarians from a peasant background. Peasants often tend toward individualistic solutions to socially based problems. Moreover, these peasants-turned-workers often came from outside the regions where the rubber estates were situated. In the case of Sumatra and Malaya in particular, the new plantation proletariat was ethnically heterogeneous, riven by barriers of language, culture, and belief. In addition, many of the workers were transient and would return to their homes upon the expiration of their contracts, although as the present-day ethnic composition of Singapore and Malaya shows, many of them stayed on in their adopted countries.

Class consciousness and the internationalist values of the labor movement have to be learned, and the classic forms of workers' resistance often have to be reinvented afresh. While stoical fatalism might be an understandable response to factors beyond an individual's control in a traditional setting, in the plantation context it was a barrier to collective action. The uprooted peasant might also regard cruelty and injustice as a normal part of life to be endured, or even as somehow justified. When Sir Maori Kiki, a future Prime Minister of independent Papua New Guinea, was a boy in both senses of the word, a white planter poured a cup of scalding hot tea over his chest because Kiki had accidentally slopped some in the saucer. Kiki was scarred for life but, "At the time," writes Hank Nelson, "He accepted the punishment. That was the way things were. It was only later when he was filled with hate."<sup>6</sup>

### *Primitive Protests*

The first coolie protests often took the form of spontaneous and sometimes murderous assaults on overseers. In 1911, for example, in the Bila district of Sumatra, estate laborers murdered an English manager and two of his Swiss counterparts with hoes and knives. Given what we know from the Rhemrev Report, the official explanation that there was no provocation seems dubious.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the overseers got off lightly, as when an arrogant assistant called John Mair was attacked on a Ramsden estate in Malaya and had a finger chopped off.<sup>8</sup> Vengeful assaults were not uncommon on the plantations in French Indochina, as in 1929 when irate coolies attacked a surveyor named Pellen with machetes and tapping knives on the Kantroy plantation in Cambodia, forcing him to seek shelter in a cesspit.<sup>9</sup> Tran Tu Binh records the murder of the French overseer

Monteil, who he calls “Monte,” on the Phu-Riêng plantation.<sup>10</sup> The murders sparked off a wider mutiny, which was only quelled when the estate director and his staff fired on the coolies, killing several and causing others to flee into the jungle.<sup>11</sup> Labor inspector Texier concluded that the attack was not premeditated, but had erupted after Monteil, frustrated that he did not receive an expected promotion, caned a coolie for “arrogance” and for neglecting his work.<sup>12</sup> Another French official assured the Colonial Minister that there was no political character to the affair,<sup>13</sup> but from what Tran says about Monteil, the coolies would have seen his killing as retribution for his excesses. Occasionally, physical attacks yielded results for the aggrieved coolies, as on the Sabrang Estate in Malaya in 1913. An assistant named Paton thrashed a Tamil coolie with a stick for “impertinence” and was afterwards set upon by “the whole of the coolies in the lines.” The police arrived to quell the disturbance and arrested three laborers, but when the manager learned that the coolies intended to complain to the immigration department, Paton was discharged.<sup>14</sup> More generally, the planters and police cracked down on “mutineers”; for example, the alleged ringleader in the murder of Monteil was executed. While the French characteristically downplayed any element of political protest in such episodes, the Dutch made public examples of the perpetrators of violence against the planters. This was the case on a Dutch estate in 1881, when two Javanese coolies named Tasmin and Kzomo di Rono were publicly hanged for their part in the murder of a Dutch planter. As Jan Breman argues in his book *Taming the Coolie Beast*, their execution was a “stage performance” enacted “to dramatize colonial power.”<sup>15</sup> The dangling corpses of Tasmin and Kzomo di Rono on the plantation where they had committed the murder was a grim warning to all other coolies of the consequences of revolt. In contrast, no matter how onerous the life of a European “wage slave,” work discipline was not enforced by “thanatocratic” methods.<sup>16</sup> Marx argued that the element of direct force distinguishes slavery from wage labor, but as Ravindra K. Jain observes, the lines between the two were blurred on the plantation,<sup>17</sup> where violence and the threat of it were always present. It follows, then, that when the estate laborers were aroused, industrial struggles would be bitter, and a direct political element was often present.

*Individual and Mass Desertions*

The strike is the classical form of workers' resistance, but a more rudimentary form of defiance, desertion, sometimes en masse, was common in the rubber plantations. Although desertion was illegal and punishable by imprisonment and fines, the planters continually complained about "absconders." Sometimes these workers deserted to other plantations or mines on the promise of higher wages. According to Akers, up to a quarter of all indentured Chinese laborers working on Malayan plantations before the First World War deserted, many of them attracted by the higher wages in the tin mining industry.<sup>18</sup> In November 1910, the manager of the Selaba Estate grumbled that eight Chinese coolies had absconded and not been retaken, adding, "I am afraid the chances of capturing them are very small."<sup>19</sup> Another Malayan manager complained in 1916 that although recruiters in India had recently sent seventy-five new coolies, seventy had either left legally at the termination of their contracts or had absconded and the estate was suffering an acute labor shortage as a result.<sup>20</sup> The desertion rates in French Indochina, particularly in the early years, were strikingly high. In 1927 alone, according to the Vietnamese inspector Bui Bang Doan, 3,001 laborers deserted from plantations in Cochinchina. Many more fled over the border from estates in Cambodia.<sup>21</sup> At Tran Tu Binh's place of work, the Michelin plantation at Phu-Riêng, no less than 161 fled out of a total workforce of 990 between June 1927 and March 1928.<sup>22</sup> The French authorities posted cordons of armed guards to apprehend deserters, and those who were caught were often brutally assaulted before being returned to their place of employment, and were sometimes murdered.<sup>23</sup>

While spontaneous assault, sabotage, and desertion were serious nuisances for the estate owners, the results for the coolies were mixed. While some might have escaped, others perished in the jungles and swamps or were apprehended and punished. Those found guilty of physical attacks during breakouts could expect little mercy from the authorities. Meanwhile, the system of super-exploitation continued without serious challenge, with fresh supplies of labor brought in to replace those who ran off. Much more serious from the planters' point of view was that the concentration of large numbers of laborers enduring similar conditions led to collective resistance. The planters often responded by calling on state power to quash the strikers. Trade unions were illegal: in the case of Papua New Guinea until 1962, where the planters were even opposed to

racially exclusive white unions because of the “possible demonstrative effect” on the Papuans.<sup>24</sup> The same situation was true of Malaya, where organizations such as the Communist-led Nanyang Federation of Labor were illegal until 1941.<sup>25</sup> It was also illegal for indentured laborers to strike or refuse to obey orders across the plantation world. Nevertheless, strikes and other forms of collective action erupted no matter how hard the authorities cracked down. Jan Breman notes instances of strike action on Sumatran plantations from as early as 1878, predating the rubber era and bequeathing a legacy of struggle.<sup>26</sup> For a number of years from the late 1920s, the estates in French Indochina were convulsed with industrial disorders and a similar pattern unfolded toward the end of the 1930s in Malaya and Singapore.

