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Konings, P.J.J.

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## **Political Consciousness and Political Action of Industrial Workers in Ghana: A Case Study of Valco Workers at Tema**

*by Piet Konings*

The political consciousness and political action of African workers in large-scale foreign and state enterprises has been a subject of lively debate among radical scholars over the past decade. The debate was opened by Arrighi and Saul who opposed the traditional communist view that workers in Africa constituted an 'exploited' class and were likely to develop a revolutionary class consciousness and to lead the struggle against neo-colonial regimes (Woddis, 1972). Arrighi and Saul argued against this - in a more systematic way than Fanon and some liberal economists had done before - that workers, and particularly semi-skilled workers in the employ of large-scale foreign and state enterprises, constituted a privileged class, a 'labour aristocracy', divorced from the 'really' exploited classes in the neo-colonial society, the lumpenproletariat and the peasantry, and in league with the dominant classes in upholding the neo-colonial status quo (Arrighi and Saul, 1973; Fanon, 1967; and Konings, 1977).

Arrighi and Saul's labour aristocracy thesis has been criticized by various authors on theoretical and empirical grounds (Waterman, 1975; and Rosenberg, 1976). Peace, in his study of workers in large-scale foreign enterprises in Nigeria, stresses the various factors that make workers identify 'downwards' with the urban and rural poor, and asserts the existence of a 'populist consciousness' among workers and other sections of the urban poor. He also attempts to demonstrate that workers, because of their higher educational level and organisational potential, play a leading role among the urban poor in the struggle against an inequalitarian status quo (Peace, 1974 and 1975). The thesis of a populist consciousness - the perception of social reality in terms of a wide, but vague gap between 'the poor' and the exploitative and oppressive 'rich and powerful' (the big men) - amongst urban workers was supported by Jeffries with regard to workers in one of the large-scale Ghanaian state enterprises: the railways (Jeffries, 1975). Sandbrook and Arn also stress populist attitudes among the Ghanaian 'labouring poor', but suggest that the relatively well educated workers in large-scale foreign and state enterprises are more likely to develop an incipient working-class consciousness (Sandbrook and Arn, 1977).

The question remains: what is the political consciousness of Ghanaian workers in large-scale foreign and state enterprises and what action have they engaged in? This study tries to answer these questions with regard to industrial workers in a multinational corporation at Tema, Valco, which has had (and still has) an enormous impact on the Ghanaian political economy.

The study is based on fieldwork in Ghana in 1975. A 5% random sample was drawn from Valco-workers, allowing for 102 structured interviews. I also discussed various problems with groups of workers, company managers and union leaders.

## VALCO AT TEMA

The possibility of an integrated aluminium industry in Ghana based on power from the Volta River had been explored by the colonial government since the early twenties (Killick, 1966; and Moxon, 1969). It was, however, Nkrumah who pushed the Volta River Project from 1952 onwards as a necessary prerequisite for Ghana's future industrialization.

While the Volta River Project was then primarily oriented towards Ghana's industrialization, the project's viability remained dependent on the establishment of an aluminium industry (consuming a large amount of electric power). Nkrumah's hope that Ghanaian bauxite would be used in the proposed industry was crushed by the major difficulties he experienced in trying to get international funding for the venture in the mid-fifties and early sixties. Ghana ended up becoming largely dependent on American capital for financing the Volta Dam and the aluminium smelter. Ghana's bargaining power against the two American aluminium giants, Kaiser Aluminium and Chemical Corporation and Reynolds Metal Company, was extremely weak. They were the only companies in the world willing to build and operate the smelter. Kaiser was prepared to take 90% of the shares and Reynolds the remaining 10%; together, they constituted the Volta Aluminium Company (Valco).

It was to Valco's interest to gain the cheapest possible price for the electricity, and therefore Valco became very directly involved in the construction of the dam; Kaiser engineers re-surveyed the original project, and this resulted in changes in both dam location and construction proposals so as to reduce costs sharply. Moreover, Kaiser 'proposed' to postpone the establishment of an integrated aluminium industry in Ghana, preferring rather to build a smelter using imported alumina in order to reduce initial capital investment. Ghana had to finance an expensive infrastructure for Valco: the construction of a new port, an industrial site and accommodation for Valco at Tema, that grew from a small village to a large industrial/commercial town in a few years.

