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Citation

Konings, P. J. J. (1995). Plantation labour and economic crisis in Cameroon. *Development And Change*, 26(3), 525-549. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4610>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Plantation Labour and Economic Crisis in Cameroon

Piet Konings

ABSTRACT

The few existing studies on the response of labour to the economic crisis and structural adjustment in African countries tend to focus on the (oppositional) relations between the state and central labour organizations. They largely ignore the response of workers and unions at the workplace. This article describes how workers and unions in the tea estates of Cameroon have dealt with the economic crisis and structural adjustment. It shows that the workers have adopted various strategies to cope with the structural adjustment measures planned and implemented by the management in close co-operation with the state-controlled unions. Two striking facts to emerge from the analysis are that the majority of the estate workers have never completely abandoned their 'traditional' militancy, and that gender differences in the degree and modes of labour resistance tend to be slight.

For many years, the economy of Cameroon was viewed as one of the rare success stories in Africa. This assessment was not without foundation: Cameroon's economic performance was quite impressive, registering a phenomenal growth rate of 6–7 per cent during the period 1970–86 (Jua, 1991). However, as Hugon (1968) was the first to point out, this optimistic view tended to ignore certain weaknesses in the domestic economy which constantly threatened the 'growth miracle', particularly the economy's almost complete dependence on the export of agricultural raw materials and—more recently—of oil.

This particular weakness became increasingly manifest from the mid-1980s onwards, when the sharp fall in the prices of these commodities on the world market, together with the 40 per cent depreciation of the US dollar relative to the CFA franc, plunged the domestic economy into severe crisis. The situation was worsened by large-scale mismanagement, embezzlement and capital flight estimated at FCFA 150 bn. a year—a quarter of the annual national budget. Apparently, the much-trumpeted slogans of 'rigour and moralization' which Paul Biya coined on succeeding Ahmadou Ahidjo as President in 1982 had been nothing but lip-service. After some hesitation, the government was forced to adopt a Structural Adjustment Plan (SAP) in 1988/89, which contained such conventional prescriptions as important cuts in public expenditures, increased state revenues, privatization, rehabilitation or elimination of almost all the nation's parastatals, as well as thoroughgoing liberalization (van der Walle, 1990).

Surprisingly, while it is now widely accepted that wage workers are among the most seriously affected by the economic crisis and SAPs in Africa, their response has hardly been studied. The existing literature tends to focus upon the actions of the central labour organizations in defence of their members' interests. There seems to have been a large variation in the role played by these organizations in African states: it is said to have been 'spectacular' in Zambia (Simutanyi, 1992), 'considerable' in Nigeria (Olukoshi and Aremu, 1988), 'unexpectedly low' in Ghana (Herbst, 1991), and 'absent' in Cameroon (Mehler, 1993). Although there are references to the responses of the workers themselves, these are seldom based on research at the local level. This may give rise to easy generalizations and even to incomplete or false interpretations of workers' responses, for numerous studies of organized labour have highlighted the remarkable differences in workers' consciousness and action between and within African states, and the contradictions between the rank and file and the union leadership (see Jeffries, 1978; Sandbrook and Cohen, 1975).

Nigeria is one of the few countries in Africa for which empirical studies on local workers' responses to the economic crisis and SAP exist. These studies seem to come to different conclusions. In a recent article, Oloyede (1992) claims that shop floor workers in a local subsidiary of a Dutch electronics multinational were more likely, on the basis of a rational calculation of benefits and costs, to adopt an individual survival orientation than a collective oppositional posture to managerial adjustment measures—the benefit in this case being individual security or tenure and the cost, perhaps, the further weakening of collectivism which the individual pursuit of security may bring about. Some other case studies, however, do not support Oloyede's claim: Bangura (1991) and Bangura and Beckman (1993), for example, argue that Nigerian industrial workers have continued to oppose managerial adjustment measures.

This article examines the response of plantation workers in Nigeria's neighbour, Cameroon. The data are derived from intensive fieldwork in the tea estates of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), one of the oldest and by far the largest agro-industrial parastatal in Cameroon (see Konings, 1993). A study of the tea pluckers' responses to the crisis is all the more interesting since the labour force on one of the two selected estates is female-dominated. This enables us to explore the possibility of gender-related differences in the pluckers' responses, taking into account the frequent assumption in managerial circles that female workers tend to be more docile and disciplined because of women's persistent subordination to patriarchal domination in society (cf. Elson and Pearson, 1984; Mies, 1986).

THE CDC AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

The CDC is a large agro-industrial parastatal located in the present South West Province of anglophone Cameroon. It was founded in 1946/47, for the

purpose of developing and managing the approximately 100,000 ha of estate lands confiscated by the British Trusteeship Authority from the German planters at the start of World War II (Konings, 1993). Between 1946/47 and 1985/86, it almost doubled its cultivated area, from about 20,000 ha to 40,000 ha, with the assistance of huge loans from several well-known financial institutions, including the World Bank, the International Development Association (IDA), the European Development Fund (FED), the Commonwealth Development Corporation (COMDEV), and the (French) Central Fund for Economic Cooperation (CCCE). It is still the second largest employer of labour in the country, surpassed only by the government itself. In the early 1950s it employed about 25,000 workers. At present, it employs about 15,000 permanent workers and a few thousand seasonal and casual workers. Its main crops are rubber, palm oil, bananas and tea. It owns three tea estates and at present enjoys a monopoly on tea production in the country.

In the years immediately preceding the economic crisis (1983/84–1985/86), the corporation was still making substantial profits, totalling FCFA 3.2 bn. The crisis, however, had a dramatic impact on the financial situation of the corporation: during the period 1986/87–1990/91 it suffered a loss of about FCFA 19 bn.¹ There is no doubt that the sharp fall in commodity prices in the world market was principally responsible for the virtual bankruptcy of the corporation. Nevertheless, there were other factors which also contributed to the emergence and continuation of the crisis. First, there was the political élite's inability or unwillingness to control the imports of cheap tea and palm oil, which impeded CDC sales on the domestic market. Second, there have been frequent reports of the managerial élite's involvement in massive embezzlement, reckless expenditure, waste, and struggles for power often based on ethnic considerations: small wonder that many CDC workers did not believe that the management would be capable of effectively combating the crisis.