#### *The Strike Wave in French Indochina*

One of the crucial ingredients for the emergence of effective trade unionism in the repressive environment of the rubber estates was the creation of a class-conscious and politically aware workers’ leadership capable of winning the workers’ trust, drawing conclusions from experience, and mapping out strategies which could lead the workers to at least partial victory. The strike wave that erupted across the plantations of southern Indochina in the late 1920s marked the beginning of the Indochinese Communist Party’s involvement in mass workers’ struggles. The Communists were able to win mass support by skillfully combining their anti-imperialist program with the direct, economic demands of the workers.<sup>27</sup> In some respects, this mass mobilization was easier for Tran Tu Binh and his comrades than for their counterparts in Malaya. Vietnam boasted a long history of proto-nationalist opposition to foreign occupation going back to the time of Chinese overlordship and developing into modern nationalism during the period of French colonialism after 1858. The Tonkinese peasants, too, had a strong tradition of mutual assistance that marked them off from the more individualistic farmers in other countries. In addition, the plantation proletariat in French Indochina was ethnically and culturally homogeneous to a much greater extent than was the case in Malaya or Sumatra. While the French employed some Khmers and hill tribesmen, primarily in forest clearing operations, the vast bulk of the coolies were Vietnamese. These factors made it easier for the Communists to develop and foster the ideas of cooperation, class strug-

gle, and solidarity without which trade unionism—and militant political action—is not possible.

Although Tran Tu Binh does not say so explicitly, it seems clear that he enlisted as a coolie and went south under the direction of the Communist Party. By 1928, reports of shocking conditions on the plantations had trickled back to Tonkin and anti-recruiting leaflets were circulating. One of these was intercepted at the Phy Ly post office by the *Surêté*:<sup>28</sup>

Fellow countrymen and women!

Our country is ruined, we are wretched, we pay heavy taxes and duties, we are beaten and thrown in prison for the slightest offence. Now they are recruiting coolies, whom they first stupefy with drugs, then forcibly transport far away to their deaths!<sup>29</sup>

By his own account, Tran was already an ardent Communist when he went south. The well-educated product of a Catholic seminary, he was also naturally rebellious and gifted with leadership qualities and high intelligence. He led a successful hunger strike aboard the *Commandant Dorier* during the passage to Saigon in protest against the poor food served by the ship's galley and even managed to gain the support of the French sailors.<sup>30</sup> He arrived at Michelin's Phu-Riêng plantation already respected as a man who would stand up against injustice. Finding the estate seething with discontent, Tran set to work to channel the inchoate anger into organized revolt.

The reports of the labor inspectors confirm that in its early years the Phu-Riêng estate was a "hell on earth," with poor sanitary conditions, sadistic overseers, insufficient and inferior food, relentless work, and unsanitary barracks. Individual protests, no matter how peaceful, were brutally repressed, such as when Tran's outspoken older friend Phan was bashed and then shackled in a dark shed for remonstrating with the bosses after the estate manager kicked a young man to death. Violent resistance to this reign of terror was met with greater violence, and peaceful protest was equally ineffective.<sup>31</sup> When an assistant battered a Vietnamese foreman to death, the workers filed a legal complaint. The court found him guilty of "negligent manslaughter" and awarded his victim's widow five piastres in damages—roughly eight days' pay for a male coolie<sup>32</sup>—a modern French version of the "exception of Irishry" laws. Disgusted, the workers responded with sabotage, slowing down production and slashing

the roots of hevea saplings just before planting and killing up to a third of the trees.<sup>33</sup> Dying in droves from sickness, overwork, and despair, tormented by the insults and blows of the overseers, and forbidden by law from leaving until the expiration of their contracts, the laborers were increasingly receptive to Tran's advocacy of militant collective action.

### *The Têt Strike at Phu-Riêng*

When the strike wave broke at Phu-Riêng and other plantations during the Têt festivities in late January 1930, Tran and his comrades prepared the workers for the battle. As Tran knew from experience and Marxist theory, the strength of the working class lies in its numbers and in disciplined organization. Expecting that the planters would try to starve them back to work, they had built up hidden caches of food. Expecting violent repression, they had stockpiled knives and other homemade weapons. During extensive discussions at secret meetings in the coolie lines, they had formulated a list of demands to be served to the rubber companies. Tran lists these as:

- The prohibition of beatings and other ill-treatment
- Exemption from taxation
- Paid maternity leave
- An eight-hour day, including traveling time
- Accident pay
- Freedom for the imprisoned Communist leader, Tran Van Cung
- Workers to be returned to their homes at the bosses' expense upon termination of their contracts<sup>34</sup>

The labor inspector J. G. Herisson noted that the workers also demanded the dismissal of two of the most brutal assistants employed at Phu-Riêng.<sup>35</sup> In spite of the findings of earlier labor inspectors regarding the unfair and unfit conditions of the laborers, Herisson considered the strike was unjustified.<sup>36</sup> This is incredible, given that the workers' economic demands were not especially radical; indeed much of what they wanted was theoretically guaranteed in their contracts. The contracts stipulated an eight-hour working day, six days a week, but in practice they were made to perform unpaid overtime and free time on Sundays was spent performing compulsory unpaid work around the coolie compound.

The demand to free the imprisoned Communist leader, however, was a calculated political move. As the strike unfolded, up to 5,000 strikers were parading behind red banners and sending delegations to put their grievances to the state authorities.<sup>37</sup> Michelin considered closing the plantation and sending the coolies home but decided to call in the police and militia instead. The disturbances continued for some months and ended with massive repression by the state forces. On April 10, 1930, Governor Jean-Félix Krauthheimer wired his superior at Hanoi to report that over a dozen workers had been imprisoned for their part in the strike. Three of these, including Tran, were sentenced to five years, four to three years, and the others received lesser sentences.<sup>38</sup> The Governor reported that the workers had been sentenced at a court in Bien Hoa for “impeding freedom of work and for actions compromising public security.”<sup>39</sup>

