

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 41
Native Labor in
the Belgian Congo

Mailed from: Hotel Lisbon
Accra,
Gold Coast,
British West Africa
April 30, 1955

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Q: What kinds of job are open to Natives?

A: They can go into anything they want, if they have the qualifications. And we are very much interested in diversifying--as much as we can--the abilities of the native population, in order to stabilize our economy."¹

This question-and-answer, lifted from a U.S. News and World Report interview with Henri Cornelis, Vice Governor-General of the Belgian Congo, sounds a little too lyrical to be true. But after five weeks in the Congo, travelling north from Elizabethville to Rutshuru and west from the Uganda border to Leopoldville, I am compelled to report that the Belgians seem to mean every word of it and, in fact, have planned it that way.

Translated into everyday living, it means that the Banque de Congo Belge is startling to one just arrived from the Central African Federation or South Africa; the space behind the counter is filled with the usual adding machines and typewriters, but every one of them is manned by an African. It means that the captain of the Reine Astrid (PBM-40) is the only white man in charge of the ancient sternwheeler on her careful voyage from Stanleyville to Leopoldville and that passengers going from Northern Rhodesia into the Congo must change from white-driven to African-driven trains. It means that the Congo's ambitious, billion-dollar, 10-year plan for socio-economic development will have to be carried out almost entirely by Africans, assisted and advised by a handful of white technicians and planners.

If there's one thing that appeals to a Belgian overseas administrator more than a free ride to Brussels or a chateaubriand béarnaise, it's a long-range plan. In office after office government officer after government officer talked about the present condition of the African laborer in the Congo not as a problem that has sprung up accidentally, but as a single, expected stage in a long-range plan for development and racial stability.

One effect of this plan is to make it hard for a European to immigrate to the Congo, either as a laborer, farmer or industrialist. It's not that the Belgians don't want increased industrial or agricultural development; it's simply that the administration wants to retard it. The planners have delved around in demography and come up with the conclusion that the move from rural areas to the cities, common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, must slow down almost to a stop in the Congo. An increase in white immigration means, in turn, an increase in economic activity and a larger demand for African labor in the cities.² It was explained to me that 10 agricultural workers can produce enough food to feed themselves and one industrial worker. As things stand, there are four agricultural workers for every industrial worker and food production is

1. U.S. News and World Report, December 24, 1954; pp. 68-71.

2. This theory seems to work. In 1952 white immigration was held to about 10,000 and the increase in African laborers in industrial centers was only 47,000. In 1951 the increase was 67,000.

suffering to such an extent that it has become necessary to refuse those Africans who wish to move to the industrial cities permission to do so.

The Belgians, naturally, have drawn up a plan to combat this situation. It calls for increased mechanization in the factories (to lower the amount of manpower needed in industry) and on the farms (to increase food production per worker per acre); expanded technical training to increase the productivity of the individual Native worker (now figured at one-fifth that of a white worker) and stricter control over the movements of Africans.

There is also a Native Peasants Scheme, explained to me by the press attache to the Governor-General, which aims at increasing food production by setting up cooperative farm ventures with Government-donated know-how, seeds, housing and machinery. All these facets of the plan will take time--and until they have been put into effect and an improvement in the food position can be seen, white immigration and further industrial development will be carefully held back.

The reason behind this meticulous and detailed planning is, in large part, the Belgian concept of just how the Congo is to fulfill its function in the mother-country's economy. It is safe to say that the Belgians have not held the numbers of Europeans down through sheer spite or dog-in-the-mangerism; the whole thing has been planned with the end in view that, in the words of Pierre Wigny¹ in his pamphlet on A Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo,² the Congo "will always remain a country that exports its raw materials."³ He goes on to say, "The results of what has been called 'colonization by injection' should be considered seriously. The word evokes a definite picture: thousands of men being artificially thrust into an economic system which does not know what to do with them. They will be brutally ejected at the first crisis.