The government used to subsidize parastatal enterprises annually, irrespective of performance: by 1988, annual parastatal subsidies amounted to about FCFA 150 bn. (van der Walle, 1990). Faced with a severe economic crisis, the government could no longer render any financial assistance to the CDC. To save the corporation from total collapse, the management and the unions agreed to adopt a series of adjustment measures aimed at cost reduction and productivity increase. This managerial strategy for economic recovery was reinforced in 1989/90 when the IMF-inspired SAP demanded a restructuring of the parastatal sector. The CDC was then obliged to sign a four-year performance contract (1989/90–1993/94) with the government (Tedga, 1990), under which the corporation was expected to achieve a set of objectives in the area of plantation development, costs of production,

1. See CDC *Annual Reports and Accounts*, 1983–91; Yaoundé: SOPECAM.

quantity and quality of output, and productivity of personnel. In return, the government wrote off some of the corporation's debts and exempted it from the payment of certain taxes. Soon after the signing of this contract, the CDC General Manager announced a managerial crusade against 'undisciplined and unproductive' workers:

In the Contract Plan drawn up and signed by the Government of Cameroon and the Corporation, the corporation is required to meet certain standards of efficiency and to be self-supporting and profitable ... That is why we have to be generally very strict on discipline and sanction any manifestation of laxity ... Maximum efforts shall be required of employees so as to continue producing more at lower and lower cost; laxity and *laissez faire* which are characterized by an alarming rate of absenteeism and uncompleted tasks shall not be tolerated.²

The various adjustment measures brought some relief to the company's liquidity problems but, owing to the continuous decline in commodity prices, the company's survival remained precarious. In June 1992, the Biya government, which is highly dependent on French support, managed to obtain a FCFA 7 bn. low-interest loan from the CCCE for the ailing company. Although this loan provided much-needed capital for investment purposes, the increased control of the French over the corporation was strongly resented by CDC workers and the wider public in Anglophone Cameroon. One of the clauses of the loan agreement with the CCCE obliged the corporation to reorganize the tea sector, with a view to improving the marketing of tea. By the end of 1992, it was made known that an agreement had been signed between the CDC and COMDEV which transferred the management of the three tea estates to COMDEV for a period of ten years. COMDEV will run the tea sector as an autonomous enterprise and will pay a royalty of FCFA 80 per kg of tea sold. Given that the corporation had already entrusted the management of the banana sector to Del Monte in 1987, tea thus became the second major crop of the corporation to fall under foreign management. As the CCCE seems to be interested in taking over the management of the CDC oil palm sector, these developments seem likely to lead to the eventual fragmentation and privatization of this sizeable corporation which was once the pride of Anglophone Cameroon.

TRADE UNIONISM IN THE CDC AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Trade unionism in the CDC has a long history. Immediately after the foundation of the corporation in 1946/47, a trade union was established on the CDC estates and duly registered. This union, the so-called Cameroon

2. Circular in file MEPS/SWP/BU.134/vol. IV, General Correspondence CDC. These documents are located in the archives of the Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare at Buea.

Development Corporation Workers' Union (CDCWU), was soon to become one of the largest and most powerful trade unions in West-Central Africa (Warmington, 1960).

In contrast to the CDC management, the British Trusteeship Authority was not opposed to the formation of this union, if only as a more sophisticated means of labour control. As in other British colonies, the Labour Department was quite successful in propagating within the newly established union a specific trade union model which may be best described as 'free, but responsible' trade unionism (Sandbrook, 1975). This trade union model actively advised trade unionists to stay away from 'politics' and to solve conflicts with employers in a cordial manner, through negotiation and collective bargaining, rather than through strikes. The strike weapon should be used only as a last resort, if all other means of settling disputes, including conciliation and arbitration, had failed. I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the introduction of this trade union model resulted in the emergence of internal contradictions within the CDCWU (Konings, 1993). On the one hand, there were the union leaders who were mainly recruited among the supervisory staff members and clerical workers. Being relatively moderate in both their political and economic demands, they tended to cling to the ideals of 'union autonomy' and 'union responsibility' which were impressed upon them by the Labour Department and international 'free' labour organizations. On the other hand, there was the vast majority of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who, in view of management's recalcitrant attitude, were less inclined than the union leaders to have faith in the efficacy of the institutionalized procedures of joint negotiation and collective bargaining, and were more committed to militant action. These contradictions in the relationship between the rank and file and the union leadership were never fully worked out during the period of the CDCWU's existence (1947-72). This was mainly due to the fact that the generally moderate trade union leadership was pressurized by the rank and file into adopting a relatively aggressive bargaining policy with regard to the management and the government, employing the strike option as a 'tactical weapon' (see Paige, 1975): not only was strike action frequently threatened, but it was also regularly employed, with workers called out on strike if all 'peaceful' means of settling conflicts had been exhausted. As a result, the union leaders tended to enjoy massive support among the rank and file.

By the end of the 1960s, however, the post-colonial state was increasingly beginning to intervene in the system of industrial relations and to curtail union autonomy, with a view to curbing labour militancy and establishing 'total' control over civil society (Bayart, 1979). The 1967 Federal Labour Code virtually outlawed strike action in the country, seriously weakening the union's bargaining position. Despite strong resistance on the part of the CDCWU leadership, trade unionism in the CDC became state-controlled in 1972. In a subsequent reorganization of trade unionism, the CDCWU was dissolved and its members were required to join the newly created divisional

unions of agricultural workers. This reorganization had a number of disastrous consequences for trade unionism in the CDC. First, it became subordinated to the single party. Its primary responsibility was to turn workers into party 'militants' and to educate them in the need for increased production and constant dialogue with the employers. There were high expectations among the party leaders that the new trade union model was going to accomplish what the Trusteeship model of autonomous trade unionism had failed to achieve: the transformation of trade unionism into an instrument of labour control and a 'responsible' partner in national development. The second major consequence was the fragmentation of the union, which created severe obstacles to united trade union actions. Since the reorganization of trade unionism on a divisional basis, CDC workers belong to five different unions of agricultural workers, membership depending on the administrative division in which they are employed. Since most CDC estates are located in the Fako Division of the South West Province, the largest proportion of CDC workers belong to the Fako Agricultural Workers' Union (FAWU).