#### *Bloody Confrontation at Dau-Tiêng*

In Hanoi, Governor General Pierre Pasquier professed to be puzzled by the strike, which he assured the Colonial Minister at Paris was solely the result of Communist manipulation. He could not understand the outbreak, he claimed, because the Michelin workers were treated particularly well at Phu-Riêng.<sup>40</sup> Either he was lying or he had not been reading the reports of his own inspectors, Delamare and Doan, who were highly critical of Michelin. The strike spread to other plantations, despite the arrest and banishment of the ringleaders from Phu-Riêng. In late April 1930, the manager on the Thuan Loi plantation reported to Michelin headquarters in Clermont-Ferrand that 1,300 coolies had put their tools down. He added that reinforcements of militia were being sent in to keep order.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, the disturbances were to culminate in a massacre of unarmed workers on Michelin's Dau-Tiêng rubber estate. The latter strike erupted when Michelin cut wages from forty to thirty cents a day and reduced the rice ration from 800 to 700 grams for males to 600 grams for females. Michelin justified the cuts as austerity measures brought on by the trade slump. Confronted with the strike, the estate manager, Monsieur Planchon, panicked and called out a detachment of militia. On the orders of their commander, Lieutenant Noblot, the militiamen opened fire, killing three coolies and wounding four others. This time the authorities had gone too far, and a cover-up was not possible. Word of the shootings leaked out and caused a wave of outrage in France, with parliamentary deputies and

newspaper editors censuring the government. The *Surêté* condemned Michelin for its illegal pay and ration cuts, and concluded that the strikers had shown no signs of aggression before they were shot down.<sup>42</sup>

By now, however, the Great Depression had begun in earnest and the workers' resolve to fight was waning. Contrary to popular wisdom, industrial militancy is more likely to occur during periods of economic upturn, when there is hope for the future. Conversely, during hard times, the workers are more concerned with survival than strikes and revolution. Moreover, by this time, the very worst conditions on the plantations had been ameliorated both as a result of the estates becoming more established and the practice of regular inspections. The colonial authorities and the rubber companies realized that it was not in their best interests to provoke the coolies into rebellion. The worst of the overseers had been dismissed and some were expelled from the colony.

Many of the leading militants were also in jail on the island of Poulo Condore (Con-Son) in the South China Sea. One can imagine *vè* poems being recited on the deck of the French ship *Tran* was aboard:

As I look at the prison island  
Still a small dot in the distance  
I feel a surge of hatred unbound  
As deep as the blue sea around.<sup>43</sup>

*Tran* spent five years on an island that for many political activists was a university of revolution. There, imprisoned high-ranking cadres of the Communist Party gave political lectures and their students discussed and debated the burning political and social questions of the hour: independence from France in particular. Seasoned in struggle and jail, *Tran* was to rise rapidly through the ranks of the Party after his release, becoming deputy secretary of the Viet Minh's Central Military Committee, commander of the army's military academy, and chief inspector of the Vietnam People's Armed Forces.<sup>44</sup>

### *The Strike Waves in Malaya*

There were also serious strike waves on the plantations in Malaya. As the historian Charles Gamba has pointed out, prior to the Second World War, "there were no trade unions in Malaya in the Western sense of the term."

This was partly due to repression. Trade unions were not legalized in Malaya and Singapore until 1941,<sup>45</sup> and before then both the Kuomintang<sup>46</sup> and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) were banned by the British authorities.<sup>47</sup> Despite the ban, both continued throughout the 1930s, and this suggests deeper causes for the rudimentary state of the unions, stemming from what Gamba describes as “the special organisation of Malay, Chinese and Indian society.” The Malays remained largely outside the wage economy at this stage and were thus indifferent to labor organization and to nationalist politics.<sup>48</sup> For most of the prewar period, the Chinese were organized in trade guilds—corporate institutions that included both employees and employers—and until the end of the 1930s the Indian workforce was comparatively docile and was looked down on by the Indian middle class, the Europeans, and most Chinese and Malays.<sup>49</sup> Such prejudices and ethnic insularities stunted the development of both class solidarity and multi-ethnic nationalism. Gamba argues that both the Kuomintang and the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party “seemed inclined to think of Singapore as an extension of China.”<sup>50</sup> Other Communists and radicals were aware of the block this placed on labor organization. One of these was the legendary Indonesian Communist Tan Malaka. René Onraet, the director of the Criminal Intelligence Department in the Straits Settlements, noted that “Tan Malaka had put on record his opinion that Malaya was, on account of the language difficulty, a difficult country [in which] to organize proletarian movements and Alimin<sup>51</sup> told me in 1927 that it was impossible to lead the masses in Malaya on account of the different nationalities it contained.”<sup>52</sup> There was also a certain amount of deliberate divide-and-rule involved on the part of the British authorities. Sir Frederick Weld, who served as Governor of the Straits Settlements in the 1880s, believed “it is advisable that, in a country like this, the preponderance of any one Eastern nationality should not be excessive,” particularly “because the Indians are a peccable and easily governed race.” The historian J. Norman Parmer argued that “[f]rom Weld’s administration onward, the Indians were cast in the role of a counterpoise to the Chinese,”<sup>53</sup> who were regarded as much less tractable.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, examples of militancy, desertion, sabotage, and other forms of protest abounded from the beginning of the industry, particularly among the Chinese. On the eve of the First World War, C. E. Akers noted that the Chinese coolies had a reputation for being “difficult”: the 1911 Revolution in China had “unsettled” them, and evidence of “a tur-

bulent spirit on several estates” had led to the intervention of the police and the military. Akers added that the Javanese, too, could be unruly<sup>55</sup>: a point on which John Turner, the longtime general manager of the Ramsden estates, agreed. Writing to the London head office in January 1908, he reported that many Javanese coolies had been employed in recent times but that “they are inclined to be troublesome.” As a result, the estates had cancelled orders for more of them, and those involved in unrest had been “severely dealt with.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Militancy among the Chinese Laborers*

By 1927 at least, the colonial authorities were seriously worried about the subversive potential of the Chinese population in Malaya. One official worried that “[m]any of our Chinese immigrants are highly undesirable politically,”<sup>57</sup> and a colleague informed the Colonial Secretary that the “police are constantly discovering secret societies and centres of communist revolutionary and anti-British organisations” in the colony. With an excess of unskilled labor in Malaya, the official added, it might be possible to halt the flow of Chinese immigrants.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the planters themselves believed that they could “see off” so-called “Celestial” troublemakers.<sup>59</sup> This belief was apparently confirmed when Chinese bud-ders<sup>60</sup> struck on the Dunlop estates in 1929, demanding a raise in pay from \$1.50 to \$2.00 a day. The management refused to negotiate, despite the loss of \$7,000 worth of budwood, and “the Chinese, recognising the firm hand, returned to work at the old rate and have never given any further trouble since,” a government journalist reported.<sup>61</sup>