The 'Master Agreement' between Valco and the Nkrumah-government shows even more clearly Ghana's unequal bargaining power. Valco signed a thirty year contract with the Ghanaian government agreeing to pay for a minimum of 200,000 kw. of electrical power during the first five years and a minimum of 300,000 kw. for the remaining twenty-five years. In exchange, Valco was able to extract many very favourable tax concessions from the Ghanaian government. For example, imports by Valco for the construction of the aluminium smelter and its operation, as well as Valco's alumina imports, to be duty free for 30 years; there were to be no restrictions, control or taxation of Valco's aluminium exports; and Valco was exempted from all taxation of its income for at least five years. Equally pathetic was the price at which power was sold to Valco. Power was to be sold to Valco smelter at 2.65 mills per kw. hour (almost at cost price)<sup>1)</sup>, a price reputed to be amongst the lowest in the world and fixed for 30 years. It was this low power cost, plus the cheapness of labour in Ghana, which rendered economical a smelter utilizing imported alumina-inputs, processed from Jamaican bauxite in the USA and transported to Ghana on Kaiser-owned ships.

<sup>1)</sup> One mill is one tenth of a US cent.

Risks of nationalization were substantially reduced by separating the raw materials from the process of smelting.

The present government, the National Redemption Council (NRC)<sup>2)</sup>, is trying to establish an integrated aluminium industry. An aluminium plant at Kibi will soon begin to process local ore for use at the Valco-smelter. Valco has been undertaking a \$ 60m. expansion programme, primarily consisting of the addition of a fifth potline, which will increase aluminium production by 25 per cent to about 200,000 tons. In 1977 it was made known that the US Hunter Engineering Co. had agreed to establish and run an aluminium casting, rolling and finishing plant in Accra, which will process ingots produced by Valco into finished products. Nkrumah's dreams of an integrated aluminium industry in Ghana were at long last to become a reality.

## VALCO WORKERS

Valco is the largest industrial enterprise at Tema: it started production in 1967 with about 1000 Ghanaians and 100 expatriates on the pay roll. Expansion of the smelter gave rise to an expansion of the labour force to an average number of 1780 in the early seventies, and to well over 2000 in the mid-seventies.

It is a foreign company with a heavy initial capital investment of \$ 120,000,000 - one of the highest single capital investments by a foreign company in a developing country - and uses the most modern production techniques, requiring a high number of semi-skilled and skilled workers for production and maintenance. It has therefore been managerial practice generally to recruit workers with a relatively high educational level who can start producing after a relatively short period of on-the-job-training. Workers with a relatively high educational level are to be found mainly among young Ghanaians from Southern Ghana. Unskilled workers to be used for the most menial jobs are mostly taken on from Northern Ghana, a traditional recruiting area for cheap, illiterate labour (see table 1).

Valco workers have not only a relatively high educational and skill level, they are also quite stable and committed to their jobs. Table 1 shows that in 1975 most workers (61%) had been on the job at least from the opening of the smelter in 1967, and some even before. There are various reasons for this high degree of stability.

- Valco pays relatively high wages in comparison with small, medium-sized and even most large enterprises in Ghana. While a large number of unskilled workers in small and medium-sized enterprises earned less than the monthly minimum-wage of 54 Cedi in 1975, Valco paid the wages presented in table 2. Moreover, Valco workers enjoy special allowances (housing allowance; cost of living allowance), and high productivity enables them to qualify for special production bonuses. Even lower professional and clerical workers are prepared to leave their 'white collar' jobs and take up unskilled manual work at Valco, because they are attracted by the relatively high wages and supplementary forms of income at Valco.
- Though the majority of workers (90.5%) did not like the hard and tedious work at Valco, they stuck to it, not only because of the relatively high wages,

<sup>2)</sup> The NRC is subordinated to a Supreme Military Council (SMC) since 1975.

but also because of the security of income it offered in a situation of large urban unemployment and a dearth of more rewarding and interesting jobs. Eighty per cent of the Valco workers had been unemployed one or more times.

