

JS-5
School Strike

P.O. Box 5113
Nairobi, Kenya
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Student strikes are practically unheard of in the United States. In Kenya and Uganda such strikes are increasingly in the news. My wife and I recently visited friends who are on the staff of Sir Samuel Baker, a senior secondary school (comparable to an American high school) where the fourth form went on strike. From conversations with our friends, with other members of the staff, with groups of the students and with educators in the capital city of Kampala, we pieced together the following story.

Sam Baker, as it is known, is a boarding school situated in a flat, featureless landscape near Gulu, the administrative center of the Northern Region of Uganda. The school is non-sectarian and is supported with Government funds. A staff of twelve; six Americans from the AID-sponsored Teachers for East Africa program, and six Englishmen, teach the school's 250 boys. All the staff are civil servants under contract to the Uganda Government.

One Monday morning last February, the school echoed with the usual beginning of the week sounds; the diminishing grind and scrape of chairs and the rise of teachers' voices. The staff member who was to teach the fourth form (seniors in the American high school system) was late to class and turned over the day's lesson in his mind as he walked quickly across the school grounds. He came into the classroom with his mind still immersed in his work and it was a moment before he realized that the room was quite empty.

The teacher waited for a while and then told the Headmaster of the boys' absence. Within an hour the two men found them sitting in sullen silence in the school assembly hall. The Headmaster asked them what they were doing. They were silent and pointed to a note pinned to a curtain which read, "We refuse to return to classes because we are not satisfied with the teaching in English and Math. We want Mr. X, Mr. Y, and Mr. Z to be relieved and proper substitutes found." The boys would not speak to anyone except the District Education Officer, an African who is a member of the School Board. The DEO arrived in the afternoon and heard their bitter complaints about the ineptitude and laziness of the three teachers.

When the class hours were over on Monday, the boys took part in all their other school activities; they continued to act as

prefects, participated in sports, and went to meals with the rest of the school. On Tuesday morning they again refused to attend their classes and threatened to march into Gulu to send an angry telegram to the Minister of Education demanding action against the teachers. The staff met that night and decided to suspend the entire fourth form indefinitely. The boys left school on Wednesday.

Three African members of the School Board immediately wrote a letter of protest to the Headmaster accusing him of acting rashly and of failing to consult the Board before suspending the boys. Although the Standing Orders of the Ministry of Education state clearly that the Headmaster has complete authority over suspensions and expulsions and need only inform the Chairman of the Board of his decisions, the three dissidents continued their criticism of the Headmaster at the Board meeting held the Monday following the beginning of the strike. After a long and heated discussion, the calmer forces on the Board persuaded the militant members to accept the suspensions. When, later in the meeting, the Headmaster announced that he would recall the boys in ten days, two members of the Board asked to speak to them on their return. The Headmaster advised against this, but the Board overruled him, saying that members of the staff could be present.

The boys returned the following Thursday still truculent and determined that the three teachers be replaced. Their meeting with the two Board members did nothing to calm them. The boys rudely ejected two of the staff members who tried to attend the meeting and then, led by the Board members, raked over their grievances.

Tension increased the following day with the arrival of Mr. George Magezi, Minister of State and Deputy Prime Minister, whom the Board had asked to speak to the school. In a racist, political blast that stunned the staff, Magezi lashed at expatriates, saying that the days of colonialism were over and that they had better "watch their step." He condemned missionary education and predicted that the Central Government would soon control the entire education system. Magezi ended with the declaration that Uganda eventually would be a one party state where all who were not members of the ruling Uganda Peoples Congress would be outcasts. Throughout his speech, Magezi gave no hint that the boys were at fault for striking; instead, his racist statements appeared to support their actions. During the question period that followed the speech, the boys picked up Magezi's suggestion that the Government could remove its expatriate staff at will and pressed him for a full explanation.