Thirdly, the union became paralysed by lack of funds. Through the introduction of a new system for the distribution of the check-off contributions, the divisional unions were to receive not more than 50 per cent of members' contributions. Moreover, a state-controlled National Committee for Trade Union Contributions in Yaoundé was made responsible for the collection and allocation of the check-off contributions in the whole country, resulting—unsurprisingly—in frequent and often prolonged delays in the remittance of monies to the divisional unions, and in large-scale misappropriation of funds. This financial crisis prevented the divisional unions from employing more than a few full-time officers and from organizing any activities such as educational courses. Finally, the union was stripped of any popular participation in the decision-making process. Trade unionism became virtually a one-man affair, in the person of the president of the divisional union: he owed his position more to the party's selection than to the workers' vote and could hardly be removed from office as long as he enjoyed the party's support. He tended to run the union without any regular consultation of the rank and file on policy matters or allocation of funds; indeed, Executive Committee, Congress or mass meetings became rare events. The union president also tried to control the shop stewards who had been introduced in the corporation in 1968. Rather like party elections, union members were presented with a list of 'screened' candidates; all that the workers could do was approve the union nominees, leaving them with virtually no say in who should represent them. Out of protest, the workers sometimes refused to vote. Any shop steward who caused 'trouble' to the management or opposed the 'one-man rule' over the union ran the risk of being victimized by the president.

It was after the reorganization of trade unionism in 1972 that the contradictions between the union leadership and the rank and file became

increasingly obvious. Co-opted in the control structure over labour, the union leadership rapidly lost popular support. Even more significantly, it proved to be incapable of containing the rank and file's 'traditional' militancy, as reflected in the large-scale participation of CDC workers in several 'illegal' strike actions after 1972 (Konings, 1993).

Interestingly, following the introduction of a multi-party system in the country in 1990, CDC workers began to pressurize the union leadership to fight for a return to trade union autonomy. Most of the CDC workers hail from the North West Province and are strong supporters of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the major opposition party based in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province, which started the struggle against the one-party state (Mehler, 1993). Mr C. P. N. Vewessee, once chairman of the CDCWU and since 1974 president of the FAWU, also joined the opposition and soon became one of the most outspoken advocates of trade union autonomy. In February 1991, he declared:

The workers expect an independent and strong trade union organization that would be autonomous in relation to all political parties and state bodies and institutions . . . This will relieve the trade union of the rubber stamp element in the country's political life. If the trade union does not become more militant and resolute in its demands, it will not be of much help to the workers. (*Cameroon Post* 20–27 February 1991, p. 11)

Vewessee also dared to condemn the corrupt leadership of the Confederal Bureau of the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC) for its continuing alliance with the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and its complete neglect of the defence of the workers' interests during the economic crisis and structural adjustment programme—a criticism that would have been impossible before the introduction of multipartyism in 1991. His relentless efforts yielded some success: on 2 April 1991, the CTUC leadership publicly announced that union members were henceforth free to join any party of their choice (*Cameroon Tribune* 9 April 1991, p. 5). However, during the executive elections at the CTUC Congress in May 1992, which were clearly manipulated by the ruling CPDM party, Vewessee failed to dissuade most delegates from voting an alternative member of the CPDM's Central Committee, Mr Etame Ndidi, into the office of president of the central labour organization.³

Unfortunately, before the union leadership became involved in the struggle for a return to trade union autonomy, it was already confronted with the unprecedented economic crisis in the corporation. This crisis tended to weaken further the bargaining position of the state-controlled unions *vis-à-vis* the management. Their principal strategy became the protection of the workers against retrenchment, even if this would demand some curtailments in past gains.

3. See *The Standard* 29 June–15 July 1992, p. 3; and *Cameroon Post* 17–24 June 1992, p. 6.

In 1987, the union presidents on the corporation's estates were approached by the CDC management to assist in the planning and implementation of adjustment measures. The management apparently assumed that the assistance of the unions would be important in controlling the anticipated resistance of the workers to a painful adjustment programme. This assumption was questionable; such assistance on the part of the union leaders was just as likely to enhance workers' dissatisfaction with the union leadership and result in their refusal to co-operate. However, the union presidents eventually agreed to assist the management in its struggle for economic recovery.⁴ There were a number of factors behind this decision, including the fact that, since the reorganization of trade unionism in 1972, the unions had become used to solving problems with the management and the state through peaceful negotiations rather than through confrontation. In this particular case, the union presidents agreed with the management that, given the corporation's inability to secure any loans or public subsidies during the crisis, cost reduction and productivity increase were necessary prerequisites for economic recovery. Furthermore, they were assured by the management that nobody in the corporation would be exempted from making sacrifices for the sake of economic recovery. Finally, they hoped that the implementation of an adjustment programme would safeguard the jobs of the sizeable CDC labour force.

On 23 August 1987 the union presidents agreed with the management upon a substantial increase in the productivity required of estate workers. For example, the daily quota required from tea pluckers was raised from 26 kgs to 32 kgs of green leaves. The union leaders assured the management that they would elicit the support of the workers for this measure.⁵ As the corporation's financial position continued to deteriorate, the management proposed further 'austerity' measures to the union presidents. After some negotiations, a new agreement was signed on 6 January 1990, entailing drastic cuts in the salaries and fringe benefits of all the workers and managerial staff members, amounting to some 30–40 per cent of their previous incomes. The corporation used to supply the workers with free housing, water, electricity and medical facilities; henceforth, they were obliged to make substantial contributions towards the supply of these services. The most draconian measure, however, was the introduction of a compulsory savings scheme, forcing the workers to save at least 15 per cent

4. See letter from Mr C. P. N. Vewessee, President FAWU, to Provincial Delegate of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 13 May 1992, in file MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/LB.2/vol. XXVII, Complaints from CDC (Buea: archives of Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare).
5. See Report of the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Limbe, on Mass Meetings with the Workers of the CDC Estates/Services in connection with the Economic Crisis, in file MEPS/SWP/BU.134/vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence (Buea: archives of Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare).

of their basic wages and salaries for the corporation's recovery.⁶ It has been estimated that the compulsory savings and fringe benefits contributed by the workers during the period February 1990–February 1992 totalled about FCFA 2.9 bn.⁷

Following the achievement of a degree of trade union autonomy in 1991, the union presidents became somewhat more responsive to the sufferings of the workers and began to criticize the adjustment programme they had previously supported. On their urgent request, the CDC General Manager organized an appraisal meeting of the January 1990 agreement. During this meeting (on 14 March 1992), the FAWU president, Mr Vewessee, insisted upon the termination or modification of the workers' financial contributions to the corporation's economic recovery. He justified this remarkable change in the unions' position as follows:⁸

