

## The Enugu Colliery Workers in Colonial Southeastern Nigeria: 'Labor Aristocrats' or Genuine Wage Earners?

Austine Uchechukwu Igwe, and Festus Chibuikwe Onuegbu

Department of History & International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, P.M.B. 5025, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

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### Abstract

*This paper which contributes to the literature on labor union movement in Nigeria under colonial rule examines the reactions of some pan- African scholars in the twentieth Century to the 'labor aristocracy' thesis, first developed by Fredrick Engels during the second half of the nineteenth century. The 'labor aristocracy' thesis argues that some times, certain privileged members of the working-class behave in ways that subvert the interest of the working class as a whole. This thesis came into prominence among pan- African writers as from the 1960s, and led to a lively academic debate. While Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul were totally in support of the thesis, others such as Peter Waterman and Andrian Peace adopted 'a middle of the road' approach in their conclusions. Against this backdrop, adopting diverse sources of data, this essay examines series of working-class consciousness and actions at the coal-mining industry in Enugu, Southeastern Nigeria during the colonial period, and argues that the working-class were totally committed in their struggles that produced positive results. The paper concludes by describing the 'labor aristocracy' debate as a myth in most parts of colonial Africa, particularly Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Labor Aristocrats, Working-class, Enugu colliery, Colonial, Southeastern Nigeria, Strike

### 1. Introduction

One observed major characteristic of colonial governments in Africa was the exploitation of noticeable resources that facilitated colonial rule. In Nigeria, the colonial government's quest for a cheap source of energy led to the discovery of coal in commercial quantity in Udi, near Enugu, Southeastern Nigeria in 1909. The opening of the first coal industry in West Africa in November 1915 led to the creation of proletariats in Enugu and its surroundings.

Management/labor relation is often a vexed issue in any enterprise that utilizes wage labor in its production process. The coal industry in southeastern Nigeria was no exception; as disagreements between management and labor over wage matters were noticed as from the first decade of its operation.<sup>1</sup> The trade disputes became well pronounced as from 1944, when a trade union was formed at the industry. On several occasions, in the course of these disputes, labor exerted collective pressure on management that led to positive results. This is contrary to the "labor aristocracy" thesis as asserted by its proponents.

The idea of "labor aristocracy" originated from Fredrick Engels, in a series of letters he wrote to Karl Marx between the 1850s and 1880s. In these letters, Engels remarked that British capitalist dominance of the

world economy, and its industrial and financial 'monopoly' allowed key employers to provide a minority of workers with relatively higher wages and employment security. Engels further observed that the resulting relative privilege, especially when compared with the mass of poorly paid workers in unstable jobs, led to the material basis of growing conservatism of the British labor movement during the period.<sup>2</sup>

The labor aristocracy thesis was further boosted in the first two decades of the twentieth century through the writings of V.I. Lenin. Lenin had condemned the rather lukewarm attitudes of socialist parties in Europe that gave tacit support to their capitalist governments during the First World War. He was disappointed that European socialist parties were unable to oppose the war drives of their capitalist governments with collective strikes and social disruptions. Lenin concluded that this was because the petty bourgeoisie and the aristocracy and bureaucracy of the working class allowed itself to be infiltrated by capitalist manipulations<sup>3</sup>.

A summary of the thesis is that, well paid workers have generally been more reformist and conservative; while poorly paid workers are more revolutionary or radicals. It argues that sometimes in the course of working class struggles, certain privileged members behave in ways that subvert and undermine the interest

of the working class as a whole; thereby jeopardizing the achievement of positive results collectively. Furthermore, the thesis concludes that the inability of workers to exert positive pressure on their employers through enforcing viable working-class actions is often as a result of the existence of 'labor aristocrats'.

In Africa, there emerged divergent views on the above thesis, especially between the 1960s and the 1980s. G. Arrighi and J.S. Saul have strongly argued that there existed aristocrats among urban workers in tropical Africa, whose social conditions set them apart from other workers and virtually placed them in the same position as their bourgeois oppressors<sup>4</sup>. J.S. Saul further reiterated this, arguing that the proletarianization of Africans in the first place led to the emergence of 'labor aristocrats' among the African labor force.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, P. Waterman refuses to accept the argument in its totality. He describes the debates as a political and intellectual argument against the rise of working class consciousness and industrial sectionalism with particular emphasis on the white dominated apartheid economy of South Africa<sup>6</sup>. In like manner, A. Peace opines that the Lagos urban wage earners, both unskilled and semi-skilled were committed in their working class actions, and showed no signs of 'aristocrats' in their midst.<sup>7</sup> However, J.L. Parpart holds a different view. In her study of the Copper-belt Mines in Zambia, she accepted the existence of 'labor aristocrats', but stresses that at times of workers' agitations for their rights, both unskilled, semi skilled, skilled and even casual workers combined and fought for a better deal for themselves and the entire black labor force.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, during the twentieth century, Nigerian economic and social historians could not lay much emphasis on working class consciousness and the 'labour aristocracy' issue as their colleagues in Southern Africa. Few works that exist on the subject emphasized only working class consciousness without evaluating the question of existence of 'labor aristocrats'. Among these works are B. Freund's book on *Capital and Labor in the Nigerian Tin Mines*;<sup>9</sup> G. Gonyok<sup>10</sup>, and A. Olukoku;<sup>11</sup> whose journal articles covered the central and western parts of the country respectively.