"To this colonization by injection, we must oppose colonization by absorption. The colonial economic system, by expanding and perfecting itself, will itself increase the demand for workers. Those who answer this call will easily be absorbed into some Congo community to which they will bring needed talent. . ."⁴ This is in sharp contrast to Kenya, South Africa and the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland which seek to build up large white populations first, find economic reason for them later. It is the difference between the Afrikaner or old Rhodesian who moans, "this is my country; if the Natives take over I have no other place to go" and the white man in the Congo who is, in all likelihood, only in the Congo on a short-term contract to represent an overseas corporation.

As a result, the situation of Jacques, a fictitious African laborer in the Congo, is good. While Lawrence Katilungu and Matthew Nkolomo were leading their drawn-out strike of African mineworkers on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt (PBM-37), Jacques, just over the border in the Belgian Congo's copper-rich Katanga Province, was digging as usual and his employer, the half government-controlled Union Miniere, was able to take advantage of the skyrocketing copper prices, caused largely by the serious drop in Northern Rhodesia's production. Since the Second World War Jacques has not gone on strike and has not been involved in labor difficulties of any kind in spite of the fact that he belongs to a labor union and is not hampered in organizing his fellow workers.

Jacque's position is so good partly because of the keen demand for labor,

1. Belgian Minister for the Colonies from 1947 to 1950.

2. Second Edition; Belgian Government Information Center, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20; 1951.

3. *ibid.* p. 14.

4. *ibid.* p. 22.

the current flush of prosperity and the tide of economic development that has caught up the Colony since World War II. But probably the biggest factor contributing to his contented state is the planned paternalism of the Government and big business.

The Government sees to it that Jacques' wages stay well above his cost of living and, at the same time, keeps improving his standard of living to allow him to progress socially and become a market for consumer goods produced in Belgium. Jacques' income is safeguarded by fixed minimum wages, based on the cost of living in the section of the Colony in which he is permitted to live and work. Before he came to Elizabethville and was living in the bush, his minimum wage was five Congo francs (10¢ US) per day. But in Elizabethville the minimum wage is at least 13 francs (26¢). It sounds ridiculously puny, but the manager of the Native City in Leopoldville assured me that fringe benefits more than double this amount and Jacques' average monthly salary in Elizabethville comes to about US\$20 a month. This includes a cash allowance for Jacques' wife, and allowances of \$6 a month for his first child and \$1.60 for each succeeding bundle of joy. It includes rations, housing, medical care and transportation to and from work. And, as a final flourish, Jacques would probably be issued with a raincoat, an indication that perhaps paternalism has run its gamut and employers are looking about for new benefits to provide.

The stability of the African labor force is perhaps best demonstrated by an event of August, 1953. Faced by a sharp drop in the world price of palm fruit, the growers pleaded with the Government to allow them to reduce wages paid to the fruit cutters. Proud of the peaceful labor picture, the Government hedged. But after 18 months of cutting freight charges and export duties to rock bottom, the Government was forced to agree to the wage cut. Monthly wages dropped from \$26.52 to \$21 and repercussions were expected. None came, however. The Africans went on working, either satisfied that the cuts were justified or just plain not interested.

An American in Leopoldville, in close touch with trade union leaders and organizers, said that the unions have long since given up trying to build strong unions. "Without the support of the unions' head offices in Belgium--both with money and patience--the branches here in the Congo, European and Native, would fold tomorrow," he said.

When the trade unions began operations in 1946, the Congo administration was admittedly scared and kept a tight rein on labor organization, probably keeping in mind the great danger Native trade unions have always been considered in the Union of South Africa. But it soon became obvious that the unions weren't out to cause trouble--and the binding restrictions were removed, although "professional strike agitators" are still liable to prison terms. My American friend said that the union leaders explain away their failure to gain strong support as follows: "The African is just not interested in unions. He comes from his environment unprepared for union organization, he has no sense of working class solidarity and the Government and management combine to see to it that his demands are satisfied before he can make them."