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic Variables of the Valco workers* (percentages)

	Unskilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled	Clerical	TOTAL
AGE					
15 - 25	33.5				9
26 - 40	66.5	100	82.5	100	83
41 - 55			17.5		8
TOTAL	100.0	100	100.0	100	100
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL					
Illiterate	33.5		4		11
Elementary	66.5	57	61		56.5
Lower technical/commercial		14.5	17.5	100	18.5
Secondary/Training college		28.5	17.5		14
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
ETHNICITY					
Akan	33.5	100	61	75	63
Northern Tribes	66.5		12.5		23
Ewe			18		8
Ga/Adangbe			8.5	25	6
TOTAL	100.0	100	100.0	100	100
LENGTH OF TIME IN PRESENT JOB					
Less than 1 year	22.5		4.5		8
1 - 3 years	44	28.5	4.5	25	21
4 - 6 years	22.5		9		10
7 - 10 years	11	71.5	82	75	61
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100
PREVIOUS JOB					
Farming/fishing	34		4.5		11
Unskilled work		14	26	25	16.5
Skilled work/artisan	11	28.5	30		22.5
Lower professional/clerical	33	29	35	50	34
No previous work	22		4.5		8
No answer		28.5		25	8
TOTAL	100	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
ENJOYMENT OF LAND-RIGHTS IN PLACE OF BIRTH?					
Yes	78	43	69.5	100	68.5
No	22	57	30.5		31.5
TOTAL	100	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
N	27	21	46	8	102

Table 2. *Wages at Valco in 1975 (percentages)*

	Unskilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled	Clerical	TOTAL
54 Cedi - 70 Cedi	33.5	14.5			12
71 Cedi - 100 Cedi	44.5	71	65	25	57.5
101 Cedi - 150 Cedi	11	14.5	13.5	75	17.5
151 Cedi - 200 Cedi			4.5		2
Above 200 Cedi			13		6
No answer	11		4		5
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
N	27	21	46	8	102

Note: 1 Cedi was equal to US \$ 0.85

- There are regular training-schemes which provide workers with specific skills and relatively good promotion chances at Valco and elsewhere. Most workers (65%) hope that a long stay at Valco will provide them with the necessary skills/capital to become self-employed in the future.
- A large minority of Valco workers (31.5%) no longer enjoy land-rights in the place of their birth, which, to a large extent, excludes them from taking up farming (see table 1).
- There are various managerial practices that help to make the workers stable: annual increments in wages; merit increases to deserving employees; sick leave is higher after 3-7 years of employment; Valco provides workers with transport, medical facilities, scholarships for their children, the Valco-Centre with its club house, shopping facilities, school, sports centre and swimming pool, and accomodation for a relatively small number of workers in certain Tema communities (the large majority of Valco workers live in Tema's periphery, particularly in Ashaiman, a slum, where the population increased from 2624 in 1960 to a present estimated 30.000 in a single square mile area).

Indeed, Valco workers are quite stable. Most of them intend to stay at Valco for a long time or even till the end of their working career. Eventually, however, the majority of them want to become self-employed and/or to return to the place of their birth, with which they maintain close ties.

Thus, at Valco there is a large concentration of workers who are for the greater part relatively young, educated, skilled, increasingly stable and to a large extent dependent for their subsistence on their incomes from the 'capitalist sector'. The majority of workers not only work together, but also live together in working-class communities at Tema and in slums in Tema's periphery. It may be expected that all these factors contribute to a common consciousness for Valco workers. We shall first deal with Valco workers' perception of their class position in the system of production, and then with Valco workers' perception of their class position in the society at large.

## VALCO WORKERS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR CLASS POSITION IN THE SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION

Though Valco pays relatively high wages in comparison with most other companies in Ghana, a strong feeling of exploitation exists among workers. Workers are convinced - though the company's profits are never revealed to workers by management - that the company makes huge profits, and consequently, they feel entitled to a larger share of them. This feeling of exploitation is enhanced by the following factors:

- Workers feel underpaid, considering the particularly hard and tedious work in an aluminium smelter and the high productivity at Valco. A shift lasts eight hours without any break, all under strict supervision in the hot temperature of an aluminium smelter. Workers often faint because of the heat, and are completely exhausted after a shift. In addition, workers are often forced, on threat of dismissal, to work much overtime.
- Workers are quite aware of the large income disparities between the 'junior staff' and 'senior staff', especially between the workers and the expatriate managers, and are convinced that these large disparities do not correspond to merit.

The large majority of workers (78%) ordinarily want to extract their share of the profits made by the 'foreign exploiter' through collective bargaining. However, if management appears constantly to ignore justified demands and also harass them in the production process, the workers then resort to individual and collective action to protest against their exploitation. These include sabotage, restriction of output, absenteeism, and strikes. It is especially during strike actions that class feelings become more explicit, and then the division between 'we', the exploited workers, and 'they', the exploiting managers, tends to foster solidarity among workers differentiated along ethnic and occupational lines (largely overlapping).

