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THE GENERAL STRIKE IN ZANZIBAR, 1948

BY ANTHONY CLAYTON

IN August and early September 1948, the docks and city of Zanzibar experienced a three-week long strike. This event is of interest as it represented the first irruption on the political stage of Zanzibar of an important component of its economic structure: labourers who had arrived more or less recently from the mainland. The strike that they brought about was a challenge addressed to the British-dominated economic structure rather than to the Arabs; with hindsight, we may also see the strike as the first clear indication that Zanzibar's politics would have to accommodate a strong mainlander dimension.¹

The Zanzibar Protectorate comprised the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. In 1948, they had between them a total African population of just under 200,000 of which some 51,000, just over one quarter, considered themselves as 'mainlanders'.² Of this 51,000, 37,404 lived on Zanzibar Island, almost one-third of the African inhabitants. The Arab population numbered 44,560³ (of which 13,977 were on Zanzibar Island), the Asian population numbered 15,892 (of which 13,705 were on Zanzibar Island), and there were small numbers of Comorians, Europeans and other groups, making a total population of 264,162. The mainlanders fell into two general categories, post-1900 immigrants and ex-slaves or their descendants. No figures dividing them into these categories exist, but a survey made at the time drew a distinction between those born on the mainland and those born in the Protectorate; this is useful, though subject to the reservation that many of the children of earlier immigrants would have been recorded as Zanzibar-born mainlanders. The largest group were those who had come to Zanzibar as migrant labourers. This migration had begun in the early years of the century, initially following recruiting

¹ The strike has not hitherto attracted any academic attention. There are three sentences about the strike in V. Harlow and others (eds.), *History of East Africa*, II (Oxford, 1965), 670. Neither M. Lofchie, *Zanzibar, Background to Revolution* (Oxford, 1965) nor S. G. Ayany, *A History of Zanzibar* (Nairobi, 1970), record the event at all.

This article is a shortened version of my more detailed study entitled *The 1948 Zanzibar General Strike* (Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Research Report No. 32, 1976). An earlier version was presented to a seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, and I am grateful for comments made on that occasion.

² The analysis which follows is based on a Social Survey of Zanzibar and *Notes on the Census of Zanzibar Protectorate, 1948*. The Social Survey was conducted in 1948-9 by Professor E. Batson of Cape Town University. Its twenty-one volume manuscript report appeared in London and Cape Town in 1962, but material may have been available for official use much earlier. There is a copy in the library of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London.

³ This figure for Arabs included a number of people of mixed ancestry who at this time perceived themselves as Arabs.

but maintained later by labour which arrived voluntarily. The need for this labour was made greater, in the first three decades of the century, by the increasing preoccupation of indigenous Africans with the production of copra, which greatly reduced the number of local work-seekers on the labour market. The use of mainland labour was facilitated by the existence of a *lingua franca*, Swahili, while Zanzibar also enjoyed high prestige as a centre of Swahili cultural life.

The recruitment of labour for the Zanzibar Protectorate was described in 1924 by the Director of Agriculture:

The Headmen of the Wanyamwezi were brought to my office and it was explained to them that the work they had to do in Zanzibar was very much less than they had been accustomed to do in their own country whereas the pay they received was very much higher . . . the intention was that they should be better off here than at home because we wanted them to come here . . .⁴

The *District Administration Reports* note the following immigration figures for the Protectorate:

	Mainlanders Entering	Leaving
1923	4,334	2,478
1924	4,235	1,740
1925	3,820	3,943
1926	5,392	2,813
1927 } 1928 }	no figures published	
1929	448	1,025
1930	790	1,071
1931	2,368	965

Note: The issue of movement passes was stopped as an economy measure in 1932.

It seems reasonable to assume that this process had, from the turn of the century, on an average increased the mainland population of Zanzibar by some 1,500 to 2,000 a year, perhaps more in the earlier years. Initially, their work was limited to P.W.D. road gang work and plantation weeding, sometimes also cultivating work; this latter extended to seasonal clove-picking. The labourers generally arrived to work on contracts of one to three months; sometimes these were renewed, sometimes the labourers moved on to a new employer, or became a clove-plantation labourer or

⁴ Agriculture Department, Annual Report, 1924. See also A. G. Church, *East Africa. A New Dominion* (London, 1928), 168. Church, an M.P. and member of the Ormsby-Gore Commission of 1924, observed that the wages paid to mainland labour in Zanzibar, the rupee equivalent of Shs. 30 per month, were the highest rate in Eastern Africa. The cash element of Kenya resident labourers' wages was Shs. 12 to Shs. 14 at this time.

'squatter'. The government viewed them, in the words of reports of the time, as 'temporarily settled'. The increase tapered off at the end of the 1920s, and stopped in the 1930s. Many of these mainlanders were animist or Christian, though some from the Kenya and Tanganyika coast areas were Moslem. Exact proportions are hard to estimate, one reason being that the mainlanders sometimes professed a temporary conversion: among the men, this was evident in the wearing of cloth caps and among the women in the wearing of the *bui-bui*, the customary voluminous garment of coastal Moslem women.