With reference to southeastern Nigeria, there exists a gap in literature in the aspect of evaluating the existence of 'labor aristocrats'. Although, studies carried out by A. Akpala<sup>12</sup> and W. Ananaba<sup>13</sup> highlighted series of workers' struggles at the coal industry in Enugu; but none of the studies evaluated the issue of 'labor aristocracy' in their various analysis, thereby leaving a lacuna, which this paper hopes to fill. Against this backdrop, this paper highlights and evaluates series of working class struggles at the coal industry in southeastern Nigeria during the colonial period. Thus, for purpose of analysis, the essay is divided into two sections and a conclusion. These are: (i) origin of the coal-mining industry and emergence of the working class; (ii) rise of union, working class

consciousness and the shooting incident of 1949; and a conclusion.

### **Origin of the Coal-mining Industry and the Emergence of the Working- Class**

Coal (the pioneer of Nigeria's energy industry) was the most important source of energy in Nigeria up till the late 1950s. Its discovery in Udi, near Enugu, southeastern Nigeria in 1909 may be described as a vital economic feat of the British colonial administration in West Africa, which had sought cheap sources of energy in its territories, instead of importing these from Britain. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 led to increase in local coal consumption in British West African territories; and thus necessitated a coal industry to supply the needed energy for the colonial administration's war efforts. The anticipated coal industry was also to facilitate export of agricultural and other raw-materials to Britain.

Consequently, a bold step to actualize a coal industry was taken in January 1915, when Mr. W.J. Leck arrived in Nigeria from London to supervise construction works at the site of the coal industry at Udi, near Enugu. Major land for the development of the colliery and what later became Enugu township was acquired in two stages from chiefs of some communities in Udi Division (Chief Onyeama of Eke, Chief Chukwuani of Ozalla, and certain Chiefs from Ngwo) between 1915 and 1917.<sup>14</sup> Production commenced at the first mine, Udi, in November 1915. A second mine was opened at Iva Valley in 1917; while a third mine, Ogbete, was opened in 1918. The first mine Udi, was worked out and closed down in March 1936; while Iva and Ogbete Mines formed the nucleus of production till the end of colonial rule in Nigeria.<sup>15</sup>

With the opening of the collieries, young persons from different parts of Igbo land and beyond sought employment at the mines; and this led to the emergence of the working class at the industry. It has been argued that generally, the emergence of the working class globally was as a result of industrial development and the further integration of the global market that created large working classes, which entered into class struggles. Furthermore, it was stressed that workers are not only collective producers with a common interest in taking collective control over social production; they are also individual sellers of labor power in conflict with each other over jobs and promotion, etc.<sup>16</sup>

However, despite the above emphasis, the sellers of labor power neither own, nor have access to the means of production. On the other hand, the buyers of labour power own the means of production and can therefore discriminate between sellers, thereby exercising stiff control over them, leading to a further element of subordination. Consequently, all sellers of labor power belong to the same economic class; and as such constitute the 'working class'; because no matter their status, they all share similar economic motive<sup>17</sup>.

It should be stressed that unlike the tin mines in Jos Plateau, North central Nigeria, where the indigenous people had knowledge of tin production before British advent<sup>18</sup>, coal production was developed by the colonial government, and as such was a government firm from the outset. Consequently, with respect to the emergence of wage labor at the coal industry, unlike practice in the developed world where individuals sought jobs voluntarily; initial labor at the coal industry during the first few months was a mixture of voluntary wage earners from Onitsha Division and prisoners drawn from the Udi prisons who worked free for the government<sup>19</sup>.

Despite the above, by the 1920s, and the 1930s, more workers sought employment at the collieries; and by the 1940s, the working class had fully developed as a viable economic class at the coal industry. Generally, wage labor at the industry can be classified into two major groups: the surface and underground workers. Whereas the surface workers were the clerical cadre and other category of workers; the underground workers were those who excavated coal from beneath. Their work was tedious, and as such, the not so strong persons sought job as surface workers.