Yet, though workers feel exploited and oppressed by the employer/management in the system of production, the majority of them do not favour a fundamental restructuring of the social relations of production. Workers neither favour the disappearance of the manager-worker distinction nor support self-management, but advocate rather the establishment of 'work councils' as a form of participation in management. However, workers' resentment against foreign exploitation and foreign ownership of 'the commanding heights of the economy' is shown by the fact that the majority of workers (64.5%) would prefer a transfer of foreign ownership to state ownership of the big companies, vital to Ghana's economy (see table 3).

VALCO WORKERS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR CLASS POSITION  
IN GHANAIAN SOCIETY

Contrary to the assumption of Arrighi and Saul, Valco workers do not identify 'upwards' with the dominant classes in society, but 'downwards' with 'suffering' social groups of Ghanaian society. These are the people among whom they live and, as Peace has demonstrated, they are the ones with whom they maintain close socio-economic ties. The 'suffering' social groups in Ghanaian parlance are

those who are the worst off materially as a result of exploitation by those groups that are 'enjoying' in Ghanaian society.

What is striking from tables 4 and 5 is that the majority of the workers are quite able to perceive the social structure in precise class terms. This is in contradiction to Lloyd's findings in Ibadan (Lloyd, 1974). Only relatively few workers perceived the Ghanaian social structure in populist terms as consisting of 'big men' who cheat the poor.

That workers identify with the 'suffering' social groups of Ghanaian society is not surprising. Though workers' incomes are superior (and more secure) than those of most other sections of the poor, the majority of them do not enjoy a really 'aristocratic' income. The minimum wage raised to 2 Cedi a day (54 Cedi a month) in 1974 was generally considered a 'starvation wage', and the Ghanaian trade union movement proposed a minimum-wage of 4 Cedi a day (108 Cedi a month) as a 'bare minimum'. A wage of under 150 - 200 Cedi is entirely insufficient to cope with the high cost of living when one takes account of the present 150 - 200% inflation rate. Table 2 shows that only the most skilled senior workers earned more than 200 Cedi (these are foremen belonging to the 'senior staff'); the remainder of the workers earned considerably less. Moreover, workers' income is seriously eroded by extended family obligations. I found that the workers with the highest incomes also had to bear the burden of the highest number of dependents. However, the income gap between the workers and other sections of the poor is only minimal in comparison with the income gap between workers and the top layers in Ghanaian society. The difference between the lowest and highest paid members of the Public Service in Ghana was in the ratio of 1:25 in 1974.

There is a strong resentment amongst Valco workers against the growing social inequality and a clear awareness that the state maintains the large income disparities despite all the rhetoric of a 'national revolution' and 'bridging the gap between the low and high income groups', and that the bureaucratic bourgeoisie flaunts a glittering affluence. Though the NRC had just raised the minimum wage to 2 Cedi a day in the year preceding my fieldwork (1974), the large

Table 3. *Who should own big foreign companies like Valco?* (percentages)

	Unskilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled	Clerical	TOTAL
State	78	43	69.5	50	64.5
Present owners	11	43	17	50	23.5
Workers themselves	11		9		7
Ghanaian private owners			4.5		2
No answer		14			3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>102</b>

Table 4. *Social groups 'enjoying' in Ghanaian society (percentages)*

	Unskilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled	Clerical	TOTAL
Top government officials/civil servants	22.5	57	48	50	43
High income groups/big men	22.5		17.5	25	15.5
Foreign and Ghanaian capitalists		28.5	13.5		11.5
Top army officers	33		4		11
Traders/middlemen	22		8.5		10
Managers		14.5	8.5	25	9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0
N	27	21	46	8	102

Table 5. *Social groups 'suffering' in Ghanaian society (percentages)*

	Unskilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled	Clerical	TOTAL
Workers/labourers	44.5	28.5	48		39
Low income groups/the poor	22	28.5	26	50	27
Unemployed	11.5	28.5	13		17
Poor peasants	22			25	8
Everybody			13		6
Disabled/sick		14.5		25	3
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100	100	100
N	27	21	46	8	102

majority of workers (81%) accused the government of favoring the dominant classes/'big men' over the workers. One of the main effects of the large income disparities and state patronage of the rich and powerful is that the impact on workers' behaviour of constant government appeals to raise productivity is minimal. Workers are not willing to make 'sacrifices' for the sake of 'nation-building' unless those classes which appear to thrive on the proceeds of the workers' hard labour also share the sacrifice.