The 1948 census suggests the origins of the mainlanders (both categories) as follows⁵:

ORIGIN	ZANZIBAR ISLAND	PEMBA ISLAND	TOTAL
<i>Tanganyika:</i>			
Nyamwezi	5,845	2,408	8,253
Zaramo	3,847	1,563	5,410
Makonde (incl. some from P.E.A.)	2,356	269	2,625
Dengereko	1,943	195	2,138
Maniema (incl. some from Congo)	1,899	303	2,202
Other	1,595	361	1,956
<i>Nyasaland:</i>			
Nyasa	3,372	1,866	5,238
Yao	2,759	1,100	3,859
<i>Mozambique:</i>			
Zigua	1,120	559	1,679
<i>Kenya:</i>	173	134	307
<i>Uganda:</i>	411	55	466
<i>Other mainland tribes:</i>	12,084	5,060	17,134
	37,404	13,873	51,277

The figures for 'other mainland tribes' included some of the second category of mainlanders,⁶ ex-slaves and their descendants, often reluctant to admit slave ancestry. In general, most of these had become accepted members of one of the indigenous groups, but some nevertheless continued

⁵ The 1948 Census, also quoted in J. Middleton and J. Campbell, *Zanzibar: its Society and Politics* (London, 1965), 21.

⁶ The Social Survey, I, notes one-third of the Protectorate's male mainland Africans and one-fifth of the female as born outside the Protectorate, but in Zanzibar City 47 per cent of the mainland population were immigrants.

to see themselves as mainlanders. Some had tried out their fortunes as settlers on plots in the central area; these had found integration easier. The remainder, the majority of the ex-slaves, had remained with their masters in domestic service or in various forms of tenancy arrangements on the estates on the west side of the island; a few had gone to Zanzibar City. This relationship was known as 'squatting', and covered a very wide variety of arrangements. The number of squatters had further been increased by the newer arrivals from the mainland who preferred agriculture to work in the city. Many of the ex-slave squatters were a depressed community, with little social cohesion and little energy, squatting on old estates in poor conditions. The twentieth-century immigrants had begun, and were still beginning, simply as weeders on one of the better estates, with a small plot for subsistence cultivation to supplement their meagre wages. A number returned to the mainland after eighteen months, but those who decided to remain used the asset of their superior physique to advance to improved terms—these might provide rights to grow crops for sale but no rights to grow trees, or even the right to grow fruit trees (but not cloves) as well; in this category there were also a very few ex-slave and indigenous squatters.

Overall, however, despite exceptional success stories of squatters becoming small plot-owners, there was little scope for mainlanders on the land, whether as a means of escape from the city or as a way of supporting demands for improved conditions in the city by providing a profitable alternative to employment there. And conditions in the city were becoming more difficult for a variety of reasons. In a long-term perspective, Zanzibar had been a major entrepot in the first decades of the century, but by the 1930s a decline had begun, and the war years had seen the increased use and development of Dar es Salaam and Tanga. Conditions of work could and did improve on the mainland, but they did not improve in Zanzibar. For this reason, the advantages enjoyed by mainland labour on Zanzibar Island, in relation to those of their kinsmen who remained on the mainland, began to diminish in the 1930s. As a result, there was a decline in the number of mainlanders on the island, both in absolute terms and in proportion to the indigenous population. This is shown in the following table⁷:

ZANZIBAR ISLAND			
	1924	1931	1948
Indigenous	68,384	no figure available	81,150
Mainlander	38,590	44,492	37,404

⁷ This table is based upon *Report of the Native Census, 1924*; *Notes on the Census of the Zanzibar Protectorate, 1948*; and J. E. Goldthorpe and F. B. Wilson, *Tribal Maps of East Africa and Zanzibar* (Kampala, 1960), which provide 1931 census figures. Both sets of figures represent totals collected outside the clove-picking season. In the case of the 1924

The decline in Zanzibar's overall position was reflected in the wage rates which mainlanders had been able to earn in Zanzibar City; these fell in relation to the opportunities on the mainland or in their home areas (although rising in absolute terms). In 1930 an unskilled P.W.D. labourer could earn Shs. 30 (in rupees) per month in Zanzibar but only Shs. 22 in Dar es Salaam. In 1939 the difference was still several shillings, but by January 1948 monthly-paid labour in Zanzibar was being engaged at Shs. 32/50, with the Dar es Salaam rates at Shs. 30 to Shs. 32, while daily-paid casual labour was earning slightly more in Dar es Salaam.⁸ In Zanzibar City and its suburbs the decline in the total number of adult men and women also suggests a dwindling attraction⁹:

	1924	1948
Men	18,405	14,990
Women	14,678	12,560
Children	3,307	8,656

Further, migrants tended to have to spend longer periods working in Zanzibar if their income was to outweigh the costs of the journey. These factors also served to reduce the support or subsidy which a labourer's own stake in his community's peasant economy could provide for him—the small parcels of food or cheap-rate fuel or charcoal supplied by kinsmen which one finds among mainland urban workers. Thus the mainlander tended to fall to the bottom of the social scale in Zanzibar Island. Among manual labourers, domestic servants and squatters owning no land, the mainlanders formed the largest proportion.¹⁰ In addition, mainlanders were not directly represented in the Legislative Council. It is against this overall background, in which urban unrest, when it came,

census, I have added totals collected under the headings of 'Shihiri', 'Swahili', 'Hadimu', 'Tumbatu', 'Shirazi' and 'Pemba', for the heading Indigenous; and 'Nyasa', 'Yao', 'Nyamwezi', 'Manyema', 'Zaramu', 'Kikuyu' and 'Other Africans' for the heading Mainlanders. In the case of the 1931 census, quoted by Goldthorpe and Wilson, the headings were the same, except there were no 'Shihiri'. There are certain discrepancies between the figures published at different times; these reflect their rudimentary methods of collection and analysis.

⁸ These wage rates are taken from the Zanzibar and Tanganyika Annual Colony Reports. Zanzibar's attraction lay in its local freedom from direct taxation, linked to the fact that many mainland Tanganyikan district officials (but not all) would not tax a man who had been away at work.