- The unions had expected that the increased output and financial sacrifices of the workers would have forestalled, or at least minimized, any retrenchment. This had proved to be wishful thinking, and the management had embarked upon mass lay-offs of workers. For example, during the period 1986/87–1990/91 the labour force at the Tole and Ndu Tea Estates had been reduced from 1546 to 974 and from 1750 to 1333 respectively.
- The unions had expected the government to take appropriate measures to stabilize the prices of essential commodities and to standardize the wages of the agro-industrial parastatals: this had not happened. Neither had the National Social Insurance Fund continued to pay family allowances to the workers. In fact, prices had sky-rocketed after the political opposition's 'ghost town' campaign,⁹ wages had been frozen since July 1985, and taxes had been increased by 100 per cent. As a result, CDC workers 'would now seem to be carrying out forced labour as a majority of the labour force has no take home wages at the end of the month'.
- The unions had supported the 6 January 1990 agreement because the CDC was at that time unable to obtain financial aid. This situation,

6. See Agreement between the CDC General Manager and the Presidents of the Divisional Agricultural Workers' Union from Fako, Meme, Mounjo, Ndian, Menoua and Donga-Mantung, dated 6 January 1990.
7. See *Cameroon Post* 19–26 February 1992, p. 6.
8. See Minutes of the Second Appraisal Meeting of the 6 January 1990 Agreement between the CDC Management and the Workers' Unions which was held in the General Manager's Office on 14 March 1992, in file MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/LB.2/vol. XXVII, Complaints from CDC (Buea: archives of Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare).
9. This was a campaign of civil disobedience organized by the opposition parties to force the Biya-regime to call a national conference. It involved the stoppage of all work, all trade, and all traffic in the towns, except for Friday evenings and Saturdays, resulting in huge personal and public financial losses and an aggravation of the economic crisis.

however, had recently changed, with the CCCE grant of a FCFA 7 bn. loan to the corporation. Consequently, the workers were no longer willing to make any further sacrifices for the corporation's recovery.

- The unions would no longer tolerate the fact that the workers were making sacrifices for economic recovery while the political and managerial élite 'continued to loot the parastatals'.¹⁰

The management refused to withdraw the 6 January 1990 agreement. The only concession it was willing to make was a 3 per cent reduction in the compulsory savings rate, to partially compensate the workers for the tax increases. This was unacceptable to the unions. As the management declined to reconsider its offer, the FAWU president, Mr Vewessee, declared a collective trade dispute on 13 May 1992. When the management tried to employ delaying tactics, CDC workers in the Fako Division went on strike (21 to 26 May 1992). After this strike, the management agreed upon various amendments of the 6 January 1990 agreement, including the re-introduction of free accommodation and water to the workers, and a 24 per cent reduction in medical costs.¹¹

Although there was a certain improvement in the relationship between the union leadership and the management after these amendments, tensions and conflicts have never completely disappeared. The union presidents complain regularly about the management's lack of consultation with the unions, while the management, in turn, constantly stresses that in a situation of crisis the unions should concentrate on an increase in labour productivity rather than on the representation of workers' interests.

TEA PLUCKERS AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

In order to examine the CDC workers' response to the adjustment measures, I carried out intensive research on two CDC tea estates during the period 1991-3 (see Konings, forthcoming). These estates were created during the 1950s, when the British Trusteeship Authority started to actively promote local tea production. The first, the Tole Tea Estate, was created in 1954 in the Fako Division of the South West Province. It is the only CDC estate which employs predominantly female pluckers, the majority of them originating from the North West Province, the 'traditional' labour reserve

10. See also Labour Day speech by Mr C. P. N. Vewessee on 1 May 1991, in *Messenger*(e) 13 May 1991, p. 4.

11. See Addendum to the Agreement of Sixth January 1990 between the CDC and its Workers represented by the Presidents of Fako, Meme, Moungo, Ndián, Menoua and Donga-Mantung Agricultural Workers' Unions, in file MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/LB.2/vol. XXVII, Complaints from CDC (Buea: archives of Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare).

for the coastal plantations (DeLancey, 1974). The second estate, the Ndu Tea Estate, was created in 1957. It is located in the Donga-Mantung Division of the North West Province. It was owned by a British-Indian multinational, the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC), which had substantial tea interests in India and Sri Lanka, and was taken over by the CDC in 1977. At present, it is the only CDC estate in the North West Province and one of the few CDC estates without labour camps. It employs almost exclusively local male labour.

The gender difference in the labour forces employed on these estates is by no means accidental. It is the outcome of two potentially conflicting factors: on the one hand, the capitalist preference for female pluckers and, on the other, the patriarchal control over female labour in the local communities (see Stichter and Parpart, 1988). There has long been a demand for female labour on tea estates throughout the world. Tea estates, in fact, were among the few capitalist enterprises during colonial rule that gave preference to female over male labour. The rationale for this preference was the managerial belief that women tended to be more productive than men in certain tasks (they had 'nimble fingers' and were, therefore, naturally suited to plucking tea), as well as being more docile and cheaper. This preferential demand formed a direct threat to customary patriarchal control over female labour. In 1952, just a few years before the creation of the two tea estates, Kaberry published her classic study of women in the present North West Province. Throughout the book she emphasizes the contradictory position of women in society. On the one hand, there is the general recognition that women play an indispensable role in society as child bearers and food producers. On the other hand, they are subordinated to patriarchal controls in society. These contradictions in the position of women, however, may not be as puzzling as they first appear. Control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour constituted the basis of men's prestige, power and wealth in society. In a recent study of women in the North West Province, Goheen (1993: 250) observes:

Women grew the food crops and were expected to provide the necessities of daily life from their farms. Women's productive labour forced men to participate in (lucrative) trading networks; their reproductive labour increased the size of the household and thus the status and the labour force of the male head. Any surplus value women produced over and above that required for household needs and petty barter was in the hands of men, who retained all the profits.

The managerial demand for female pluckers proved to be more successful on the Tole Tea Estate than on the Ndu Tea Estate, largely because capitalism had had a more disruptive effect on the social formations in the South West Province than on those in the North West Province. Consequently, patriarchal opposition to female employment on the newly established tea estates was less pronounced in the former than the latter province. The introduction of plantation agriculture in the South West

Province during German colonial rule had resulted in the large-scale expropriation of land and a regular flow of migrant labour, especially from the North West Province, to the coastal estates. The CDC, which took over most of the ex-German plantation lands, was not dependent on the goodwill of the local chiefs for the supply of land and labour when the Tole Tea Estate was created in 1954. Furthermore, chieftaincy was a relatively weak institution in the segmentary societies of the South West Province and was often a colonial creation. Despite the pervasive ideology of patriarchal dominance in their communities, these chiefs were in no position to contest the managerial decision to employ female labour, as they had no authority on the CDC estates. Moreover, at the time of the establishment of the Tole Tea Estate, female employment on the CDC estates was not a new phenomenon. The CDC management used to encourage the wives of its workers to seek employment on the estates.