However, workers neither strive for a complete restructuring of the social structure nor for the seizure of political power to improve their own position in society. They do not champion revolution, but only want certain reforms within the present status quo. Though Valco workers strongly resent the present large social inequalities, they do not advocate social equality. They want the present income gap to be narrowed; since the 1966 coup the Ghanaian trade union movement has often proposed a ratio of 1:10 between the lowest and highest incomes. Workers accept the legitimacy of 'reasonable' income disparities as long as these correspond to education, initiative, hard work and responsibility. Workers often admire the 'self-made' men and aspire to become small entrepreneurs in the petty commodity sector themselves.

The workers condemn a government that is elitist, corrupt, repressive and unconcerned with their lot, and most workers consider the present government as such, for only 19% of the workers expected any help or support from the government. Though they do not possess a clear vision of an alternative socio-political order, workers advocate a government that shows more concern for their own lot, one that both leaves workers free to organise and to defend their interests and tries to narrow the gap between the low and high income groups. Most workers, however, do not consider it necessary to seize political power, within the present power structure in Ghana, in order to establish the kind of government they want. Seventy-two per cent of the workers still think that more union pressure on the government or a (larger) representation of the workers in the government, will make it more responsive to their interests, and will lead to changes in the society favourable to the workers.

The foregoing shows the emergence of an incipient working-class consciousness among Valco workers. Most workers perceive the social structure in precise class terms and try to defend their interests against those classes that they view as exploiting and oppressing the workers. However, the feeling that they are exploited in the system of production, their rejection of the present inegalitarian status quo and their resentment against the state for maintaining the present status quo, have not given rise to the emergence of a radical or revolutionary class consciousness but to a reformist consciousness. Workers do not advocate a fundamental restructuring of the status quo or the seizure of political power, but desire specific reforms within the present status quo, especially the establishment of a more egalitarian, more democratic society and a more prosperous existence for the workers.

#### ORGANISATION AND ACTION OF VALCO WORKERS

Because of the established check-off system in Valco, all Valco workers are members of the local branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) - the largest union in Ghana, with more than 80,000 members. Though compulsory membership in the union does not necessarily imply interest in, nor even active participation in trade union affairs, Valco workers have developed a hardy 'trade union consciousness'. The large majority of Valco workers realize that they cannot fight individually against the superior power of employer/management, which is backed by the state, and appreciate membership in an organisation that wants to defend the workers' interests.

Partly out of conviction ('the necessity of nation-building') and partly out of constraint (government pressure) the ICU has generally preached 'the historic role of workers as builders of the new nation'. It has tried to mobilize workers 'not for war, but for peace, not for destruction but for production, not for aggression but for service'.<sup>9)</sup> The ICU is constantly exhorting workers to raise productivity and to avoid strikes as the workers' contribution to national development; it tries to raise the living standard of the workers and to bring about certain reforms within the present status quo by collective bargaining with management and state. The ICU has avoided playing any overt political role, and has even tenaciously adhered to collective bargaining after the bloody suppression of various 'wildcat' strikes. Its identification with the state's developmentalist ideology

<sup>9)</sup> TUC Newsletter, vol. 3, no. 6, June 1975; and vol. 3, no. 3, March, 1975.

and its moderate economic strategy (the abandonment of strike threats and actions) have undoubtedly enabled the union to survive under the relatively repressive regimes after independence; however, its frequent compromises with state and management have often harmed the class interests of the members. The few economic concessions the union obtained in the years after independence were insufficient to compensate workers for the increasing cost of living in the sixties and seventies.

The national union's identification with the state's developmentalist ideology and its strict adherence to the 'official' bargaining structures are considered by a large number of workers a betrayal of their interests and a 'selling out' of workers to management and state. As one worker remarked: 'National union officers, managers and government are bed-fellows in the exploitation of labour'. The workers' distrust of the national union leaders is strengthened by the leaders' increasing estrangement from the workers' hard life: their high income, elitist life-style and the bureaucratization of union affairs on a national level. Only 2% of the Valco workers were able to name a single national leader, and only 11.5% believed that the national union leaders did a good job for the workers. Valco workers have more faith in their local branch leaders who live close to the workers, and over whose conduct they have greater control. Workers told me: 'It is traditional that our leaders must live up to certain expectations - they should be bold and radical, defending workers' interests and not their own, and close to the workers - and whenever they fall short of these expectations they are kicked out'. Local branch leaders are expected to extract a larger share of the company's profits on behalf of the workers by any means, and are evaluated upon this criterion. The pressure 'to deliver the goods', and their living close to the rank and file (who may constantly take them to task informally), is likely to force them to identify with this rank and file and their 'consumptionist' demands, rather than with government/management and the national union's 'productionist' demands.