⁹ *Report of the Native Census, 1924*, and *Social Survey I*. The Social Survey's figures do not quite tally with those of the 1948 Census. Batson, drawing his distinction between mainlanders born on the mainland and those born in Zanzibar or Pemba, noted a masculinity ratio of 2.2 for the former category in the Protectorate as a whole.

For a contemporary comment on a similar decline in the fortunes of coast labour in Kenya see A. Clayton and D. C. Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895-1963* (London, 1975), 271-2.

¹⁰ The Social Survey's tables on 'Social Class' (IV), 'Occupations' (V), Numbers in Households (VII), 'Personal Socio-Economic Rating' (XII), 'Wage Earners' (XIII), 'International Occupational Classification' (XIV), 'Nature of Employer' (XVII) and Plantation Ownership (XV) all indicate the mainlanders' position at the bottom of the scale.

was bound to be dominated by mainlanders, that we should consider the more direct causes of the 1948 strike.

Nearly 25,000 mainlanders lived and worked in or near Zanzibar City. Within Zanzibar City itself, just under one-third of the total population of 9,850 were mainland African born outside the Protectorate.¹¹ They worked in domestic service, in the port, for the P.W.D. and the Public Health Department, and other urban activities. In general they constituted the bulk of employed labour at bare subsistence wage levels, in contrast to the informal sector of indigenous petty traders, *hoteli* owners and other minor independent and more lucrative—and less physically exhausting—activities; although there were some indigenous Africans in manual labour, the numbers were not great. Just under 15,000 lived in the 'Ngambo' (trans. 'the other side', of a former creek used for drainage), the African township of Zanzibar City (in contrast to the European, Asian, and Arab 'Stone Town'), with a further 10,000 in nearby 'commuter' settlements. They lived, for the most part, in small square or rectangular shaped mud houses, with roofs of flattened kerosene tins or thatch made from coconut palms. The few better houses had cement floors and plastered walls with a privy and cess pit; the very large majority were much rougher, doubtfully rain proof and with no sanitary arrangements. The 1948 Annual Report admitted that Ngambo contained 'some of the worst features of native slums', with 'serious congestion and lack of adequate sewerage, drainage and ventilation'.¹² Such huts could be built easily and cheaply (£50-60), and many were owned by both mainlanders and indigenous Africans. They did not, however, own the site, usually the property of an Arab or Indian to whom rent had to be paid; the average rent for one small room was Shs. 4/50 to 5 per month, a charge which led inevitably to overcrowding. Considerable sums of Colonial Development and Welfare Act money had been granted for improvements in the City's urban housing and social services, but the work had not made great progress by 1948; the majority of the inhabitants of the area had benefited only marginally, if at all.

The mainlanders had little formal organization; in 1934 an 'African Association for Immigrant Workers', later shortened to 'African Association', was formed, but it does not appear to have achieved anything noteworthy. The distribution of mainlanders, partly on the land and partly in Zanzibar City, and their many different original ethnic groups, militated against effective formal organization. There were no Zanzibar counterparts of the ethnic group associations to be found in Mombasa or Nairobi. Overall, though, despite their different origins, in some cases one or two generations distant by 1948, a common awareness that they were strangers in society was to be given expression—at least in Zanzibar City—by the strike. A few informal organizations may perhaps have played some part in preserving this awareness; it seems the ex-slave mainlanders were

¹¹ Social Survey, I.

¹² *Annual Report, Zanzibar Protectorate, 1948.*

linked together in dance groups, while the immigrants were linked ethnically by loosely organized savings clubs.¹³

In the immediate post-war years, the general arousal of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments was heightened, in Zanzibar, by Arab resentment over British policies in Egypt and in Palestine; as a reflex to the emergence of Zionism, an 'unfamiliar Arab arrogance' was discernible.¹⁴ Other forms of racial expression were bound to follow in a territory which was structured in so racial a hierarchy. For example, many Zanzibar inhabitants, including both indigenous Africans and permanently domiciled Arabs, were from different points of view beginning to feel that wealth was being steadily drawn off, either by British or by Indian commercial interests, to Arabia by the dhow trade or to the mainland through migrant labourers' wage packets escaping all taxation. The growing use of the term Shirazi—an assertion by indigenous Africans of their particularity—was an indication of this sentiment. This climate of opinion encouraged indifference to the predicament of mainlanders, and such indifference prompted the mainlander to see himself as the only true representative of African opinion.¹⁵

Several further factors contributed to this growing racial consciousness and disquiet in the early post-war years. One was the Zanzibar government's attempts—in accordance with overall British colonial policy at the time—to develop local government bodies, often presided over by Arab notables. This was often very unpopular among Africans.¹⁶ Another was the loss of prosperity occasioned by poor clove harvests in 1947, and the severe 'sudden death' disease attacking clove bushes. In Zanzibar City the cost of living, in particular foodstuffs and clothing for Africans, had continued to rise slowly but wages had remained generally at the 1945 level. Although the government operated a number of price-control regulations, the scarcity of some goods, particularly imported foodstuffs, had led to black marketeering. A further grievance was the report of a Colonial Office civil service salaries commission on salaries in all four British East African territories; this had reported in favour of racial salary scales disadvantageous to Africans. More important, however, were spectacular gains made by dock-workers' strikes in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam. In Mombasa, a spectacular strike in January 1947 had led to

¹³ T. O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* (London, 1975), 20–2, 102, provides evidence strongly suggesting ex-slave dance groups. F. Wilson, formerly Zanzibar Agriculture Department and later Professor at the University of East Africa, to the author, 12 June 1975, notes the savings clubs.