As in French Indochina, labor militancy tended to die down during the worst years of the Great Depression. There had been widespread layoffs. Many coolies had returned to India or China. There were also wage cuts, but with a worldwide glut of rubber, the workers were in no position to mount serious resistance. C. D. Ahearne of the Federated Malay States Labor Department reported, “there were no strikes or serious disturbances of note” in 1932, with “the relations between employers and employed being harmonious.”<sup>62</sup> On April 13, 1937, Police Commissioner C. H. Sansom wrote:

For the past 3 or 4 years throughout the period of depression in this country the Communist Party has been moribund, partly due to police action, partly

due to lack of funds but chiefly, perhaps, owing to the innate reasonableness of the Chinese character moulded by generations of adversity.<sup>63</sup>

A wave of strikes swept across the plantations and on April 27, the *Financial News* reported that the number of rubber workers on strike in Malaya had jumped in the space of twenty-four hours from 10,000 to 24,000, with forty-four estates affected by the unrest.<sup>64</sup> Alarmed by the tide of discontent, Governor Shenton Thomas banned a huge range of “subversive” books, pamphlets, and newspapers. The Colonial Secretary at London offered his support for the prevention of what he called “the circulation of deliberate revolutionary propaganda amongst ignorant and excitable people” but regretted that in his haste, the Governor had banned a number of classics of English literature and the publications of the Phoenix Book Company, which was “innocent” of any leftist affiliation.<sup>65</sup> By May, the colonial authorities were writing of the “alarming situation” in Malaya. Thomas claimed that “the critic at home does not realise that what may be harmless to an English undergraduate may be most unwholesome food for a Chinese, Tamil or Malay youth . . .”<sup>66</sup>

### *An Explosion of Strikes*

The planters and the colonial government in Malaya were soon faced with an explosion of strikes based in the Chinese population and orchestrated in large part by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) through its General Labor Union (GLU). The strike wave began in March 1937 among Chinese workers on rubber estates in Selangor and Negri Sembilan provinces and spread beyond the plantations to the collieries at Batu Arang.<sup>67</sup> However, while the MCP was an avowedly revolutionary organization, dedicated to overthrowing British rule on the peninsula, the Colonial Office privately admitted that “the strikers had, for the most part, genuine grievances in regard to their rates of pay, no effort having been made to raise them, as the price of rubber increased.” The strikers were demanding \$1.00 a day, an increase of around thirty-five to forty cents. After a half-hearted attempt at conciliation, the High Commissioner ordered the police to raid the plantations and arrest the “leading agitators.” With the abandonment of evenhandedness by the authorities, the disturbances grew more violent. In one case in mid-1937, the police opened fire on strikers who had converged on a local adminis-

trative center. In another, four plainclothes detectives who were spying on a crowd were set upon and fired their revolvers, wounding two of their assailants. As the strikes dragged on, such clashes became more frequent, with hundreds of arrests. When the workers organized flying pickets to close down plantations, the authorities responded by flooding the plantations with police, backed by the bayonets of the Punjab Regiment and the Malay Rifles.<sup>68</sup> On March 2, 1937, the manager of the Malayan Rubber factory, Mr. Grice, telephoned the police to report that he had been “taken prisoner” by a group of striking women. It was only with difficulty that the police were able to “extricate” him from the women’s clutches. The male strikers stoned the officers in retaliation, and in the *mélée* a police revolver went missing. The police retreated with two arrested strikers whereupon the workers formed themselves into a 1,200-strong procession and marched on the police barracks to demand their comrades’ release. C. H. Sansom, the Commissioner of Police, admitted that the demonstration was “orderly,” but considered “their attitude was one of insolent defiance.” The strikers “literally took possession of Klang town for 3 hours and stipulated a reply [to their demands] within 24 hours.” They dispersed only after the police trucked in massive reinforcements.

Strikes also engulfed the plantations in the Kajang district some thirteen miles from Kuala Lumpur, with militants cycling round the estates to spread the action. Matters came to a head when strikers overpowered an undercover policeman and stole his notebook. The police responded by raiding the plantation and arresting seventeen strikers, after which the workers decided to march on Kuala Lumpur to present their grievances directly to the colonial government. When the procession neared the Bolton Estate they found the road blocked by a phalanx of more than 150 police under the command of an Inspector Dickinson. Dickinson gave the order to baton charge the strikers, whereupon “the mob broke and was driven all the nine miles back to Kajang” where “110 arrests were made.” Coolies on a nearby estate responded by roughing up some Chinese plainclothesmen—an action that Commissioner Sansom claimed was unprovoked—and more arrests were made. Later, the police were incensed by events on the Wardieburn Estate in Ulu Klang, where female tappers flew a red flag and stopped work to observe International Women’s Day; “one of the days decreed for celebration by the Communist Party of Russia,” fumed Commissioner Sansom. At the same time, he claimed that the strikers had lodged “exorbitant wage demands” and other “supplementary and unreasonable demands.” These included

the provision of childcare for children under the age of five, schools for the coolies' children, and "no dismissals or fines without cause and new labourers to be introduced by the present labour force." In response, the coolie lines on the nearby Hawthornden Estate were raided and the strike leaders dragged off. When the workers held a protest meeting on the lines, the police and soldiers of the Punjabi Rifles attacked with force. Sansom's report read, "For three weeks this unruly gathering had been a law unto itself, definitely anti-European and defiant." This strike wave was later crushed by the state authorities.<sup>69</sup>

Other officials were critical of the authorities' handling of the disturbances. Mr. S.W. Jones, the British Resident at Selangor, was unimpressed by what he saw as the "unscrupulous" behavior of planters, who had refused to negotiate in good faith despite the modest demands of the workers. "The police have forgotten for the moment certain vital circumstances," he observed. Generally, there had been an "insufficient element of unlawfulness . . . to justify strong measures. Meetings only call for dispersal when they threaten a breach of the peace; picketing is not defined as an offense under any law of this country; and in the early days intimidation in actuality hard to discover and proof was only 'information received.'"<sup>70</sup> Jones represented the part of the colonial establishment that favored a more conciliatory approach, believing that trade unions should be legalized in order that moderate leadership might displace the militants.<sup>71</sup> Trade unions were not legalized in Malaya until the eve of the Japanese invasion of 1942, but if the authorities believed that they had cowed the Chinese workers into submission, they were soon forced to rethink this.