Whilst the local union members, like the national union leaders, consider collective bargaining the 'normal' procedure to extract economic gains, they do not want to abandon the strike (and other forms of action) as a last weapon for defending their interests. That workers want to retain the strike as a bargaining weapon, is the more significant as strikes were almost completely outlawed after independence. 'Illegal' strikes, though primarily aiming at the extraction of economic benefits, inevitably become political strikes. And indeed, 'illegal' strikes often arise from the workers' deeply felt resentment against the present inegalitarian status quo.

Though local union members do not want to give up the right to strike in the last instance, only few strikes have actually taken place at Valco. Various reasons can be given to explain this discrepancy between attitudes and behaviour:

- the Valco personnel management consists of old TUC leaders who are quite experienced in dealing with industrial unrest. As soon as they suspect the possibility of a collective strike action, they quickly summon the labour leaders and either offer them promotion or declare them redundant. These and other tactics (as, for instance, partly giving in to workers demands) are likely to break the united front of the workers.

- workers are well aware that management and the state mete out severe punish-

ment to participants of 'illegal' strikes, especially to strikers in the country's vital industries: sometimes violent police charges against striking workers, incarceration of labour leaders and large-scale dismissals.

- Valco workers prefer to resort to other forms of action to protest against their exploitation: sabotage, absenteeism and restriction of output, and theft of company documents to be used against management. Valco workers have developed a systematic use of the 'slow-down' method (go-slow) which is more difficult to control by state and management, and has resulted in serious losses in the company's profits. Local union leaders threaten to use or actually do make use of the 'slow-down' method to show the workers' 'power' to management and to strengthen their bargaining position.

- Local union leaders consider strike actions in one Valco subsidiary not fully effective. They would like to establish closer links with workers in other Valco subsidiaries which could give rise to international class action. However, they are well aware of the difficulties involved. Valco management would do everything to prevent international co-operation, and would dismiss instantly anyone propagating that idea.

The (normal) reliance of workers on collective bargaining to improve their lot has now become much less because of the minimal benefits resulting from collective bargaining in a situation of serious inflation. Twenty percent of Valco workers stated in 1975 that strikes and go-slows were the only means 'to bring management and government to their knees' and to improve their lot. It may be expected that the present record inflation (150 - 200%) will give rise to increasing militancy among workers. A radicalization of the rank and file will certainly meet an even harder repression from the side of the state, leading probably to a situation in Ghana that militant actions on the local level (in particular 'wildcat' strikes) and severe repression will alternate. Yet, it is not altogether excluded that the national union leaders will become more militant in the future as well so as not to lose all support from the rank and file. Though the Ghanaian national union leaders still condemn 'advocates of confrontation' between unions and government and have not participated in political actions by specific sections of the middle class against the regime in 1977-78, they have pressed the necessity for 'an unperverted socialist form of government' in Ghana in the near future.<sup>4)</sup> It remains to be seen whether they will keep their promise to co-operate with other groups and organisations which advocate the establishment of a socialist system in Ghana, whether they will create education-programmes for local union leaders and members in order to win them over to their socialist ideal, and whether there will be a significant change in their ideology and strategy.

## CONCLUSION

In this conclusion I shall return to the introductory question: what is the political consciousness and political action of Valco workers?

I did not find any convincing evidence supporting Arrighi and Saul's labour aristocracy thesis. Valco workers are not economically and socially segregated from the urban poor and in league with the dominant classes of society. Their

<sup>4)</sup> See Africa, no. 68, April, 1977, p. 35; and West Africa, 6 February 1978, p. 262.

income, eroded by inflation and consumed by the large number of dependents in rural and urban areas, is not so much higher than that of most other sections of the urban poor. However, Valco workers feel relatively deprived in comparison with the dominant classes in Ghanaian society, because the gap in income between them and the dominant classes in society is vast and growing; this is the reason for their strong resentment against the highly inegalitarian status quo.