¹⁴ The Hon. A. P. T. H. Cumming-Bruce, Zanzibar Administration at the time, to the author, 20 June 1975: "Just as it did more obviously at independence, this arrogance triggered off African self-consciousness; the term 'mwafrica' was a new and unfamiliar one."

A Moslem day of shop-closure and strikes had taken place on 12 December 1947.

¹⁵ *Annual Report, Zanzibar Protectorate, 1946*.

¹⁶ D. B. Barber, Zanzibar Administration at the time, to the author, 24 May 1975. Barber commented that, as a district commissioner, he received numerous complaints.

an increase from Shs. 2/50 to Shs. 3/25 per day for stevedores and from Shs. 2 to Shs. 2/75 per day for shore labour.¹⁷ At Dar es Salaam, an equally effective strike in July had increased casual labourers' wages from Shs. 2/30 to as much as Shs. 3/80 per day. These wage rates were by the standards of the time major increases—an example that could hardly fail to be noticed in Zanzibar.¹⁸

In the first months of 1948 it would have appeared to workers in the port that Zanzibar's economic circumstances were improving. Clove exports to the Far East and copra exports to Britain both increased. The port was also busier as it was being used as an unloading station for the Tanganyika groundnuts project.¹⁹ Further, duties on the mainland had recently been increased and many consumer goods were unloaded for sale in Zanzibar but found their way quickly to the mainland.²⁰ This slight sign of apparent improvement may well have precipitated the action which followed.

At Zanzibar port, the African Wharfage Company (Zanzibar) held a total monopoly of cargo-handling. This Company was wholly owned by a parent Mombasa African Wharfage Company (owned in turn by the British India and Union Castle Steamship lines), and it was staffed by officials of Messrs. Smith Mackenzie, a large export-import trading firm. The movement of goods to or from the quayside to the merchants' godowns and warehouses was in the hands of porters: some had very short distances to move goods, others—some 800 *hamali* cart men—pulled hand carts through the streets. The *hamali* men considered themselves the élite of the work force: they were still on piece-work rates (based on the number of journeys made), earning very much more than the quayside workers. From 1945 onwards, and under the paternal tutelage of the district commissioner, they had organized themselves into a loose Association²¹ which owned some carts, and which from 1946 onwards formed the employees' side of a committee which determined rates of remuneration. The African Wharfage Company, after the Dar es Salaam award, began negotiations in its works council with representatives of its work force.²² As a result, the stevedores and quay workers entered into monthly terms

¹⁷ Clayton and Savage, *Government and Labour*, 293–5, 276–9.

¹⁸ John Iliffe, 'A History of the Dockworkers of Dar es Salaam', *Tanzania Notes and Records*, no. 71 (1970), 119–48.

¹⁹ Cumming-Bruce to the author, 20 June 1975. Cumming-Bruce and others have suggested that the huge sums of money being spent on a project believed by Africans to be doomed from the start must in itself have spurred on a demand for higher wages.

²⁰ Two 'general wisdom' comments of the time were: "Zanzibar imported in a month more than it could consume in a year" and "Zanzibar's fishing boats left the island for a night's fishing off Bagamoyo as low in the water as on their return after a heavy catch". A British business man (hereafter A.B.) to the author, 30 June 1975. A.B. was resident in Zanzibar at this time.

²¹ *The Zanzibar Labour Report, 1949*, notes the strength of the Labour Association as 380.

²² These representatives were selected informally by their fellows but were no doubt subject to Company approval. There was no trade union.

of service on six-month contracts (designed to create a professional, permanent labour force), which provided for a monthly wage (paid in half-monthly instalments) of Shs. 45, rising by annual increments of Shs. 1 to Shs. 55, one free meal per day, overtime payment of 25 cts. per hour for more than nine hours work, and other benefits.²³

One immediate cause of the strike which followed so quickly and so surprised both the government and the company was, no doubt, a suspicious reaction to this paternal, coercive approach. There were, however, other immediate waterfront causes: Zanzibar had acquired a reputation for unloading ships diverted during the Dar es Salaam strike,²⁴ and behind the events that ensued there appears to have been some measure of organization connected with the mainland and probably connected also with the Dar es Salaam strike.²⁵ The principal figure behind the Zanzibar strike appears to have been a Tanganyika Dengereko named Abbas Othman, who some three weeks prior to the strike had engaged himself as a labourer with the African Wharfage Company under the name of 'Jomo Kenyatta'²⁶; it may be conjectured that he travelled to Zanzibar to organize a strike. But the strike was characterized far more by a sudden clear demonstration of unity, albeit inarticulate in its written or verbal expressions, rather than any charismatic strike leadership. In this respect, indeed, it resembled the Copperbelt strike in 1935 or the Mombasa general strike in 1939.²⁷

After various vague rumours of a strike and also after the half-month pay day, the Company on 18 August received a demand, in the form of

²³ These other benefits included full pay during temporary disability arising out of employment and half pay for up to 50 days during other illness.

²⁴ D. McQueen, Branch Manager of Smith Mackenzie Ltd., in Zanzibar at the time, to the author, May 1975.

²⁵ In reconstructing the events of the strike, I have used the British Resident's address to the Zanzibar Legislative Council (*Proceedings of Zanzibar Legislative Council*, 6 Sept. 1948), Colonel A. Bell to the author, 19 Sept. 1975, and the *Zanzibar Annual Report, 1948*, as a basis for the sequence of events. Colonel Bell's letter enclosed extracts from a report written by him to the Inspector-General of Colonial Police Forces at the Colonial Office, 31 Jan. 1952, and extracts from his own diary.