#### *May Day Riot and Firestone Occupation*

Another wave of unrest rolled across the plantations in 1940, with fifty-seven strikes in the Selangor province alone. The unrest spread to the rubber factories in Singapore and culminated in the occupation of the Firestone plant, an action which itself followed directly from spectacular riots that erupted on May 1, 1940. The Malayan Communist Party called for a "monster demonstration" and general strike "in sheer defiance" of the authorities' wishes, noted a police inspector. The police shot two demonstrators dead and wounded another two. Predictably, a white jury found the shootings to have been justified.<sup>72</sup> The Firestone plant, which employed almost 300 men and women and which was said to have con-



Civil unrest in Singapore, Syed Alwi Bridge, May 1940.

tained “a strong communist cell,” went on strike the following day after the manager refused to discuss “an entirely unreasonable” log of claims served on him by the GLU. The evidence is contradictory, however, it seems that the manager locked out the workers, whereupon they occupied the plant. A sit-down strike lasted for two months, during which time the police observed that the coolies held “continuous anti-British meetings” on the premises and organized a workers’ militia to repel attempts to evict them. In the meantime, the strike spread to other rubber factories and there were continuous disturbances, with the police shepherding blacklegs into work through angry picket lines. In at least one instance, the workers fought a pitched battle with police, defending themselves with “wooden staves, stones, iron bars and hammers.” On July 1, 1940, the police stormed the Firestone factory and ended the occupation, arresting forty-six workers in the process and initiating deportation procedures against a number of “subversives.” Firestone’s management immediately rehired the workforce, minus those it deemed to be ringleaders, and granted a general increase in pay. These were tried and true tactics honed back home in Akron. “The result was a complete defeat for the General Labour Union at that factory,” observed a colonial official with some satisfaction. Just to make sure, the company built a high fence around the property and instituted a strict surveillance over its employees,<sup>73</sup> again a staple of Akron-style union busting.

The strike wave and occupation had severely rattled the British authorities. A Colonial Office mandarin calculated that there had been

130 strikes in Singapore alone since the outbreak of the Second World War, but conceded that this reflected “genuine discontent with the failure of wages to follow the cost of living in spite of increased profits . . .”<sup>74</sup> A journalist at the *Manchester Guardian* agreed and claimed that the strikes could have been averted if the management had been willing to negotiate in good faith. The solution, the journalist believed, was to legalize trade unions and create mechanisms for the conciliation of disputes.<sup>75</sup> In fact, a bill was introduced into the colonial legislature later in the year with precisely that intention.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, the authorities claimed to see a Japanese connection behind the strikes, and clamped down hard on known Japanese “agitators,” some 1,000 of whom were rounded up and placed in detention prior to deportation to Hong Kong and Amoy. The Chinese Government made urgent representations to ensure that the deportees were not delivered into the hands of the Japanese and their “puppets.”<sup>77</sup>

#### *Myth of the “Mild Hindoo” Shattered*

The wave of strikes by Indian estate laborers in 1941 shattered the stereotype of “the mild Hindoo.” While Tamils had launched sporadic industrial action over the years, including a wage dispute at Ramsden’s Sabrang estate in 1912,<sup>78</sup> and numbers of “undesirables” had been deported to India,<sup>79</sup> in general they had been comparatively subdued. If the Klang strikes in Selangor province in 1941 came as a shock to the planters, they also caught Malaya’s Communists napping. The local MCP branch was rebuked by the Party’s central committee for failing to foresee or involve itself in the upsurge and thus missing an opportunity to extend the Party’s influence beyond the Chinese community.<sup>80</sup> The Tamils moved separately into industrial struggle after the massive Chinese strike wave of 1940 had died down. We should note, too, that whereas the planters were represented by powerful industry lobby groups (the Rubber Growers’ Association and the United Planters’ Association of Malaya), the Indian laborers lacked any semblance of trade union organization until the strikes actually started. Although the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) included the furtherance of the interests of the laborers among its aims, it had a mainly middle-class, North Indian leadership.<sup>81</sup>

The epicenter of the strikes was in the Klang district of Selangor Province, with its chief town at Port Swettenham on the Straits of Klang

to the west of Kuala Lumpur. The stoppages began at the Demansara Estate,<sup>82</sup> on March 17, 1941 when four laborers were arrested for allegedly intimidating the others into ceasing work.<sup>83</sup> As a Colonial Office report noted, there were actually three consecutive strike waves. The first broke out early in the year and was inspired by the desire for parity in wage rates with Chinese plantation workers and by widespread resentment that despite a vast increase in profits since the Depression, wage cuts had not been restored.<sup>84</sup> The synchronicity of the strikes with similar demands was made possible by the formation of a new illegal workers' organization, the Klang District Indian Union, by two "agitators" called Y. S. Menon and R. H. Nathan (whom the British described as members of the Indian National Congress with "strong socialist sympathies").<sup>85</sup> Further support came from the Indian Communist R. K. Thangaiah and the CIAM's Mr. Raghaven. The strikes were successful in that the Indian laborers were granted a general wage increase to sixty cents a day for men and fifty cents for women, although this still fell short of the rates paid to their Chinese counterparts.<sup>86</sup>

The second wave broke on April 16 and was not directly wage-related. The Colonial Office considered the motives political and that, "[t]he underlying cause of the strikes was probably the fact that the earlier strikes had given the labourers an idea of their power and their victory had gone to their head." The workers demanded the right to wear "Gandhi hats" and fly Congress flags in their compounds, and wanted the abolition of the custom of coolies having to dismount from their bicycles if they met a planter's car on the roads.<sup>87</sup> Such "insolence" outraged the High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas, who told CIAM leaders, "the strike was a disgrace to the Indian community" and a "politically inspired . . . challenge to authority." Nevertheless, Thomas downplayed the significance of the affair by claiming that "the men will soon get tired of the new fashion" of Gandhi caps. Sounding like the Wodehouse character Bertie Wooster, he claimed, "It is the custom of India to dismount from a bicycle when meeting a superior . . . just as we take off our hat to a lady."<sup>88</sup> Arguably, the laborers were demanding to be treated with respect, and this collided with the racist stereotyping common among planters and British officials. Puzzled that "their" Tamils had become unruly, the British police blamed the whole situation on "agitators." They reasoned, "if they could get rid of them, the rest of the labour force would be perfectly contented."<sup>89</sup>

*The Third Strike Wave*

High Commissioner Sir Shenton Thomas ordered the arrest of Nathan and Thangaiah, whom he blamed for leading the Tamils astray. In the monochrome world of racial stereotypes common to men of Thomas's rank and class, it was inconceivable that "the mild Hindoo" could act without outside influence. There is evidence that he had already decided to arrest the agitators before the start of the second wave of strikes but was waiting for the most opportune moment to act and thus behead the strike movement. The laborers, however, were incensed by the arrests, which added to their growing list of unresolved grievances. After his deportation to India, Nathan listed the strikers' demands as follows:

- Pay parity between Indian and Chinese [laborers]
- Removal of "brutal" Ceylonese and Malayili staff and replacement with Tamils
- Proper education for children
- An end to the molestation of laborers' womenfolk by Europeans and "black" Europeans
- Proper medical facilities
- Closing of toddy shops
- Freedom of speech and assembly
- Free access to estates for family and friends
- Laborers to remain mounted on bicycles in front of European and Asian staff
- Abolition of 10–12-hour days
- No victimizations
- Permission to form associations to represent their interests<sup>90</sup>

These were scarcely trivial matters. A new spirit of solidarity and a deep yearning to be treated with dignity had swept through the Tamil coolie lines. The laborers' demands were a mix of classical trade unionism with nationalist aspirations and the desire for what we today would call human rights. The arrests reignited the movement and drew in wider groups who had held aloof from the first and second waves. At its height, the strikes involved over 20,000 laborers from close to one hundred estates. Young militants fanned out on bicycles to spread the message of revolt over the 1,500 square miles affected. Police inspector Bagot concluded they were "the best organised and most widely spread strikes

among Indian labourers that Malaya has yet encountered.”<sup>91</sup> The historian H. E. Wilson later argued that had there been even better organization, the disturbances could have been pan-Malayan in scope.<sup>92</sup>

High Commissioner Shenton Thomas was full of the patrician directness common among upper-class Englishman in the colonies. Sir Robert Menzies, the grand old man of Australian conservatism, considered him “compact, brisk and I should think efficient,” unlike the usual “tropical service Englishmen.”<sup>93</sup> For a man like Thomas, the place of the Tamil laborer was at his master’s gate. His attitude toward Asian people was shown in 1942 when the Japanese invaded Malaya. He is reputed to have said to the army commanders, “Well, I suppose you’ll shove the little men off.” The Tamils’ “insolence” infuriated him, particularly as the strikes were affecting vital war production. Even then, he might have temporized, as some colonial officials advised and as the Government of India demanded. He could have released Nathan, recognized the laborers’ union, and appointed a conciliation commission. Instead, he sent in the military. The commander of Australian troops stationed nearby declined to be involved in civil disturbances, so Thomas relied on Indian soldiers under the employ of British officers.<sup>94</sup> The coolies armed themselves with sticks, batons, stones, and “anything they could find,” complained Thomas. They cut down telephone wires in some instances. On May 15, 1942, a frightened assistant barricaded himself in his house on a Klang rubber estate. The military arrived and opened fire, killing three demonstrators outright and injuring another two, one of whom later died of his wounds.<sup>95</sup> When the echoes of the shots died away, five strikers lay dead and a further sixty were wounded.<sup>96</sup> The strikers gradually flooded back to work.<sup>97</sup>

The government and planters prevailed, but Thomas had overstepped the mark. It had been a moral defeat for British power. Indian nationalist opinion was outraged by the shootings, British politicians were demanding explanations, and the Government of India was considering what sanctions it could bring to bear on the administration in Malaya. At the urging of the Colonial Office, the FMS Government appointed a Commission of Inquiry into the disturbances. Thomas was furious; he claimed such a course could only lead to a recrudescence of militancy.<sup>98</sup> The initiative was, however, out of his hands and the Commission, presided over by a Malayan Supreme Court judge and a European judge from India, was critical of his handling of the crisis. The planters and officials, however, soon had more pressing concerns. The Japanese invasion came shortly after-

wards and as a Colonial Office mandarin noted, “This document is now only of historical importance but the issues raised by speakers in the debates will be heard again if we re-occupy Malaya [and] still more if Indian troops play a large part in the re-occupation.”<sup>99</sup>

### *Syndicalism and Nationalism*

In both Malaya and Indochina, the struggles of the rubber workers were to combine economic with revolutionary nationalist political demands. The Vietnam plantations remained strongholds of the underground Communist movement over thirty years later during the Second Indo-China War.<sup>100</sup> The same picture was broadly true of the relationship between the Chinese rubber workers and the MCP, which endured until the period of the “Malayan Emergency” when the Party launched guerrilla war against the British. As for the Indian laborers, they too wanted independence from Britain. A police spy noted that a secret meeting of the Sepang (Selangor) Indian Association at the Sungei Pelek plantation in 1941 resolved to:

Unite & work for independence, Give their lives for independence. . . . ALL INDIAN labourers should be instructed not to help the BRITISH in present war. They should not retreat when they are confronted with troubles. They should work in the same way as IRELAND did when she gained her independence.<sup>101</sup>

It is interesting to speculate what might have happened in Malaya had the Japanese not invaded. Class solidarity might have overcome entrenched ethnic divisions, and the plantation laborers might have united in a multi-ethnic political-industrial movement to challenge the planters and British rule. After the invasion, the plantations ceased production and many Chinese coolies fled to the jungle as guerrillas or squatter-farmers. Tragically, Indian estate laborers made up a large proportion of those whom the Japanese deported to work and die on the infamous Burma Railway. After the war, Malayan politics crystallized into the three-way communalist pattern that continues to this day.

The brief Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia had far-reaching consequences. The planters returned in the baggage train of Mountbatten's armies—or were released from Japanese prisons and concentration camps.

The coolies returned to the lines, and the masters to their bungalows. The rubber estates were brought back into production. The encroaching jungle was cut back, and the rusting machinery was oiled and restarted. Freighters again plied the seas with their cargoes of block, biscuit, and sheet rubber. Eventually, the Malayan workers were to form an enduring union: the National Union of Plantation Workers. But the world had changed. A huge synthetic rubber industry had emerged in the Allied countries to compete with the natural product. The returning colonialists were confronted by determined independence fighters, many of them former rubber workers, and within the space of a decade and a half, most of the countries of the colonial world had achieved independence.