The next day the Headmaster and another staff member went to Kampala to protest to the Ministry of Education about the speech and the interference of the three Board members. The Chief Education Officer, an Englishman, tried to shunt the Headmaster aside, and it was not until the entire staff threatened to resign that the Minister himself, Mr. Luyimbazi-Zake, finally heard of the strike. Mr. Zake immediately declared his support of the staff and wrote a strong letter to the Board leaving no doubt about his position. The damage, however,

had been done. General school discipline will not recover until the fourth form leaves, and the spirit and spontaneity have gone from the teaching of the staff, who now weigh every word they say.

School strikes are not new in Uganda; one of the most famous occurred at King's College, Budo, in 1942. But two aspects of the present series of strikes are disturbing. First, that eleven of them have occurred since Uganda's independence last fall, and second, that they have taken place all over Uganda, not simply in one unstable district. Why?

The entire emphasis of the educational system in East Africa is on passing examinations. At the end of the first eight years of schooling, students must pass their first major set of exams to enter senior secondary school. Four years later come the crucial "School Certificate" exams. If the student passes these, he can go on for two more years of specialized study and then sit for the "Higher School Certificate" tests. Those who succeed generally go on to a university.

The School Certificate exam is unquestionably the most important, for without a School Certificate a boy has little chance of getting better than a clerk's job. A four year syllabus spells out which subjects must be covered. The boys view their education merely as a process of collecting enough facts to meet the requirements of the syllabus. They have no use for analysis or discussion, they simply want information.

In any school, therefore, the boys are taut and anxious during their fourth form year. To make matters worse at Sam Baker, last year's fourth form received some of the lowest School Certificate examination results in Uganda. There is little question that a major cause of the strike was the boys' fear that their instruction in English and Math would not be good enough to get them through the School Certificate exam.

Furthermore, the boys have a conception of themselves that is at once realistic and sadly naive. They believe they are an elite--with reason, for only 1.2% of the secondary school age group actually attends senior secondary school. The future leaders of Uganda will come from this small percentage. During their vacations the boys are courted by the local politicians and bring back to school half-digested political "truths" and an exaggerated idea of their importance; "We are big men and know how things should be", a leader of a strike at another senior secondary school said recently.

The staff at Sam Baker see a definite correlation between the strike and the deportation early this year of two Northern Region businessmen, an Asian and a European. The boys see the passing of authority from white man to black man and, filled with their new sense of significance, reason that if their Government can deport the formerly powerful whites it will listen with a ready ear to their complaints about their teachers.

If the boys' image of their own significance is partially out of focus, their image of their country is even more blurred. Erisa Kironde, the capable Chairman of the Uganda Electricity Board, gave a talk at Sam Baker last month. When he told the boys that the technical gap between Uganda and the rich nations of the West would probably increase in the next ten years, they strenuously objected and claimed that Uganda would soon be the industrial equal of any country in the world, with her own steel mills, automobile plants, and atomic power. Kironde next suggested that, for all its faults, colonialism brought Twentieth Century technology to East Africa. The boys roared their disapproval. But for colonial restraint, they said, Uganda would now rival America.

The immediate result of the strike has been the destruction of staff morale and cohesion; the best teachers are resigning at the end of the school year. As the strikes continue throughout Uganda, more and more expatriates will leave. They can hardly be blamed, for they are needed at home and do not like to receive abusive treatment from people they came to help. Certainly, few countries can afford an exodus of teachers, but for Uganda, it would be disastrous. The senior secondary schools would simply have to close. 516 of the 550 senior secondary school teachers are expatriates and only a handful of Africans choose to enter teaching training each year.

It is generally thought that the strikes will continue as long as the boys think they can circumvent school authority by appealing to the National Government. They will continue to do so if officials like Magezi condone them. However, the Uganda Government now shows signs of clamping down. In a nation-wide radio broadcast on June 16, the Minister of Education, Mr. Zake, called for an end to school indiscipline. He thanked the expatriates for their work and said that they would be needed for at least another ten years.

Although Mr. Zake is respected as an intelligent man with a genuine concern for education and his statement will inject some discipline into the school system, his warnings need following up by prompt Government support of staff disciplinary action in any subsequent strike. The Government needs to convince the boys of its purpose. If it does not, the strikes may well continue until the senior secondary schools cease to operate.

Sincerely,



John Spencer