²⁶ McQueen to the author, confirmed by Shaikh Yahya Alawi, District Commissioner Zanzibar Urban at the time, to the author, 10 July 1975; E. Stiven, interview March 1976; and Captain J. B. Robertson to the author 10 Aug. 1975. Robertson wondered whether Kenyatta had been only a 'front man'. The practice of assuming a name to attract attention or increase prestige was not an uncommon one in East Africa at the time. The Immigration Regulation and Restriction Decree in force in Zanzibar at the time required no documents from African mainland immigrants (except, technically, those from Nyasaland and Mozambique) other than a smallpox vaccination certificate and, only occasionally, a yellow fever certificate. Mainland Africans were exempt from immigration control; they could present themselves from vaccination (free) or, if time was short, borrow or buy a certificate. No control or identity card system existed therefore to check on an African under any name he wished to select entering or seeking employment in Zanzibar. W. Wright, formerly of the Zanzibar Police, to the author, 12 July 1975.

²⁷ Ian Henderson, 'Early African leadership: the Copperbelt Disturbances of 1935 and 1940,' *J. Southern African Studies*, 11 (1975), 83-97; Clayton and Savage, *Government and Labour*, 222-5.

an unsigned and somewhat unclear letter, apparently claiming a monthly wage of Shs. 60 and other improved conditions.²⁸ This claim was not unreasonable in the light of the Dar es Salaam settlement, but the manner of its submission—so soon after the July agreement, in the form of a demand not presented through the Works Council and backed by threats of a strike within two days if the demands were not met—was unacceptable to the Company, which had been willing to consider an increase but refused to do so under duress.

Two days following the ultimatum were spent in efforts to avoid a strike, government officials trying to argue for an abandonment of the strike after which negotiations might commence. These efforts failed, and on 20 August the strike began. As on the mainland, the strike was at first orderly, though pickets carried sticks and there were reports, never in fact substantiated, that some other members of the Company's staff had been intimidated. The first attempts to involve other labour, that of the Shell Company, P.W.D., and Clove Growers Association, were also made at a meeting arranged by the Wharfage Company employees, but such attempts, coming at the end of a month, with pay day approaching, lacked appeal. Nevertheless, by 22 August three ships had already sailed away without unloading, further attempts to persuade men to return to work had already failed, and both the British Resident, Sir Vincent Glenday, and the Company's chairman in Mombasa were advising concessions.

On 25 August the government, becoming more alarmed by the threats of intimidation, issued a warning, conveyed by loudspeaker, that intimidation might be used to spread the strike, and stated that it would meet threats of violence with force, if necessary; it also urged a return to work. At this juncture, matters were greatly complicated by the government's decision—in the light of the findings of a cost-of-living enquiry—to increase the wages of its own labour force—skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled—retroactively to 27 July; in respect of casual daily-paid unskilled labour, the increase was to be one from Shs. 1/30 to 1/40 per day (including cost of living allowance) to Shs. 2/80.

The situation, however, continued to deteriorate. On 26 August an Italian liner arrived at Zanzibar with a crew of 201 and some 700 passengers amongst whom together were 32 suspect typhoid cases; striking dockworkers tried to prevent urgently needed water supplies reaching the ship. The company made two unsuccessful initiatives: a previous and very popular port manager was flown over, but he found that even workers

²⁸ *The Zanzibar Voice*, 22, 29 Aug. 1947, notes the claim, warning that the Wharfage Company's monopoly position could, and perhaps had, led to its identification with the government. The Wharfage Company's labour force did not contain a preponderance of any mainland ethnic group; Robertson, however, believed that the fact that it represented so great a mixture made it the more militant.

he had known and respected for a long time were unwilling to talk to him²⁹; and on 28 August the strikers were made a new offer based on the government's casual labour rates with a promise of further discussions. An indication of the increasingly tense atmosphere occurred on the evening of 28 August. When the alarm siren at the Ziwani police barracks sounded for a routine practice, a large crowd, many of whom were armed with sticks, poured out of Ngambo and parts of Stone Town, rushing towards the dock gates and shouting a rumour of clashes with the police. The payment of the August wage packet to monthly paid labour in the city also heightened the likelihood of the strike spreading.

All these events together, however, led the Resident to decide that the strike could no longer be left alone for time to heal. The economy of the territory and the movement of goods to Pemba and other parts of the Protectorate were severely affected, and in some areas food shortages became acute. Under the Peace Preservation Decree, the Resident issued a proclamation on 31 August applying the provisions of the decree to the African areas of Zanzibar City; in particular, these provisions directed that all weapons, defined in wide terms to include clubs and bludgeons as well as all firearms and swords, should be delivered to the Central Police Station—a measure which posed difficulties of interpretation as many East African coastal peoples often carried light walking sticks. He followed this by issuing rules on 1 September which forbade all meetings without permission from the Chief of Police.³⁰

Glenday also decided that fresh labour must be found to handle ships and supplies of foodstuffs. In the small town of Mkokotoni the *mudir* (a junior administrative official) was directed to recruit Tumbatu men, who were to be brought to the Customs Gate in lorries just before 7 a.m. on the morning of 2 September.³¹ The labour so recruited absconded, for fear of what their reception might be, but the administration and police in the City were not informed of this desertion, and a substantial force of police was sent to the Customs Gate to escort them in. These were greeted by a hostile crowd of strikers, early risers having noticed the arrival of the police guards. The buses were attacked with sticks and stones. The police secured their entry to the dock through the Customs Gate and arrested two men for carrying sticks in contravention of the proclamation. The word spread around like lightning, and the crowd outside the Customs Gate rapidly increased to about 1,500; the police were quite unable to disarm them although reinforcements were sent. At the same time throughout the city the large majority of Africans working for government or for other employers joined the strike, either in sympathy or under threats of

²⁹ A. B. to the author, 30 June 1975.