## SIXTEEN: COOLIE REVOLTS

1. British National Archives [hereinafter BNA]. CO 717/89/12. 1932 Malay States. E.A. Dickson to the Undersecretary for Colonies, January 12, 1934.
2. BNA. CO 717/145/12. Item 51514/1. Part I, Malay States 1941 Minute from High Commissioner to British Residents, Advisers and Resident Councillors. May 17, 1941.
3. Leopold Ainsworth, *The Confessions of a Planter in Malaya: A Chronicle of Life and Adventure in the Jungle* (London: H.F. and G. Witherby, 1933), 56.
4. D.C. Lewis, *The Plantation Dream: Developing British New Guinea and Papua, 1884–1942* (Canberra: *The Journal of Pacific History*, 1996), 5.
5. Nguyen Ngoc Phach, *Life in Vietnam: Through a Looking Glass Darkly* (Melbourne: Nguyen Ngoc Phach, 2005), 26. Nguyen uses the term “cudgeons,” but this is not a recognized English word, at least not in the sense he intends. *Vê*, as Nguyen points out, is doggerel, “roughly short verse by an anonymous author, often critical of public figures and events” and “satirical but serious in intent and not devoid of artistry” (1).
6. Hank Nelson, *Taim Bilong Masta: The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1982), 21.
7. C. E. Akers, *The Rubber Industry in Brazil and the Orient* (London: Methuen, 1914), 253–254.
8. Pennington of Muncaster (hereinafter MUNC). JAC 265 D/PEN/MALAYA. Duncan to Taylor, September 20, 1912. These are the files of the Ramsden group of companies.
9. Archives Nationales du Cambodge (ANC), Phnom Penh. Résidence Supérieure au Cambodge, D35 File 2799. Box 288. The most detailed account of the Cambodian plantations is Margaret Slocomb, *Colons and Coolies: The Development of Cambodia's Rubber Plantations* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007). See also John Tully, *France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863–1953* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), Ch. 16.
10. Tran Tu Binh (as told to Ha An), *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*, ed. David G. Marr and trans. John Spragens Jr. (Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, 1985), 39.
11. Archives d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereinafter AOM), Fonds Ministériels, 7 Affeco 26 Main d'oeuvre en Indochine. Clipping entitled “Plantations Michelin,” *L'Indochine Financière et Economique*, L'Agence Financière d'Indochine, Paris, 29 septembre 1927.

12. Ibid., telegram from Governor General Varenne to the Colonial Minister, Paris, October 22, 1927.
13. Ibid., Monguillot, Hanoi to the Colonial Minister, Paris, February 11, 1928.
14. MUNC JAC 265 D/PEN/MALAYA 3/15 PRE. Sabrang Estate estimates, reports, 1913. A.W. Wilson, Sabrang Estate to General Manager W. Duncan, August 23, 1913.
15. Breman, ix.
16. That being said, I do take Peter Linebaugh's point that the English ruling class used capital punishment as a form of social control in a "thanatocracy" during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. See Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 2003).
17. Ravindra K. Jain, "South Indian Labour in Malaya, 1840–1920: Asylum, Stability and Involution," in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834–1920* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), 158.
18. Akers, 207.
19. MUNC JAC 275 D/PEN/MALAYA Selaba Rubber Estates Correspondence 1910. Harrison, Manager to Harrisons and Crosfields, London, November 17, 1910.
20. MUNC JAC 265 3/4 D/PEN/MALAYA PRE Quarterly Reports 1913–1917. J. Cruikshank to E.L Taylor, May 11, 1916.
21. AOM, Fonds Ministériels 7 Affeco/25 Main d'oeuvre en Indochine. Rapport de Mission en Cochinchine de M. l'An-sat BUI-BANG-DOAN [capitals in original] et réponse de M. le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine.
22. AOM Fonds Ministériels, 7 Affeco/25 Main d'oeuvre en Indochine. Procès-verbal de la visite de la plantation de Phu-Riêng (Michelin & Cie) 2 mars 1928 – première inspection.
23. Tran, 28–30 and 43.
24. Colin Newbury, "The Imperial Workplace: Competition and Coerced Labour Systems in New Zealand, Northern Nigeria, and Australian New Guinea," in Shula Marks and Peter Richardson (eds.), *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives* (London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1984), 225.
25. Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1962), 10–11.
26. Breman, 37.
27. See Pierre Brocheux, "Le prolétariat des plantations des hévéas au Vietnam méridional: aspects sociaux et politiques," *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 90 (January–March, 1975), 55–86.
28. Police criminal investigation department.
29. AOM. 7 Affeco/25. Main d'oeuvre en Indochine. Traduction d'un tract en Quoc Ngu polycopie trouvé de 25/11/28 dans le boîte aux letters du bureau de poste de Phyl Ly.
30. Tran, 18–19.
31. Ibid., 34–39.
32. The piastre, issued by the privately owned Banque de l'Indochine, was worth around five French francs, so the compensation amounted to 25 francs. This was worth around \$1.00 in the 1920s .
33. Tran, 39–42.
34. Ibid., 65.

35. AOM 7/Affeco/26 Main d'oeuvre en Indochine. Report on strike at Phu-Riêng Michelin plantation, by J.G. Herisson, labor inspector, Saigon, February 28, 1930.
36. Herisson.
37. Tran, 67.
38. AOM 7 Affeco/26. Telegram from Governor Krautheimer to the Governor General at Hanoi, April 10, 1930.
39. AOM. Fonds Ministériels. Indochine Nouveau Fonds. Carton 225, Dossier 1839. Incidents sur les plantations Michelin, 1930. Krautheimer to Pasquier, April 10, 1930.
40. AOM. Fonds Ministériels. Indochine Nouveau Fonds. Carton 225, Dossier 1839. Incidents sur les plantations Michelin, 1930. Telegram from Pasquier to the Colonial Minister, February 7, 1930.
41. Ibid. Letter from Michelin, Thuan Loi Plantation in Bien Hoa province to company headquarters at Clermont-Ferrand, March 31, 1930.
42. Ibid. French colonial reports entitled "Manifestation sanglante. Comment s'est produit l'incident de la huit de vendredi à samedi à Dau-Tiêng," "Note au sujet des incidents qui se sont produits les 16 et 17 décembre sur la plantation Michelin de Dau-Tiêng (Cochinchine)." Direction de la Police et le la Surêté Générale. 6 janvier 1933.
43. Nguyen, 29.
44. David G. Marr, introduction to Tran Tu Binh, *The Red Earth*, x. For a fascinating, in-depth discussion of the importance of prisons in the Vietnamese revolutionary tradition, see Peter Zinoman, *Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
45. Gamba, vii.
46. The Kuomintang was the Chinese Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-Shek. Until 1927, it was in alliance with the Chinese Communists but afterwards they were implacable enemies.
47. BNA. CO 717 56/5. 1927 Malay States 29078A. Chinese Labour in British Malaya. Letter from S.S. Govt. to LCMS Avery, Colonial Office, August 31, 1927.
48. A point not lost on the Communist Party of Great Britain. See *British Imperialism in Malaya*, Colonial Series No. 2 (London: CPGB Labour Research Department, 1926) which held that "there is no definite nationalist movement [in Malaya]. The essential struggle is between British capitalists and Chinese and Indian workers; the Malay peasant class, like the peasants of other countries, will never lead the workers in any conflict with capital" (4). Copy of pamphlet in BNA. CO 273/539/12. 1927 Straits Malay States.
49. Gamba, viii, 8, 12, 13.
50. Ibid., 9.
51. Tan Malaka and Alimin were leaders of the PKI, the Communist Party of Indonesia, which did not recognize what it saw as the artificial division of Malaya and the Indies by the colonial powers. One wonders whether Alimin was so definite, given that the PKI and other Indonesian nationalists operated in what became one of the world's most ethnically diverse states, Indonesia, whose national motto is "Unity in Diversity."
52. BNA. CO 273/564/10. Item 72074. 1930 Straits Communist Activities. Report by René Onraet, Director of Criminal Intelligence Dept., S.S. Singapore, April 1, 1930, "A Report showing the connection between Chinese and non-Chinese concerned in Communist Activities in Malaya."