### **Rise of Union, Working Class Consciousness, and the shooting incident of 1949.**

Colonial intrusion and its socio-economic forces influenced the formation of trade unions in Nigeria. The first observed trade union was the southern Nigeria Civil Service Union (later renamed Nigeria Civil Service Union after the unification of 1914), formed in 1912<sup>20</sup>. However, it has been argued that trade unionism commenced effectively in Nigeria as from the early 1930s, due to a number of accumulated grievances such as low wages, racial discriminations against Nigerian workers, and the attitudes of colonial administration to the welfare of Nigerian workers<sup>21</sup>. Thus, during the decade of the thirties, the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) was formed in 1931, while the Railway Workers Union (RWU), which later played a major role in the 1945 National strike, was also formed in 1931.<sup>22</sup>

The late commencement of effective trade unionism in Nigeria has been blamed on the British Colonial office which had no clearly conceived labor policy for the colonies until the 1930s. I. Davies argues that the British had a conservative trade union policy. Accordingly, he observes, "in its structure of trade unions, the British in theory advocated and in practice encouraged 'grass root' unions."<sup>23</sup> No doubt, as will be seen in the course of analysis, this stance delayed the formation of a virile trade union at the coal industry in southeastern Nigeria. The first step to form a trade union at the Enugu collieries was initiated in 1937 by the colliery management, which had asked workers to organize unions on clan basis and this was to form a Workers' Council. Management's explanation was that the council was to play advisory

role; but in reality, the Representative Council was used as a ploy to curtail the emergence of a virile trade union and to create 'labor aristocrats' among the work force<sup>24</sup>.

However, the life span of the Representative Council was cut short in 1938 when it was suspended as a result of the passing into law of the Trade Union Act by the colonial government. The Act specified that as few as five persons could combine to form and register a trade union<sup>25</sup>. Consequently, two unions that were solely initiated by workers emerged at the collieries in 1940. These were the Enugu Colliery Workers' Union and the Enugu Colliery Surface Improvement Union formed by underground and surface workers respectively. The two unions pursued separate agenda; but in the 1942/1943 cost of Living Allowances (Cola) negotiations, the underground workers' union had a better bargain. This made many surface workers to enroll en-mass into the underground union.

The first unified union to emerge at the coal industry was the Colliery Workers Union (CWU), formed in April 1944 as a result of the merger of the two earlier unions. The first Secretary General of the amalgamated union was Mr. Okwudili Ojiyi<sup>26</sup>; a literate employee who had benefited from the colliery training scheme initiated in 1938; aimed to assist Nigerians to acquire the necessary mining techniques. At inception, the principal objective of the CWU was to sustain workers' solidarity and destroy the management and government's policy of 'divide and rule'. Put in a wider perspective, the foremost aim of the CWU was to fight a legacy of 'labor distrust that had taken root in the industry over the years'.<sup>27</sup>

As observed earlier, all employees in the coal industry belonged to the working-class at the mines. It has been argued that at certain stage in the working-class/management relationship in the production process the working-class develops some form of class consciousness. R. Sandbrook and R. Cohen<sup>28</sup> have outlined three levels of class consciousness. Of this three, two are attainable: the simple acceptance by a group of workers of their identity based on similar roles in the production process; and a recognition that workers have common interest as a class, which need to be protected through collective action against opposing claims of other classes. However, the third level of working-class consciousness, which is the eventual replacement of the capitalist system, has been difficult to attain. In the coal industry, the first two levels were attained through collective action of workers on several occasions.

From the inception of the mines in 1915, the working-class showed series of consciousness especially with regards to their remunerations. The take-off wage in 1915 was 9 pence for underground workers. This was reduced to 6 pence in the first few months of 1918 due to the purported over-supply of labor.<sup>29</sup> However, between 1915 and 1937; there were series of work stoppages that numbered more than eight. These were caused by either reduction in wages or non-payment of certain allowances.<sup>30</sup>

The first noticed major working-class consciousness was the 1925 strike action that was organized by the non-Agbaja (non-indigenes) hewers who protested the reduction in their wages from 6 pence per tub to 4 pence. Their action led to stoppage of work for many days and eventually made management to sack the protesting workers and replaced them with the Agbaja (indigenes); who lacked experience in underground operations. This incident marked the beginning of management's effort to create 'divide and rule' among the workers. Although, few strike actions by the workers (such as the 1937 strike when wages that were reduced due to the economic depression of the early 1930s were restored) were successful, but most failed as a result of the non-existence of collective bargaining. It has been observed that any form of organization of workers generally emerge from their efforts to seek an improvement of existing conditions through collective bargaining<sup>31</sup>. This was lacking at the coal industry until the 1940s due to distrust among workers.