³⁰ The Zanzibar *Official Gazette*, 31 Aug., 1 Sept. 1948.

³¹ Bell to the author, 19 and 27 Sept. 1975, and Seyyid Saud Busaidi, town *mudir* at the time, to the author, July 1975.

violence to themselves or their families.³² In particular, Africans working for white employers, in government, commerce or domestic service, were expected to strike, and, with indigenous as well as mainland strikers, the strike became an all-African urban protest.

While the strike was spreading through the town, the situation at the Customs Gate worsened, the crowd becoming even larger and more abusive. The district commissioner, Barwani, and the town *mudir*, Seyyid Saud Busaidi, were asked to go to the Customs Gate and tell the crowd to disperse after appointing spokesmen to discuss grievances with the government. This they did, but after thirty minutes of parley gave up in face of the militancy of the crowd. The Town Magistrate, Stiven, was then summoned to read the Riot Proclamation ordering the strikers to disperse, which again had no effect; the crowd, armed with bludgeons, crowbars and matchets, threw stones and demanded the release of the men arrested. Stiven did, however, manage to ascertain that the crowd would not resort to violence if the two arrested men were released, which message he reported to Bell, the Commissioner of Police, adding that the police officer at the Gate wished to open fire. He told Bell that he thought that this would be totally unjustified and that he would reiterate this at any subsequent enquiry. Bell decided that the arrest of the two men had been unjustified as the sticks they were carrying had been light ones, but that their arrest had created a situation even more tense than that which might have arisen if the Tumbatu labour had arrived. While he was so engaged the mood of the crowd—now nearly 5,000—became so ugly that the police at the Gate decided that they were in danger of being rushed and fired a tear-gas bomb. This proved almost totally ineffective as some ex-servicemen members of the crowd immediately covered the bomb with sand, which in turn further encouraged the crowd to attack.³³

Bell decided that there was only one course of action open to him which would avoid bloodshed: to return the two men. He accordingly recommended this action to the Chief Secretary and the Resident. Glenday at first disapproved, but then gave way. Bell then took the men back to the crowd and, amid cheers, released them. The crisis passed. The crowd broke up into smaller groups and paraded through the streets of the town calling for all Africans to cease work. Traders kept their stores closed and shuttered.

The government was now thoroughly alarmed, and accepted the Tanganyika government's offer of police reinforcements. An emergency

³² Ph. Pullincino, a senior colonial officer in the secretariat, wrote to the author (10 June 1975): "Soon office messengers were called on by the strikers to stop work, and the stoppage rapidly spread to domestic servants . . . Later a gang or gangs of men went from house to house to ensure that *all* servants were out . . ." The compact area of Ngambo made the rapid passing of the strike call and the summoning of a crowd very easy, a point made in the *Tanganyika Standard*, 18 Sept. 1948.

³³ Busaidi to the author, July 1975.

meeting of the Legislative Council was called for 6 September, the Sultan issued a personal message appealing for a return to work and law and order, and the Senior Commissioner and the Information Officer toured the area using loudspeakers fitted on to a vehicle, trying to induce workers to be less militant. A 'Labour Conciliation Committee' was appointed under the chairmanship of the Chief Justice,³⁴ and representations were made to it in the course of the next few days from people who appeared on behalf of the town's working population. Two trade unions gave evidence—the *hamalis*' Association and the European Servants Union. Welfare officers urged men on strike to go and see the committee. The 1948 Labour Report commented that the Conciliation Committee noted that the contentions of the workers' spokesmen were made 'mostly in a reasonable and conciliatory way' and the union representatives spoke well and clearly.

The strikers in their turn began attempts to divert food supplies from the city, and on 3 September a rowdy demonstration against the police took place outside their Ziwani barracks. This was dispersed without difficulty after police reinforcements arrived, but the effect of this militancy together with a report that a further attempt on Ziwani, to raid the police armoury, was being planned, decided the Resident to call for military aid. On 4 September some fifty soldiers from the 6th King's African Rifles arrived from Dar es Salaam. They were billeted in a city school whose teachers were on strike. On 6 September the Legislative Council met. Glenday used his powers as President of the Council to introduce an Emergency Powers Decree, the Bill for which was given three readings and passed in forty minutes.

The Decree, the proclamation of a State of Emergency, and Emergency Regulations, all gave the government very wide powers over requisition, food, movement, labour, essential services, improper interference and control of weapons. Armed with these powers and backed by its small security force of police reinforcements and soldiers, the government then posted notices saying that intimidation would end and men could feel free to return to work. The uniforms in the streets were evidence of the return of superior strength to the government, which felt strong enough to arrest nine men for intimidation: a measure which produced no African reaction. The Resident also appointed a Price Control Committee on 7 September, on which various government and other interests were represented, to see if prices of commodities already controlled, especially food and clothing, could be reduced, to see if further goods needed to be covered, and to consider enforcement measures.