Moreover, I found little proof of the existence of a populist consciousness among Valco workers. Relatively few workers perceived the social structure in terms of a large, but vague gap between 'the poor' and 'the rich and powerful' that could give rise to a sustained mobilization and a common struggle of workers and other sections of the urban poor against the exploitative and oppressive 'big men'. Various factors do make for an identification of interests with other sections of the urban poor. They live together in towns, want to become self-employed in the future, and are drawn into the problems of unemployed relatives. Petty traders and producers depend upon the purchasing power of the workers. There are, however, also factors that promote mutual tensions and conflicts, and these are often exploited by the dominant classes of society. The workers mistrust the 'industrial reserve army' that threatens their own security of employment and exercises a downward pressure on wages, and they accuse petty traders and producers of cheating workers by charging 'exorbitant' prices. In 1977-78 there were several clashes, instigated by the state, between workers and petty traders and market women who were selling consumer goods above controlled prices.<sup>5)</sup>

Valco workers have clearly developed an incipient working-class consciousness: most of them perceive the social structure in class terms and try to defend their interests against specific social classes. The obvious reasons for the emergence of a working-class consciousness among Valco workers are:

- the concentration of stabilized workers in a large enterprise (and their living together in working-class communities at Tema and on the periphery of Tema). This promotes not only communication and the development of a common consciousness, which is manifested by the absence of any marked differences in the responses to the questions posed among the various occupational levels, but it also promotes a sense of solidarity against a common (impersonal) employer/management.
- the constant confrontation with the state which maintains the present inegalitarian status quo, determines wages and tries to control workers.
- the relatively high educational level of workers in large enterprises in comparison with (most) workers in small and medium-sized enterprises. Workers with a higher educational level are more likely to develop a 'theory' of exploitation and to perceive the social structure in class terms than workers with a lower educational level (Sandbrook and Arn, 1977; and Sandbrook, 1977).

Strong feelings of exploitation in the system of production, and resentment against the inegalitarian status quo, have not given rise to the emergence of a radical or revolutionary working-class consciousness but to one that is economic-reformist. Workers do not fight for a fundamental restructuring of the present

status quo, but for an improvement of their living standards and for incremental changes within the status quo. The reasons for the absence of a radical/revolutionary consciousness among workers are:

- the co-existence of various modes of production in Ghana. A small number of workers were also active in the petty commodity sector, and most of them long to be self-employed in the future. It is evident that such petty-bourgeois aspirations retard the development of a radical working-class consciousness
- the constant confrontation of workers with the value system and ideology of the dominant classes in society: a value system which supports individual competition and enrichment, social mobility, respect and admiration for those who have achieved power and wealth; and ideologies like African socialism, nation-building and 'national revolution' which have neither questioned nor attacked the emergent class structure.
- the absence of a radical/revolutionary ideology and leadership. There are no radical parties in Ghana and the ICU has always dissociated itself from an politicization of the rank and file. It has never resorted to actions that went beyond economic-reformist goals. Kraus very properly observed that

'one of the most important criticisms that must be levelled at accommodationist-reformist union strategies... is the failure to articulate to members as sharply as is necessary the tendencies towards inequalities and the emergence of class structures... Such accommodationist strategies are particularly disastrous for members in periods of rapid inflation, such as Ghana has had since 1972. In this sense union organisation can serve to stifle and contain explosions of worker discontent at rapidly falling wages. It also serves to blunt alternative political strategies. It is the politics of survival, and rebellion must come from below' (Kraus, 1977).

Though Valco workers do not possess a (clear) vision of an alternative social political order, they know who they must fight against. It may be expected that the present record inflation will sharpen the workers' conflict with management and national union leadership, and increase working-class actions. The growing militancy of the rank and file (and the subsequent severe repressive measures on the part of the state), however, may bring about a radicalization of the national union leaders, whose position ultimately depends on the votes of the workers. The national leaders' call for a future socialist state in the tense political atmosphere of Ghana in 1977 may be an indication of a more overt political role for the unions in the future. Yet, whether or not the national union leaders will become more militant in the future, in 1961 and 1971, workers in Ghana showed their protest against oppression by elitist regimes following independence, have shown a capacity to organise working-class actions even beyond the local level.

<sup>5)</sup> West Africa, 14 November 1977, p. 2328; and 20 November 1977, p. 2383.

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