By comparison with the South West Province, there was a low degree of capitalist penetration in the North West Province. Determined to create a tea estate at Ndu in 1956/57, the EAC management was heavily dependent on the goodwill of the local chief and elders for the supply of land and labour; chieftaincy continued to be a powerful institution in the centralized states of the North West Province (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982), still capable of resisting any serious capitalist onslaught on local value-systems and authority patterns. During the negotiations, the chief of Ndu strongly opposed the managers' proposal to employ female pluckers on the estate, insisting instead on the employment of local male labour as a prerequisite for the setting up of the estate in his area of jurisdiction—a condition that would not only halt the migration of local male labour to the coastal areas, but also forestall the construction of labour camps, common to the coastal estates. In this way, he hoped to safeguard not only 'traditional' male control over women's productive and reproductive labour, but also the continuous integration of male workers into the local community and their loyalty to the traditional code of ethics and authority patterns. In the end, he agreed that some women might be employed on the estate for specific activities, notably weeding, on a casual or temporary basis, provided that their employment on the estate would not affect their productive and reproductive responsibilities in the local community. The EAC negotiation team had no other choice but to comply with the conditions set by the local chief.

From the start, the labour force on these estates showed some common characteristics (see Table 1). First, the labour force tends to be either illiterate or poorly educated. This is, of course, not surprising. For this category of workers, plantation labour forms one of the rare employment opportunities in the capitalist sector. Second, it consists mainly of men and women who have tried to escape from the control of (male) elders in their local communities and build up an autonomous existence. Table 1 demonstrates that most women employed on the Tole Tea Estate tend to

be 'husbandless' (cf. Bryceson, 1980). Some of them are young, single women who often have no access to land, but instead are expected to work as unpaid labour on the family farms. Most of them, however, are older women who, by the dissolution of a marriage either through death or divorce, have lost relatively secure usufruct rights in land. Rather than becoming dependent on the family elders for their survival, they preferred to migrate to the tea estate where they could be sure of a regular monthly wage income. Ndu workers, in contrast, tend to be local men who have failed to become family heads and are, therefore, eager to escape from the control of those who have succeeded. They perceive plantation labour as an avenue to a relatively autonomous existence and, above all, to social mobility in the local community. There is often a specific sequence in the attainment of such social mobility objectives: first to build a house and to marry one or more wives who will be responsible for the cultivation of food; then to set up a coffee farm and to raise cattle; and eventually to invest in the acquisition of some honorific titles which give access to the same power and wealth in the local community that are available to hereditary office and title holders. These are not easy objectives for the low-waged estate workers, and very few manage to accomplish them all.

Thirdly, the labour force on these estates tends to be highly committed to its job, becoming increasingly stable. Over 60 per cent of the Tole and Ndu workers have been employed on the estate for more than ten years (see Table 1). In general, both groups have a high stake in plantation labour. Tole female workers tend to be not only husbandless, but also household heads with children to support. They are often highly dependent on plantation labour for the reproduction of their families, lacking the time and energy to engage in any additional income-generating activities. Most women have acquired a small food farm for subsistence and trading purposes, but they actually experience great difficulties in combining food production and trade with their daily work-load on the estate and in the household. Ndu workers, too, tend to work for a long period on the estate, eager to realize their social mobility goals. Although they tend to become involved during their working career in a variety of potentially lucrative economic activities, such as coffee production, cattle rearing and trade, they usually retain their job on the estate. Plantation labour serves as an insurance against any future misfortune in their expanding economic activities and a source of further investments.

Despite these common characteristics, there are also some differences between the Tole female workers and the Ndu male workers. One major difference is the degree of contact with their home towns. Unlike the Ndu male workers, who remain strongly integrated in their local community, Tole female workers maintain very few close links with their region of origin. The 'husbandless' women in particular seem to have largely severed the ties with their home towns and villages. Their escape from patriarchal control tends to prevent them from maintaining contact with their family

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of tea estate workers in Cameroon (%)

	Tole women	Ndu men
Age		
15-25 years	7.5	3.5
25-35 years	32.5	25.0
35-45 years	41.0	38.5
45-55 years	17.0	28.0
55 years and above	2.0	5.0
	100.0	100.0
Marital Status		
single	9.0	8.0
married	32.0	90.5
widowed	27.0	1.0
divorced/separated	25.0	0.5
free union	7.0	
	100.0	100.0
Educational Level		
illiterate	78.0	56.5
primary education	20.5	39.5
post-primary education	1.5	4.0
	100.0	100.0
Religion		
christian	94.0	92.0
ancestral belief	6.0	7.0
muslim		1.0
	100.0	100.0
Years of Service		
0-5 years	17.0	12.5
5-10 years	19.5	24.5
10-15 years	39.0	17.5
15-25 years	19.5	31.5
25 years and above	5.0	14.0
	100.0	100.0

Source: Computed from data supplied by the estate offices.

members and gaining access to land at home. Their 'exit-option' from wage employment is usually a switch to petty trade in the urban centres rather than a return home. Even married female workers on the Tole Tea Estate seem to find it difficult to keep up intensive contact with their family members at home. Geographical distance and a six-day working week constitute serious obstacles to regular communication. Many female workers visit their home towns only during the annual leave period, or on special occasions such as funerals of close kin.

There are also certain divisions within the labour force on the two estates, mainly based on education, occupation, gender and marriage as well as ethnic and regional origin. There is a division, for instance, between the vast

majority of illiterate and poorly educated field workers and the tiny group of better educated clerical workers. The latter tend to look down upon the field workers and to treat them rudely when they visit the estate offices. There is also a division between male and female workers. The root of this cleft is the pervasive ideology of male dominance. For example, male workers expect the (male) management to give them preference over female workers when there is an opportunity for further training or promotion, and to fire female workers first when there is a retrenchment exercise. They are reluctant to work under female supervision and regularly harass their female colleagues. There is a persistent fear among the married men that wage employment will make their wives too 'head-strong' or independent. There is also a division between married and unmarried female workers. Unmarried women tend to be relatively free from patriarchal controls, but they are accorded very little respect, being labelled 'loose women' or 'prostitutes'. Married female workers, on the other hand, are highly respected, but they are still constantly subordinated to male dominance. Some husbands insist that according to African tradition, women are responsible for the upkeep of the family; these men tend to make very little financial contribution, spending their wages as they choose. Others, especially men from the North West Province, even claim that they are traditionally entitled to their wives' wage income.