Despite all these efforts, few Africans returned to work, and the strike continued until 10 September. Persuasion—militant and peaceful—of work-people, either to remain in or join in the strike, continued. One

³⁴ This committee became in practice a temporary Minimum Wage Board, operating by recommendations and not producing a formal report.

victim was Glenday himself: he was playing a round of golf on 6 September with a senior Secretariat official and two other Europeans when they all lost the services of their caddies.³⁵ More serious was the deteriorating situation in Zanzibar City, with food shortages and garbage remaining uncollected.³⁶ In efforts to protect their own interests, various organizations, such as the Arab Association and the Indian National Congress, tried in vain to mediate.³⁷

At a formal level the Conciliation Committee continued its hearings, though it was not to complete its work until after the strike was over. At a more direct level, secret negotiations were taking place in which Herbert Barnabas,³⁸ a Christian Tanganyikan mainlander who was a sanitary inspector in the Public Health Department, acted as the link man. He was also a member of Glenday's price control committee. Barnabas was in touch with the strike leaders through the Health Department sweepers, who were on strike, and also with Pakenham, the British Senior Commissioner. Busaidi was used, at some risk to himself, by Pakenham to carry messages by night to Barnabas's house as the strike leaders were either unwilling to see Pakenham in his office or afraid to be seen doing so.³⁹ At the Wharfage Company the detail of events is equally obscure, but their employees had had no pay since mid-August and many were short of money. Their men returned to work on 11 September, following an offer made to them by the company of new terms—a reversion to casual labour terms with a rate of 25 cts. per hour for a nine hour day (i.e. some 2/25 per day, or Shs. 56 for a 25-day month), one free meal per day, and overtime at a rate of 30 cts. per hour.⁴⁰ These new terms were offered to representatives of the company's work force in writing on Friday 10 September, but the company's manager believed they returned for quite a different reason—that 'Jomo Kenyatta' had called a meeting of strikers and read to them a letter purporting to come from the company, promising the original increase if they reported for work on the Saturday morning. 'Jomo Kenyatta' did not remain in the company's service; early on the morning of the Wharfage Company employees' return to work he was seen on the deck of a launch bound for Dar es Salaam. This version of events adds that he had collected a 'strike fund', allegedly to assist workers

³⁵ J. J. Adie, the secretariat official, to the author, 28 Mar., and Bell to the author, 19 Sept. 1975.

³⁶ Busaidi to the author, July 1975.

³⁷ *The Zanzibar Voice*, 5 Sept. 1948.

³⁸ Barnabas was not a militant figure; he was a quiet and deeply religious man of peace-loving temperament. He remained in Zanzibar until after the revolution, which he soon found discouraging, and retired to the Mainland where he died in 1965. Bishop Neil Russell to the author, 1 Aug. 1975; Mrs V. Davies to the author, 14 Sept. 1975. Lofchie, op. cit. 165, notes that Barnabas was President of the African Association in the early 1950s.

³⁹ Busaidi to the author, July 1975.

⁴⁰ *Zanzibar Labour Report, 1948*, Robertson to the author, 10 Aug. 1975, believes the strikers' major error was not to have arranged that the strike was simultaneous in port and city.

while on strike, and had departed with it. The company telephoned Dar es Salaam, where, again according to this narrative, he was arrested.⁴¹ The other city workers who had been drifting back to work in increasing numbers as the week progressed and intimidation was no longer to be feared, were also all back at work by 13 September.

A few special features of the strike scene merit attention. Several details throw light on its organization and also suggest that the issue was not simply one of wages. A British businessman found a middle-aged Swahili on the beach laboriously writing down the names of the ships passing through the Zanzibar Channel. The Swahili asked the business man which ships were in transit and which were continuing because the strike made it pointless for them to anchor.⁴² He said that he had been told to keep this record but would not say by whom nor for what particular purpose. An attempt was made to spread the strike to Pemba, where a delegation of strikers arrived and was ordered off the island by the district commissioner.⁴³ There was also a certain selectivity in the calling out of domestic servants employed in houses. Almost all Europeans, including the Resident, lost their servants. The Sultan's staff were specifically not called out, nor did the servants of a few leading Arab families participate in the strike; these latter, however, may have faced counter-threats from their Arab employers. European employers of domestic servants met at the English Club and decided that there could be no domestic wage increases until all had returned to work; this may have played some part in the ending of the strike.⁴⁴ Another noteworthy event which occurred at the same time as the strike, caused in this case exclusively through rising prices, was a mass meeting of African women, both indigenous and mainlander and several thousand strong, which decided not to purchase imported *khngas* (cloths which formed dresses) for three months, as a protest against the prices charged in Asian stores. The protest seems to have been effective, at least at the outset; it was reinforced by pickets, and at least one case was noted of a woman who purchased a *khanga* being persuaded to hand it back.⁴⁵

A particularly significant feature of the whole strike was the way in which it was reported by the press. The *Tanganyika Standard*, the most important local paper and part of the East African Standard group of

⁴¹ McQueen to the author, May 1975. Robertson to the author, 10 Aug. 1975, states that at the time he also heard of Kenyatta's departure and subsequent arrest. He judged that the fund could not have amounted to more than a few hundred shillings and that the labour force bore him no ill-will.

⁴² A. B., the businessman concerned, to the author, 30 June 1975.

⁴³ K. G. S. Smith, Zanzibar Administration at the time, to the author, 27 Apr. 1975.

⁴⁴ *The Zanzibar Voice*, 5 Sept. 1948, notes the Arab domestic scene. Bell to the author, 19 Sept. 1975, notes the Europeans' reaction. Robertson to the author, 10 Aug. 1975, remarked that the strike was 'more political and anti-white than a true labour movement'.