Contrary to the view held by E.J. Berg that African Trade Unions had little power because wage employment affected only a small proportion of the total labor force<sup>32</sup>; the CWU was committed totally in its demands for improvement of workers welfare during its years of existence, 1944-1949. The first real test for the young CWU was its demand in 1944 for management to improve the wages and working conditions of its members, necessitated by the high cost of living caused by the Second World War. Management's refusal to negotiate led to a protracted strike that lasted till 1945.

The strike action angered management and led to the banning of the CWU and dismissal of some underground workers in April 1945. Management also took a drastic step by re-introducing the Representative Council on clan basis. During the 1945 National Strike that commenced on 21 June, and lasted for thirty-seven days, which involved about 30, 000 workers from seventeen unions<sup>33</sup>, although there was no coordinated participation of the CWU, but work was near standstill at the coal mines because the Railway (cooperating partner of the Colliery was on strike).

Although the strike of 1944 to 1945 did not yield the desired result, the CWU declared another strike on 4 November 1947. This was as a result of management's delay in paying the new increase in wages introduced by the central government. On that day, the CWU leadership mobilized workers in all segments of the mines and taught them the '*welunwayo*' (go slow) method of work. This marked the genesis of 'go slow' as a mass action. It was a passive resistance whereby workers in all sections of the mines worked slowly with little output. In its face value, the 'go slow' was not a legal strike because there was no work stoppage.

In a Press Release, the banned CWU executive argued that workers worked slowly because they were hungry. Against this backdrop, recognition was restored to the

CWU, while its leaders entered into negotiation with management. An agreement that was reached in December 1947 approved payment of the harmonized wages and some arrears. This was a resounding victory for the CWU, because the increment was backdated to January 1946; while all the arrears were paid in March 1948. However, due to the seemingly success of its first 'go-slow' strike, the CWU declared a second 'go slow' action on 8 November 1948 over claims of the under-payment of certain category of workers in the previous payments in March 1948. Its demands were granted; and it became yet another victory for the CWU.

At this juncture, it should be stressed that the CWU's undaunted stance on the improvement of working condition could be premised on "self protection", as collective bargaining enabled the workers protect their interests in relation to their employment. Supporting this view, Allan Flanders<sup>34</sup> observes that collective bargaining was significant to workers in three major ways: it eliminates competition that would otherwise exist among them to offer their services to lower prices; it could be used to compel employers to concede wage advances and other improvements in their terms of employment; and it protects employees against arbitrary treatment by management in form of victimization. Thus, with all the above and coupled with a daring/fearless leadership, in addition to a relatively conscious and loyal followership; the CWU's successes should not be described as coincidental; it was rather through commitment of its members.

The third 'go slow' action (that led to the shooting incident) was declared on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1949 as a result of another trade dispute with management over certain unpaid allowances. Irked by the constant use of strike by the CWU, the management took drastic action and sacked 200 underground workers. Concerted efforts made by the Ngwo community (on whose soil the colliery was located) to hold conciliatory talks with the two groups failed. Meanwhile, the dismissed workers and the CWU executive converted the 'go slow' action into a sit-in-strike and refused to vacate the mines for days.

At this juncture (for fear that explosives at the mines might fall into wrong hands), the government decided on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November to remove the explosives at the mines. Consequently, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1949, Mr. F.S. Philip, a senior superintendent of police was appointed to head 105 policemen in the operation to remove the explosives from the mines. The explosives were successfully removed at the Ogbete mine, but at Iva valley mine, the dismissed workers resisted the removal. By this time, about 1, 500 miners had gathered with sticks, chanted war songs, and demanded that the explosives must not be removed. In the process, a struggle ensued between three policemen and some miners. In the ensuing melee Mr. Philip ordered his men to shoot; and accordingly, the policemen shot indiscriminately at the protesting miners. The shootings

led to the death of 21 miners while more than 50 were injured.<sup>35</sup>

With regards to the effects of the shooting incident, it led to spontaneous reactions by Nigerians from diverse backgrounds who criticized it vehemently. It aroused nationalist consciousness and re-awakened nationalist activities that were at a lull during the period. Specifically, the Nationalists set up a National Emergency Council (NEC); while labor activists set up a National Labour Committee to look into the incident. With this zeal, all the groups, which also included the Nigerian Youth Movement demanded for the granting of self-governing status to Nigeria.<sup>36</sup>