53. J. Norman Parmer, *Colonial Labor Policy and Administration: A History of Labor in the Rubber Plantation Industry: Malaya, c. 1910–1941* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin for the Association for Asian Studies, 1960), 19.
54. Akers, 217.
55. Ibid.
56. MUNC. JAC 246. D/PEN/MALAYA 2/15. Letters [in] 1908 (January–June). Turner to Taylor, January 3, 1908.
57. BNA. CO 717 56/5. Cipher telegram to Mr. O'Malley, Peking, June 3, 1927.
58. BNA. CO 717 56/5. Telegram from Officer administering the Government of the S.S. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, May 17, 1927.
59. Term ironically applied during the colonial era to Chinese people. China claimed to have been a “celestial” empire.
60. Workers employed to graft new shoots or stems onto older trees.
61. M.J. Kennaway, *Some Agricultural Enterprises in Malaya, 1933–1934* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Agriculture, Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, 1934), 53.
62. BNA. CO 717/100/14. Item No. 13422. 1933 Malay States “Labour Report 1932.” C.D. Ahearne, Federated Malay States Annual Report of the Labour Department for the Year 1932 (Kuala Lumpur: FMS Govt. Printing Office, 1933).
63. BNA. CO 272/632/9. 1937 Straits. Labour Disputes in Malaya. Report by Commissioner of Police C.H. Sansom, April 13, 1937.
64. “Malaya Labour Trouble,” *Financial News* (London: April 27, 1937). Copy in BNA. CO 273/632/9. 1937 Straits.
65. BNA. CO 273/633/1. 1937. “Left Book Club, London. Prohibition of Publications.” Thomas also banned a number of publications by Lawrence and Wishart, including “Chess for the Matchplayer,” “Women Who Work,” and “Hitler and the Empire.”
66. BNA. CO 273/633/2. Straits 1937. “Seditious Literature.”
67. BNA CO 273/632/9 1937 Straits. Labour Disputes in Malaya. Federal Council Minutes.
68. Ibid. Memo dated August 5, 1937.
69. Ibid., Sansom’s report.
70. Ibid., Mr S.W. Jones, memo, Kuala Lumpur, April 1937.
71. Ibid., minute of Lord Dufferin, Colonial Office, August 12, 1937.
72. BNA. CO 273/666/15. 1941 Malay States Labour Unrest in Malaya. Evidence of Phillip Stewart Gordon, Inspector of Police, Kendang Kerbau police station. Also report by L.A. Thomas, Deputy Inspector of Police (Administration) Straits Settlements.
73. BNA CO 273/666/15 1941. Malay States Labour Unrest in Malaya. Covering minute by W.B.L. Monson, Colonial Office February 13, 1941 and telegram from High Commissioner Malay States to Colonial Office August 20, 1940.
74. BNA CO 273/662/10 1940 Straits Malay States Labour Unrest in Malaya Part I. Minutes by Mr. Gent, April 27, 1941.
75. *Manchester Guardian* (Manchester: February 14, 1940).
76. BNA CO 273/662/10. 1940 Memo by Director Special Branch Straits Settlements Police in extract from Malaya Combined Intelligence Summary September 30, 1940.
77. BNA CO 273/662/11 1940 Straits Malay States Labour Unrest in Malaya Part II. The suspicion of Japanese involvement appears to have been unfounded.

78. MUNC JAC 245 D/PEN/MALAYA 1907-1913 2/11A Penang Sugar Estates Quarterly Reports B- R. W. Duncan to Secretary, Quarterly Report Sabran Estate December 6, 1912.
79. BNA 717/72/3 1930 Malay States. "Deportation of Indians."
80. BNA CO 717/145/12 Part I. Malay States 1941. "Labour Conditions—Disturbances on Klang Rubber Estates." High Commissioner, FMS, to Lord Moyne, Colonial Office, July 14, 1941. Report and cover letter.
81. H.E. Wilson, *The Klang Strikes of 1941: Labour and Capital in Colonial Malaya*, Research Notes and Discussion Paper No. 25 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1981), 3. Wilson's account is possibly the only in-depth study of the strike wave. He notes that while the Indian community had "rather a plethora of social clubs, caste associations or societies, most of which enjoyed no more than an ephemeral existence . . . none of . . . [these] represented the interests of the estate labourers."
82. Some accounts claim the Glenmarie Estate.
83. BNA CO 717/145/12 Item 51514/1 Part I Malay States 1941 Labour Conditions – Disturbances on Klang Rubber Estates. Adrian Clark, 13 June 1941. "Chronological note of incidents connected with the Strikes in which I took any action as Legal Advisor or Public Prosecutor," June 13, 1941.
84. Wilson, 12-13.
85. *Ibid.*, 6.
86. BNA CO 717/145/12, Memo by Mr. Gent, Colonial Office, October 14, 1941.
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.* Minutes from High Commissioner to British Residents, Advisers and Resident Councillors. May 17, 1941.
89. *Ibid.*, "Report on the strikes" by E. Bagot, Inspector General of the FMS Police, June 17, 1941.
90. Reported in *The Hindu* (Madras: June 2, 1941) and cited in Wilson, 13.
91. Bagot.
92. Wilson, 5.
93. Old Parliament House, "Menzies," 1941 Diary. Entry for January 29. Available online at <http://www.oph.au/menziesonpeople.htm>. Original diary kept at the National Library of Australia.
94. BNA CO 717/145/12, Gent.
95. Thomas to Moyne, July 14.
96. BNA CO 717/147/15 1941 Malay States "Indians in Malaya: Commission of Inquiry," October 25, 1941; Sec State Colonial Office to Shenton Thomas.
97. BNA CO 717/145/12, Gent Note, September 1, 1941.
98. *Ibid.*, High Commissioner, FMS, to Sec. State Colonies August 28, 1941.
99. BNA CO 717/147/15 1941. Covering note June 13, 1942. Signature illegible. The repression, perhaps, was a factor in the willingness of Indian POWs to join Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army.
100. As is revealed by a simple Internet search, which will provide websites maintained by former U.S. military personnel who served in the *terres rouges* regions.
101. BNA CO 717/145/12. Extract from Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 9 (undated, c. 1941).