Finally, there is a division on ethnic and regional lines. There is a greater ethnic and regional heterogeneity among the Tole female workers than among the Ndu male workers. On the Tole Tea Estate there is a clear North West-South West divide: 67 per cent of the Tole female workers originate from various ethnic groups in the North West Province and 29 per cent from ethnic groups in the South West Province. On the Ndu Tea Estate, almost all workers hail from two ethnic groups in the North West Province: 73 per cent belong to the local ethnic group, the Wimbun, and 23 per cent hail from the neighbouring ethnic group, the Nso, most of them living in villages surrounding the estate. Although ethnic and regional heterogeneity is a potential source of conflict, with rivalry being sparked by suspicions of favouritism on hiring or promotion or on disagreements with supervisors or co-workers, there has been very little incidence of serious, protracted ethnic clashes on either estate. Interestingly, although the labour force at the Ndu Tea Estate is ethnically less heterogeneous than that at the Tole Tea Estate, it was nevertheless the scene of more overt ethnic tensions and conflicts during the 1960s. This was due, in part, to Ndu chauvinism: since the estate was located on Ndu land, the chief and people used to claim that Ndu workers should be given priority when vacancies occurred for leading positions on the estate.

Generally speaking, however, estate workers of different ethnic groups and regions tend to live and work together peacefully. It has been the consistent policy of the management, as well as church and union leaders, to mobilize and organize workers on a multi-ethnic basis, and this policy seems to have created a certain measure of understanding and tolerance among the

workers for each other's socio-cultural background and to have fostered bonds of companionship and friendship across ethnic boundaries. The general use of Pidgin English has also helped to overcome barriers of communication between the various ethnic groups. The most important reason for this relative harmony, however, appears to be the sharing of similar living and working conditions on the estates, which are classic examples of occupational communities. The internal divisions which do exist have never prevented the tea pluckers from regularly engaging in common actions for the protection of their interests. The estate workers display a rather ambivalent attitude towards plantation labour: on the one hand, they appreciate it, for it provides them with a regular source of income; on the other hand, they have an acute feeling of exploitation and subordination in the labour process.

As in other parts of the world (cf. Loewenson, 1992), estate workers in Cameroon receive a relatively low remuneration for their arduous work. Unlike other parts of the world, however, (cf. Kurian, 1982) there is no difference in the remuneration of male and female workers on the Cameroonian estates. Before the economic recession, tea pluckers on the CDC estates used to earn an average net monthly wage of approximately FCFA 20,000–25,000. Quite a number of pluckers, however, were unable to earn this amount, mainly due to the link between the remuneration of workers and the system of task work prevailing on the plantations. Completion of the daily task set by the management entitles a worker to the daily basic wage; non-completion of the allotted task is punished by pro-rata payment, the worker receiving a proportion of the wage equivalent to the proportion of the task completed. While workers' incomes have been seriously reduced during the economic crisis, managerial controls over the labour process have been intensified, so as to raise labour discipline and productivity.

From the first days of estate tea production, the union leadership and the Labour Department have consistently instructed the pluckers that the union is supposed to be the normal intermediary channel between the workers and the management. As a result, workers usually turned to the union in the first instance for the representation and defence of their interests. Their support for the union, however, was never unconditional. They expected their union leaders to act promptly and energetically during individual and collective disputes and to produce results. When such expectations were not realized, workers began to by-pass the union and to employ alternative methods, such as informal actions, pursued on an individual or small-scale basis, and collective actions (see Cohen, 1980; Crisp, 1984). This was particularly true of the period of state-controlled unionism. Loss of confidence in the union seems to have been more clearly manifest at the Tole Tea Estate than at the Ndu Tea Estate. The degree of participation in union affairs has always been conspicuously lower among female pluckers than among their male counterparts because of the patriarchal union structure and women's

multiple productive and reproductive responsibilities outside the labour process (cf. Parpart, 1988; Pittin, 1984).

Confronted with the (initially) close co-operation between the union leadership and the management in the planning and implementation of austere adjustment measures, the response of the tea pluckers was complex and varied. Some workers opted for a single strategy, others for several strategies, simultaneously or consecutively. A growing number of pluckers have become survival-oriented in the climate of insecurity: they are inclined to acquiesce in whatever economic recovery measures management may introduce, however stringent, for the sake of keeping their job. They try to impress the management with above-average output, and avoid conflicts with their supervisors. This tendency seems to be somewhat more marked among the Tole female pluckers than among the Ndu male pluckers, no doubt attributable to the fact that the Ndu male pluckers are still strongly integrated in the local community and usually enjoy an easier 'exit-option' than the Tole female pluckers.

Some workers continue to rely on the unions for handling their individual and collective grievances, but a growing number by-pass the unions and lodge their complaints directly with the Labour Department. This department is overburdened with work, often resulting in long delays in settling disputes. What is even more striking, however, is the fact that the majority of workers seem to have clung on to their informal and collective resistance during the crisis. Since the foundation of the corporation in 1946/47, such actions have usually been oriented at combating various managerial efforts, such as attempts to increase labour productivity, notably through an increase in task work; to strengthen control over the labour process; and to minimize wages and other conditions of service. These management efforts, which are obviously crucial to capital accumulation, were intensified during the economic crisis and became central to the corporation's adjustment measures. The workers' persistent resistance against these efforts is principally manifested in their informal actions, which is quite understandable: collective actions are extremely risky in a situation where strikes are virtually outlawed and are likely to elicit severe managerial reprisals in the form of summary dismissals. Such collective action is a last resort measure, if other means of settling long-standing disputes have failed. Significantly, however, the number and intensity of informal actions, which are difficult to control by the management, seem to have increased somewhat during the crisis, in response to the various adjustment measures of the management.

Managerial Efforts to Maximize Labour Productivity during the Crisis

On 23 August 1987, the union presidents informed the pluckers at both estates that they had agreed with the management upon an increase in the

daily task from 26 kgs to 32 kgs of green leaves.¹² Most pluckers strongly resented this agreement; they told the union presidents that the new norm was too high, as many of them already experienced difficulties in reaching the old quota.