Far from being afraid of unions today, the Congo administration is trying to encourage them, I was told. The Government is aware that it has precious few ways of knowing just what the African worker is thinking about or what he wants. The process of setting up a union goes like this: The new union must apply to the Government for recognition, giving its name, objectives, place of office, group of workers covered and names of its lawyers. If this is in order, temporary authorization is granted and the union must then submit a list of its members, its committee members--and a rundown of its financial situation. In addition, it must make financial and progress reports every three to six months. "This is very difficult for the Congolese,"¹ I was told by the manager of the Leopoldville Native City. "The Government is supporting a project to

1. Africans in the Belgian Congo are called Congolese.

alleviate these difficulties. Trade unions must be free if they are to benefit their members and keep the Government informed about the feelings of laborers in the country."

In addition to the ineffectual trade unions, there are labor-management-Government commissions at various levels which are designed to keep the administration informed on the current thinking of the working classes. On the single company level these bodies are called Conseil Indigène d'Entreprise which, I found, function well in settling petty squabbles like those that are handled by the grievance committee of the American Newspaper Guild branch at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The two higher commissions--the Comité Local des Travailleurs on the territorial level and the Commission Régionale du Travail et du Progrès Social Indigène on a Colony-wide level--do not function so well. The Government makes the same complaint of these two bodies that the union leaders make of the Native trade unions--the Africans who serve on them are not representative and do not feel strongly enough about laborers as a class to contribute anything to discussion. As a meeting ground for Government, labor and management, they seem to be accomplishing nothing because the African delegates sit in silence and can think of nothing to say. "It's not because they are too stupid or uneducated to say anything," the Native City director said emphatically. "When they are interested in a problem they can talk on it for hours. It is just that they are not interested."

"Q: Is there a color bar in the Congo?

A: We have no color bar. It's a question of social differentiation--a question of fact, not of principle. You couldn't expect a man coming out of the Kwango to live in Leopoldville for the first time to be completely assimilated into European life. Theoretically, there is no objection. Practically, it would be unfeasible--more from his side than ours."¹

As this question-and-answer shows, the Belgians are extremely anxious to assure everyone, especially the Natives, that there is no color bar and therefore no basis for frustration. It is one of the big reasons that white immigration is limited to the technician-engineer-entrepreneur class and lower-middle and lower class white men, who would naturally tend to compete with the higher echelon of Natives are kept out of the Colony. It is also a reason, obviously, for industrial peace.

There is a color bar in attitude, the answer above points out, and there is still the vestige of a legal color bar in the fact that when an African is hired he signs a contrat de travail while a white man signs a contrat d'emploi. The difference between the two is hard to pin down; everyone I talked to explained the difference by saying the contrat de travail (contract of labor) is for Congolese and the contrat d'emploi (contract of employment) is for Europeans. Checking through the statute books, I could find only one major difference; if an African breaks his contrat de travail he can be arrested, tried and given a jail sentence. There is no such penalty attached to the breaking of a contrat d'emploi.

Three Government officials told me that discussions are under way which will, eventually, result in the abolition of the contrat de travail. And, in other conversations, I was told that the barrier between the two contrats is not a color barrier. One man, Jacques Massa, African editor of a Government publication for Congolese, was hired under a contrat d'emploi in September, 1953. In other words, the Government is conscious of the fact that, to an outsider (and perhaps to an African insider) the two forms of work contract look suspiciously like a color bar. And, although the weak European trade unions are opposed to it, the differences between the two contracts will probably soon disappear.

Which shows, clearly, that the Belgian Congo is out to provide its Native working class with the kind of protection that goes to white workers in South Africa, Southern and Northern Rhodesia. It is this reverse English that gives the Congo its industrial peace and indicates that if and when African nationalists seek to cause trouble, they will not be able to look for strong support from a downtrodden working class.

Perhaps the Congo, with all its plans, has found answers to some of the troubles to the south.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Bird Martin". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Peter Bird Martin

Received New York 5/12/55.