⁴⁵ *The Tanganyika Standard*, 25 Sept. 1948. The report noted that the meeting took place and the boycott began while the strike was in progress.

newspapers, deliberately played down the strike. Despite the disruption and gravity, the strike never appeared on a major news page and no reference to the strike being primarily one of mainlanders appeared at any time; again neither Abbas Othman's nor anyone else's name was mentioned nor was there any reference to Othman's subsequent fate. All this served to obstruct any appreciation of the issues.⁴⁶

With the return of the labour force to work, various improvements in the City's working conditions were made. With effect from 1 December the Wharfage Company increased labourers' rates to Shs. 1 in respect of the first two hours of work and 25 cts. per hour for the remainder of a nine hour day, giving a total earning for a normal full day of Shs. 2/75. Through the mediation of the Labour Conciliation Committee, wage increases and other improvements in terms of service were achieved by negotiations between employer and worker representatives in the packing of produce for export, the bakery trade, all processes in soap and oil factories, and coconut husking and breaking. In December a special Advisory Board was set up to fix minimum wages for *hamali* carters; new rates, based on the weights of loads carried and the distances involved, were fixed in May 1949. The State of Emergency was ended on 23 September. The Price Control Committee made a number of adjustments and new orders on maximum prices, and a price inspector was employed for seven months to enforce the orders. Government employees in skilled and semi-skilled categories were given a pay increase in May 1949; and in August arrangements to provide notice or a cash grant when discharging daily-paid labour in government departments, thus offering slightly greater security, were made. In 1949 a Port Labour Advisory Committee, under the chairmanship of the Senior Commissioner, was appointed to advise the government on labour conditions in the port; by this means the government's former *laissez faire* attitude to port employment was ended and some degree of supervision of the Wharfage Company established.

In this event we may first see a general strike caused by industrial grievances; at this level the strike was a continuation, using much the same methods, of those of Mombasa and Dar es Salaam in 1947. It created a situation very near to a flashpoint, which was handled by officials on the scene who had thoughts of subsequent inquiries and parliamentary criticism very much to the fore in their minds, and led them to prudent concession rather than repression.⁴⁷ But Zanzibar's strike was more than

⁴⁶ The playing down was quite deliberate: A. B. to the author, 14 July 1975. A. B. was connected with the East African Standard group. The postponement of a much publicized ceremonial visit of the Royal Navy's Indian Ocean flagship, H.M.S. *Birmingham*, was presented as a news item unrelated to the strike. Even the report of the Italian liner drama played down the strikers' intervention.

⁴⁷ The strike attracted very little attention in Britain. It was briefly mentioned in *The Times* and attracted two somewhat perfunctory parliamentary questions from J. Rankin and J. F. Platts-Mills, two left-wing Labour M.P.s. (*Parliamentary Debates, Commons*, 22,

a local industrial flare-up. One special feature was the very high proportion of the City's work force from ethnic groups of the mainland and outside the Protectorate; it was their action in 1948 that for the first time created a unity—however transitory—of all Africans.

When the strike spread from the docks to all Africans, particularly those in government service or British commercial or private employment in the city, it became more political than industrial. The politics were those of mainland protest, African and anti-foreign—anti-British as much as anti-Arab. The colonial government understood the significance of the industrial discontent, but saw the demonstration and the role of the mainlanders in creating an African solidarity as only an 'unfortunate feature' in an industrial fracas of no deep-rooted structural significance.⁴⁸ Some measure of reform followed, more attention being paid to labour matters. But, imprisoned in its Indirect Rule policy and for other reasons especially sensitive to Arab nationalism, the colonial government could not adequately accommodate any 'African dimension' in any wider political restructuring. When, in the next decade, the peasants of Zanzibar Island, its indigenous Africans, also came to perceive their destiny as Africans, the alliance for change was re-formed and a revolution of labour and peasantry became inevitable.

SUMMARY

This article examines a three-week long strike in Zanzibar City in August and September 1948. The strike began among labourers from the mainland at work in Zanzibar port, but spread to all African work-people in the City after an unsuccessful attempt to break the strike by the government. This attempt had led to a major demonstration and confrontation at the entrance to the port, violence being only narrowly averted.

While at one level the strike was a Zanzibar sequel to the strikes of the previous year in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, in Zanzibar there was additional significance in the fact that the City and Island's work-force were in very large proportion men from the East African mainland. Zanzibar's dependence on mainland labour had begun in the early decades of the twentieth century. In those years mainland labour had been particularly well-paid, by the standards of the time. By the late 1940s however, mainland labour in Zanzibar was as poor as, perhaps poorer than, its mainland counterparts. Besides, the political structure of the Protectorate aggravated sentiments of alienation since mainlanders were not regarded as permanent residents for whom the government should have any particular concern: nor were mainlanders represented in the legislature.

24 Sept. 1948) neither of which resulted in any awakened British interest in Zanzibar since there did not seem to be any particular causes for concern, such as shooting or death.

⁴⁸ *The Zanzibar Labour Report, 1948*, belatedly admitted: "A particularly unfortunate feature of the strike was the clearly evinced inspiration by agitators not normally resident in the Protectorate . . . it was apparent that a number of African workers came out on strike for no better reason than a mistaken sense of loyalty to their own race . . .".

Even after the strike was over the colonial authorities saw only a need for labour reforms rather than political re-structuring to accommodate mainlanders. The strike however had briefly united all Africans, indigenous and mainlander. When, a decade later, this unity of Africans, mainlander and indigenous, town and plantation labourer and peasant, was re-formed, revolution followed. As a portent, therefore, Zanzibar's strike is of particular significance.