The Tole female pluckers continued to resist the implementation of the new norm on the estate. Eventually, the CDC General Manager had to call upon the FAWU president, Mr Vewessee, to make a renewed attempt to persuade the women to accept the agreement. During a mass meeting organized by the union on 23 October 1987, the women reluctantly agreed to accept the new norm on condition that every worker in the corporation would be obliged to contribute to economic recovery. The Ndu male pluckers could not forestall the implementation of the new norm on the estate, but they soon started to express their dissatisfaction in two ways. First, during the executive elections of the Donga-Mantung Agricultural Workers' Union (DUAU) in September 1987, they refused to re-elect their president, Mr Johnson Tanto Massa, and instead voted a non-estate worker, Mr G. N. Majam, into office. Secondly, they started a go-slow in November 1987, which resulted in all of them being paid pro-rata. It was only after they had been given the opportunity to check upon the implementation of the new norm on the other CDC tea estates that they were willing to call off the action.

One year later, on 3 October 1988, the Tole female pluckers went on strike. They alleged that they were unable to fulfil the new task requirement, in spite of working from 6.30 am to 6 pm each day. They added that they no longer felt obliged to adhere to the agreement as their condition for accepting the new norm—the contribution of *all* workers to the economic recovery programme—had not yet been met by the management. The union president, Mr Vewessee, strongly condemned the pluckers' strike action, pointing out that it was illegal as they had not followed the prescribed procedures for settling conflicts. He was booed and jeered by the angry pluckers. The CDC General Manager then threatened the strikers with dismissal if they did not report for work the next day, with the result that most pluckers decided to resume work. Seventy-nine continued to strike, however: they were summarily dismissed by the management. Many of them stayed in the area surviving on farming and trading.

No further collective actions on this issue have been reported. There is, however, some evidence that the pluckers increasingly resort to informal actions to protest against managerial efforts to raise labour productivity. Unexpectedly, the corporation's statistical data seem to suggest that during the crisis there has been an increase rather than a decrease in the various forms of informal resistance, such as late arrival at work, absenteeism, malingering and poor work performance. The proportion of total person-

12 See footnote 5 above

days lost due to uncompleted work rose from 7.22 per cent in 1987/88 to 8.24 per cent in 1989/90, while those lost due to unauthorized absence rose from 5.27 per cent in 1987/88 to 5.71 per cent in 1989/90.¹³ Although this increase might appear small, it is nevertheless significant if one takes into account the intensification of managerial efforts to increase labour discipline during the economic crisis. The rate of absenteeism at the Tole Tea Estate has certainly caused concern: the estate manager reported to the union that absenteeism was responsible for the loss of over 1700 person-days during the months July–August 1992. He estimated the corporation's financial loss at about FCFA 11 m. He warned the union president that he would not hesitate to dismiss more than a hundred workers if the union and the shop stewards failed to address this situation.¹⁴ Apparently, the managerial crusade against 'undisciplined and unproductive' workers has not been successful during the crisis.

Managerial Efforts to Strengthen Control over the Labour Process

Supervisory staff constitute an essential link between the estate management and the workers in the labour process. They are expected to communicate the orders of estate management to the workers and to maintain discipline in the labour process.

Like other CDC workers, pluckers have always drawn a clear line between 'bad' and 'nice' supervisors. Bad supervisors are those who tend to treat the workers as objects of production and are largely insensitive to the workers' plight. They may be differentiated into two types (see Adesina, 1989): supervisors who are notoriously authoritarian and bossy, who command their subordinates without taking into account their opinions and advice; and those who are over-zealous in the exercise of their duties and interested only in increasing output, tending to supervise their subordinates closely and uncompassionately. Nice supervisors, by contrast, are those who treat their subordinates as human beings in the labour process and take their personal and domestic problems into consideration in the exercise of their supervisory powers. They are usually less strict, leaving the workers a certain measure of autonomy in the execution of their allotted task.

Since the beginning of the economic crisis there have been enormous pressures from the management on the supervisory staff to exercise tight control over their subordinates, to use their authority to the full and, if

13 See CDC *Annual Reports and Accounts*, 1987–90, Yaoundé: SOPECAM.

14 See letter from Mr R. M. Achiri, Estate Manager Tole Tea, to President Agricultural Workers' Union, dated 16 September 1992, in file MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/LB.2/vol. XXVII, Complaints from CDC (Buea: archives of Provincial Delegation of Labour and Social Welfare)

necessary, to discipline any worker without compassion. This increasingly authoritarian and over-zealous supervision seems not to have had the desired effect of strengthening managerial control over the labour process. It seems rather to have provoked the workers, making them feel like slaves, constantly pushed to increase production for no reward. Although there used to be numerous collective actions aimed at the transfer or dismissal of authoritarian and over-zealous supervisors, such actions abated during the economic crisis. The workers seem to have realized that not only are these actions risky, but they will almost certainly be ineffective; with the management actively encouraging strict supervisors during the crisis, it is not likely to give in to collective demands from the workers for their removal.

However, there still seems to be widespread informal resistance against intensified managerial control over the labour process, which manifests itself in various forms including:

- *Insubordination*: it is not uncommon for workers to simply refuse to carry out orders from their supervisors, even if such a refusal might result in a considerable loss of output. For instance, some Ndu pluckers refuse to work during the heavy downpours in the cold, rainy season at Ndu. Others refuse to do overtime on Saturdays during the peak plucking season, as they look upon Saturday afternoons as a period for resting, visiting friends and relatives, or working on their own coffee farms. Estate records suggest that insubordination is increasingly accompanied by insults and abuse and even physical attacks on supervisory staff.
- *Attempts to discredit supervisory staff*: at times, the pluckers try to play tricks upon the supervisors and to discredit them with their superiors. This often takes the form of falsely accusing them of bribery, corruption and other misdeeds, in the hope that management will take action against them.
- *The threat of using mystical powers*: pluckers sometimes threaten to harm or kill a supervisor by means of sorcery and witchcraft. It is difficult to know whether this is mere bluff or a real threat.

Managerial Efforts to Minimize Wages and Other Conditions of Service

The workers have always fought for an improvement in their living standards and have steadfastly resisted any managerial effort to curtail their wages and fringe benefits. It is small wonder that they were furious about the 6 January 1990 agreement between the management and the unions introducing a compulsory savings scheme and a drastic reduction in their fringe benefits. Their bitterness was reflected in a number of collective actions.

Straight after the signing of the agreement, the newly elected DUAW president, Mr G. N. Majam, was accused by the shop stewards of betrayal of workers' interests. The shop stewards subsequently refused to communicate the terms of the agreement to the workers. When Mr Majam himself tried to explain the agreement, he barely escaped a severe beating from the angry workers. Following Mr Majam's dismal failure to persuade the workers to accept the agreement, the CDC General Manager decided to go to Ndu personally. In a mass meeting, he threatened the workers that non-acceptance of the agreement would inevitably lead to the closure of the estate because of the corporation's precarious financial position. This left them with no other choice but to comply.