These reactions made the colonial government set up a Commission of Enquiry that looked into the shooting incident; and its report published in 1950 had far-reaching effects on the coal-mining industry. As it concerned the workers, recommendations of the Commission, among others changed the names of roles of African workers at the mines. For instance, before the shooting incident, foremen were called 'boss boys', but after the shooting incident, they became known as foremen. Similarly, pick-boys became known as hewers, tub-boys, as tub-men; while the job done by hammock-boys (carried senior white officials in hammocks on their shoulders to and from their residence and offices) was abolished, thereby restoring the dignity of African workers.<sup>37</sup>

The incident also created more consciousness among workers with respect to participation in trade union activities. Although the CWU was outlawed, but working-class consciousness persisted, as a new union, the Nigerian Coal Miners' Union (NCMU) was formed and later recognized by colliery management in April 1951. Like its predecessor, management interfered in its affairs severally, but workers were not undaunted in their commitment to collective bargaining at every point during the period.<sup>38</sup> Other benefits accrued to workers were: the representation of Nigerians at the Colliery Board, the regularization of the appointment of miners (particularly casual workers), and the improvement of workers' conditions of service.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has examined working-class actions at the coal-mining industry in southeastern Nigeria during the colonial period. As observed, working class consciousness manifested in various forms and at various times, the hallmark being the 'go slow' strike of November 1949 that led to the shooting incident of 18 November 1949. The following observations emanate from the study in order to place events at the colliery in their proper historical perspectives.

As observed in the course of analyses, the colliery management did try to create 'labor aristocrats' on several occasions; but this ploy failed because the workers were committed in their struggle. It was also

observed that workers had participated in strike actions prior to the formation of the CWU in 1944, and the subsequent series of 'go slow' as a mass action. The reaction of the workers was in tandem with M.A. Tokumboh's assertion that 'trade union is a function of the environment, the economic development and the culture pattern from which it grows'.<sup>40</sup> No doubt, the workers' reaction may be premised on the socio-economic exigencies of the period that led to a restive working class movement across Nigeria nurtured on grievances and discontent during the 1940s.

Similarly, as observed in the analysis, the entire work force operated in circumstances, with their primary aim being economic, primarily to earn wages, which could boost their living standard. The workers were virtually Igbo, the same culture, and therefore cooperation among them was easier than in an enterprise with workers from diverse backgrounds. Their collective actions could be likened to the railway workers strike in Lagos in 1920, which succeeded in getting the colonial government act to alleviate the sufferings of wage labour.<sup>41</sup>

Generally, the Enugu colliery workers were genuine in their struggles against management because as Mandel and George Novak jointly argued: the proletarian condition makes it inevitable for the employee to try by all means to acquire tactics necessary for satisfying his needs and those of his family.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in trying to achieve their primary economic motive; the Enugu colliery workers may be termed to have turned "passive revolutionary" by introducing the 'go slow' strike as a means to an end.

Mandel and Novak stress further that:

*the revolutionary potential of the working class can be denied only if one argues that the sparks of revolt which have been rekindled in the working class mass through the experience of social injustice and social irrationality are extinguished or suppressed for ever; and if one argues that the patient and obstinate propaganda and education by revolutionary vanguards cannot have a marked effect among the workers anywhere, any time, whatever may be the turn of objective events.*<sup>43</sup>

Finally, it should be stressed that the development of an organized labor movement is a crucial indicator of the strength and power of the working class. This manifested in the CWU; and both its leadership and followership took advantage of this in their collective bargains with management that had positive economic effects on their lives and those of their families. Thus, the series of working-class consciousness at the coal industry were genuine, as there was no evidence of 'labor aristocrats' in the highlighted actions in this paper because of the collective commitment of all workers in their struggles as an economic class.

On the whole, the nature of commitment exhibited by colliery workers in the strike of November 1949 in

colonial Southeastern Nigeria could be likened to that exhibited by unskilled workers at a Louisiana, United States Sugar Plantation in 1953. In a strike carried out by peons at that plantation, Negroes and whites united and worked together on their common problem to achieve results.<sup>44</sup> In like manner, the Enugu colliery workers were genuine wage earners who 'fought' for better working conditions under colonial rule. The CWU succeeded because of the existence of 'purposeful leadership', and committed followership that sustained their struggle until victory was achieved. Thus, as it pertained to the coal-mining industry in colonial southeastern Nigeria, the 'labor aristocracy' thesis may be described as a myth because it was not allowed to see the light of the day.

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