A year later, on 4 January 1991, the Ndu workers went on strike without informing the shop stewards and the union leadership. Faced with serious financial problems after the drastic cut in their incomes, they were angry that their family allowances had not been paid for eighteen months and that they, unlike other CDC workers, had not received any Christmas advances. Attempts by the Labour Department and the union to settle the strike failed. It was only after the payment of family allowances on 9 January 1991 that work was resumed.

In early 1992, all the CDC workers in the Fako Division, including the Tole female pluckers, started to agitate for the abrogation of the 6 January 1990 agreement and the immediate payment of seven quarters' family allowance arrears. Their demands were supported by the FAWU president, Mr Vewessee. The workers went on strike on 21 May 1992 and refused to negotiate with the management until Mr Vewessee returned from the CTUC Conference he was attending in Yaoundé. On his return on 26 May, they called off the strike and authorized him to negotiate with the management. These negotiations eventually resulted in the amendment of the 6 January 1990 agreement described above.

Besides these sporadic collective actions, workers have engaged in a variety of informal actions to protest against the reduction of their incomes, including output restriction, sabotage and involvement in 'illegal' income-generating activities. Some pluckers do not keep to the plucking standards: they mix bad leaves with good ones, a practice which enables them to complete their task earlier and to achieve more weight and income. Others cut the tea bushes and prunings and use them for firewood, while others steal tea from the factory and sell it to middlemen. The management frequently complains that the theft of tea has reached unprecedented levels since the economic crisis and has caused serious losses to the company. The increase of theft is probably closely connected with the workers' interpretation of this criminal offence. It would appear that they regard theft and other such 'illegal' activities as opportunities for taking what is due to them in return for their hard labour, and for reducing the level of their exploitation (Gordon, 1977).

CONCLUSION

This study of Cameroonian plantation workers presents a more complex picture of labour responses to the economic crisis and SAP than the case studies of Nigerian industrial workers which are available. The CDC tea pluckers seem to employ a variety of strategies to cope with the managerial adjustment measures. A growing number of pluckers are adopting an individual survival orientation rather than an oppositional posture. They do their utmost to make a good impression upon the management through hard work and disciplined behaviour, in the hope that this strategy will help them escape from the regular managerial retrenchment exercises. Some workers still rely on the bargaining strength of the state-controlled unions for the protection of their interests. Many workers, however, tend to by-pass the unions and to lodge their individual and collective complaints with the Labour Department which is still perceived by most workers as a neutral intermediary between management and labour. Unexpectedly, the majority of workers have continued to resort to (sporadic) collective actions and (frequent) informal actions to protest against their intensified exploitation and subordination in the labour process.

A number of factors together seem to account for the continuing resistance of most CDC workers. One of these is their remarkable degree of solidarity. The various internal divisions among the workers never seem to have impeded them from regularly resorting to common actions against the employer, although it cannot be denied that their solidarity has been weakened somewhat by the present economic crisis. This solidarity has been promoted by their residence in 'occupational communities' where they share similar living and working conditions, speak one *lingua franca* (Pidgin English), and can easily communicate with each other (cf. Ardener et al., 1960; DeLancey, 1973). A second factor is the workers' persistent belief in the efficacy of militant action. The illiterate and poorly educated estate workers have always tended to put less faith in the institutionalized bargaining procedures than the relatively moderate union leadership, mainly composed of clerks and supervisory staff. The regular failure of these procedures to achieve the workers' aims, together with the establishment of state control over the unions, has strengthened this belief in militant action as the only way to bring management to its knees and to redress long-standing grievances.

The growing demotivation of many of the workers during the crisis has also played a role. Far from their increased productivity being compensated by increased wages, the workers' real incomes have been seriously eroded. Most workers, and women in particular, are still reluctant to resign and lose their regular monthly wage income, however meagre; but a growing number of workers, mostly among the men, are no longer interested in keeping their job at any cost, especially as they have lost confidence in the corporation's eventual economic recovery. Some of these workers have already resigned,

having collected their long-service awards and gratuities as well as voluntary and compulsory savings. This capital is used for investment in farming, trading, and other potentially lucrative activities. Others are contemplating resignation. No longer committed to their jobs, these workers tend to become either more militant and less reluctant to show resistance, or more apathetic, having worked out alternatives.

Another factor influencing the workers' attitude is their daily exposure to the glaring socio-economic inequalities on the estates. Although the corporation's adjustment measures have effected a substantial reduction in the high salaries and numerous fringe benefits of the managerial staff, there remains a wide gap in incomes and living standards between them and the workers. There is no doubt that workers' acute feelings of exploitation and subordination are reinforced by the sharp contrast between their own misery and managerial opulence. Finally, I found that the CDC workers' continuing resistance has also been influenced by their perceptions of the state. In his comparative work, Burawoy (1985) has used the concepts of 'productive politics' and 'global politics' to tackle the complex relationship between the labour process and the state. Like most Cameroonians, the CDC workers tend to attribute the economic crisis primarily to the corruption and mismanagement of the ruling regime rather than to the sharp fall in commodity prices. The majority of them belong to one of the opposition parties, mostly the populist Social Democratic Front (SDF). They are unwilling to make sacrifices voluntarily for 'economic recovery' as long as the regime which is in power lacks legitimacy and appears to be interested only in the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart, 1989).

The management has failed dismally to fully control workers' resistance during the crisis. There is no reason to believe that it will succeed in the near future. On the contrary, there are indications that labour resistance may even increase. The unions have largely regained their former autonomy and the union leadership has become more critical of the adjustment measures which it had previously agreed upon with the management. CDC workers have always admired militant union leadership and are inclined to support any union actions in defence of their interests.

One final observation: I did not find any evidence for the widespread assumption that female workers in the Third World are more amenable to control than male workers. There was a slight difference in the degree and modes of resistance between Ndu male pluckers and Tole female pluckers: Ndu male pluckers tend to be somewhat more militant because they enjoy an easier 'exit-option', due to their continuing close links with their local community. On the other hand, Tole female pluckers have shown themselves to be more inclined to circumvent the state-controlled unions and to engage in alternative modes of resistance because of the patriarchal structure of the unions, and women's multiple productive and reproductive responsibilities outside the labour process.

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